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Church as confessing Church

The ecumenical dimension of the church's confessions¹

Dear sisters and brothers, my paper has four parts: First, I give some insights to the self-understanding of the church and its relation to the historical confessions. Secondly, we will consider the meaning of the Barmen Declaration in the situation of its emergence and today. Thirdly, we come back to the first point but in reverse order, says we consider the relevance of the confessions for the being of a confessing church. And finally, I close with some short aspects of the possible benefits of the Belhar Confession for our church.

1. The church and its confession(s)

Let me start with a very elementary statement: The church is based on the good news of Easter Sunday: Christ is risen from the dead. This is what the church has to tell – to witness, to proclaim, to confess – its members and to the world.

It is not us who found and maintain the church, but it is God himself, who enlightens the world that seems to be conducted by the power of death through the light of life beyond death. The light of the living God is the light of eternal life that changes everything in our recognition of the world and ourselves. Christ, who was nailed to the Cross of Golgotha by human betrayal, contempt and destructive power, is resurrected. That means he is not lost in the nothingness of death but resurrected into the eternity of God. God is the God of the living and not of the dead. Although we all have to die this never will separate us from God who stands for our life in eternity. This is the gospel from which we live. This is gospel from which the church lives, and this is the gospel from which the world lives. God is for us so that nothing really serious can stand against us, even if it threatens our temporal life. This is what the world needs to know and what the church has to confess.

Since the church is about proclaiming this gospel of the living God to the world, the church is primarily and fundamentally a confessing church. The gospel of Christ's resurrection as the all decisive good news for the whole world makes the church inevitably the ambassador of God's will for life wherever it exists or intends to go. This is the pointed meaning of the first commandment that ties us encouragingly to the God, who brings all of us "out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex 20:2) together with Israel and leads us into the freedom of his coming realm. The truth of this pivotal confession has many levels and it embraces the whole

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range of our Christian faith. It is in particular this confession the church is living from or it will be a dying church.

We realise that calling the church a confessing church does not mean that the church has to defend the creeds of the old church like the Apostle's creed. Likewise, it is not about the confessional writings from the 16th century, in which the churches of the reformation summarised their basic theological insights as in Luther's Small Catechism of 1529 or in the Augsburg Confession of 1530 or in the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563; and finally, it is not about the Barmen Declaration from 1934 and the Belhar Confession from 1986. All these confessions are not in the centre of the church, they are not the substance of its being, they are not the decisive marker of its mission.

But this emphasis does not mean that the creeds, the confessional writings of reformation time and other acts of confession have no meaning for the church, on the contrary. Actually, they are not in the centre of the church, but they are important and sometimes decisive helpers and signposts for its continuously needed renewal of its alignment in an always changing world. Time and again the church is in an essential need of reconsidering its calling and its mission. Always it has to adjust the perspective of its life anew to the horizon of permanently changing times.

And this is a twofold action at least. On the one hand, it has to respond to changing challenges and moving circumstances that are not met just by repeating the old answers and quoting traditional theological insights and solutions. It was Karl Barth who saw the sheer quotation of the past as a refusal of one's own understanding: "The veracity of our knowledge of God can easily die of this kind of repetition"² and it gets easily into direct neighbourhood to heresy.³ As the church is always addressed anew by the living God it also has to listen always anew. The church has to be contextual to its ever-particular time and place, if it wants to say something that is really worthwhile to be heard.

On the other hand and with exact the same emphasis, we have to realise that the church is not just a religious instantaneous water heater (Durchlauferhitzer) of accidentally prevailing possibilities and fashions. The context of the church is not its text. The church lives in this world but not from this world. It is directed by the "commission ... to extent ... the message of the free grace of God to all people", as the sixths theses of the Barmen Declaration⁴ says.⁵ This is its enduring task that remains the same through all times and at all places.

² CD II/1, 214. "Die Wahrhaftigkeit unserer Erkenntnis Gottes könnte sterben über solcher Wiederholung"; KD II/1, 241.

³ Cf. Karl Barth, *Einführung in die Evangelische Theologie*, Zürich 1962, 54.

⁴ The Barmen Declaration (1934), in: *Creeds of the Churches. A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, ed. by John H. Leith, Garden City (NY), 1963, 517–522, 522; German: *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung. Einführung und Dokumentation*, hg. v. Martin Heimbucher u. Rudolf Weth, 7., überarbeitete und erweiterte Aufl., Neukirchen-Vluyn 2009, 42.

To sum up both interconnected aspects one may say: The church worldwide has the same mission all the time, but this mission has to be tackled always differently in reference to the respective context. In substance there is one message, but this message permanently has to meet different situations.

It may seem that this goes without saying, but actually it remains a real challenge because in fact we do not stick to the one God of the first commandment but instead are confused by several gods or idols that emerge in human ideas or ideologies, in political or economical programs, in ethical or cultural values. They impose themselves as ways of salvation and expect to be taken as the current gospel of hope. We continuously are observer and participants of an ongoing competition of idols and pretended gods that compete for the favour of our hearts. There are good reasons indeed why the first commandment itself takes other gods into account as to be rejected in faithfulness to the one God, who entered into his merciful covenant with Israel that is aiming at whole humankind. Other gods are permanently on stage and call for special authority. They try to marginalize the God of the first commandment as far as possible, and not seldom it happens that the true God totally gets out of view.

This still remains the ambivalence of our situation. It provides reasons enough to direct continuously specific and vital care to the particular promise of the gospel and to the requirements of the first commandment. This never goes without saying, and we have to be remembered all the time. And sometimes there are extraordinary situations where the church has to concentrate all its strength to reject the temptation of an ideology or idol grasping to the self-understanding of the church. Then it has to state a clear and perceptible confession that clarifies for what it stands and for what not.

2. The Barmen Declaration

Such an extraordinary situation emerged, when the Barmen Declaration or the Belhar confession came up. In the first case, concerned people from the “Confessing Church” (Bekennende Kirche) gathered in Wuppertal-Barmen to discuss the existential threat that was entering the church by the movement of the so-called German Christians and the ideology of National So-

⁵ It is about the particular balance of the contextuality and the Catholicity of the Church; cf. Michael Weinrich, *The Church between Contextuality and Catholicity. Protestant Considerations on the Ecumenical Significance of the Reformational Principle*, in: Richard Chartres, Christoph Ernst, Leslie Nathaniel a. Friederike Nüssel (Hg.), *Reformation Then and Now. Contributions to the Ninth Theological Conference within the Framework of the Meissen Process between the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany (ÖR.B 109)*, Leipzig 2016, 55–64; –, *Kirche zwischen Kontextualität und Katholizität. Protestantische Anregungen zur ökumenischen Bedeutung des Reformationen*, in: Magdalene L. Frettlöh u. Frank Mathwig (Hg.), *Kirche als Passion. FS f. Matthias Zeindler z. 60. Geb. (reformiert)* Bd. 6), Zürich 2018, 109–118.

cialism.⁶ The result of this confessing synod was the well-known Barmen Declaration that – as it says – *confesses* certain truths⁷ to be exposed in the very situation of trial and temptation. Explicitly the declaration underlines that this “common word has been placed in our mouth.”⁸ This refers to the conviction of the synod that the presence of the Holy Spirit had encouraged the church to the needed clarity in its particular contentious situation.

On closer reflection we can realise that the first commandment was at stake in the Barmen Declaration. It emphasises that “Jesus Christ ... is the one Word of God” that means only Jesus Christ is God in his revelation to us and there are no “other happenings and powers, images and truths” to be recognised “as divine revelation alongside this one Word of God”⁹. The church was challenged by the ideological belief of the so-called German Christians that Adolf Hitler has to be received by the German people as a revelation of God’s providence. Over against this position it had to be emphasised clearly that God speaks only through Jesus Christ and not through Adolf Hitler or the so-called Aryan race as a master race (*Herrenrasse*) or the elected German people. These convictions are nothing less than sheer blasphemy and the undisguised expression of unbelief.

The clear and distinct reference of the declaration to the undisputable basis of the church makes it to a confession to be heard in the church and beyond. At first it is about the church in Germany in the specific situation in 1934. The representatives of the Confessing Church made a clear and public statement there and then.¹⁰ But at the same time, it was about the whole church that is scattered all over the world and confesses Jesus Christ as the risen Lord of the church and of the world. It is this theological refer-

⁶ Cf. Richtlinien der Glaubensbewegung „Deutsche Christen“ 1932/33, in: Martin Greschat/Hans-Walter Krumwiede (Hg.), *Das Zeitalter der Weltkriege und Revolutionen* (Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte in Quellen Bd. V), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1999, 79–83.

⁷ German: “Wir bekennen uns ... zu folgenden evangelischen Wahrheiten“; Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung, 36.

⁸ The Barmen Declaration, 519; German: 36.

⁹ The Barmen Declaration, 520, German: 37.

¹⁰ There is a particular necessity to which a confession has to respond. And so Karl Barth emphasises: „*We, here and now, confess this.*“ (Karl Barth, *The Idea of a Reformed Confession of Faith*, translated by W.R. Forrester, in: *Quarterly Register VIII* (1925), 100–103 and 125–128, here 103). [“*Wir, hier, jetzt – bekennen dies!*“ (Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses, in: *Ders., Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925*, ed. by Holger Finze (Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe Vol. 19), Zürich 1990, 604–642, 616.) It is this close connection between the confession and the specific situation that is in particular characteristic for the reformed understanding of confessions, while the Lutheran – closer to Roman Catholic understanding of the tradition – claim to the universal authority of their confessions that means especially the confessional writings of the 16th century. Cf. Michael Weinrich, *Confessio and Traditio. A Reformed Approach in Dialogue with the Lutheran Tradition*, in: Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, Wessel Stoker (Eds.), *Crossroad Discourses between Christianity and Culture* (Currents of Encounter Vol. 38), Amsterdam/New York 2010, 545–562. It is about the famous “*finitum non capax infiniti*” that marks a specific difference between Lutherans and the Reformed (not only in terms of Christology).

ence to the mission of the universal church that rescued the German church from getting lost to the ideological context of its particular situation in Germany.

The Barmen Declaration implied two close connected messages at least. On the one hand, the church drew a sharp line between true church and false church in its specific situation. The act of confession remembered the church clearly of what it means being the church in 1934 in Germany. And on the other hand, by drawing this sharp line the church expressively reclaimed itself as a part of the universal church, as a part of the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” as it is envisaged most prominently in the old Church’s creed of Constantinople in 381. The theology of the German Christians was to be recognised as sectarian. It was as sectarian as later the racist theology in South Africa, and as such they never can be acceptable for the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”. Only under the umbrella and in the authority of the universal church as the body of Christ the synod in Barmen as well as the synod of Belhar were authorised to expel certain positions as heresy from the church.

This demonstrates a strong and substantial commitment to the God-given unity of the church and applies to the existential dimension of this basic attribute of the true church over against the particularism of the historically separated and chopped up appearance of the church. The Barmen Declaration was a convincing signal of the Confessing Church in Germany to other churches appealing substantially to the ecumenical bonds that should be worth considering for all churches worldwide. In this sense the Barmen Declaration implies substantially and purposely an offensive ecumenical dimension. To express it pointedly, the universal dimension within and beyond its contextual engagement makes a confession to a confession of the one church. Not least this becomes obvious in the remarkable fact that Lutherans, Reformed and United were ready and able to speak publicly together without leaving behind their different confessional traditions. This happened in a time, in which the Leuenberg Agreement – including its remarkable first signature from the Lippische Landeskirche – was in no way in view.

It was especially Karl Barth who referred time and again to this ecumenical dimension of the Barmen Declaration and to the ecumenicity of a confessing church.¹¹ He was not really interested in interconfessional talks to clarify what is theologically appropriate and what not, what can churches say together and what not. Dialogues like this are abstract enterprises with only little or no impact on the concrete life of the churches, and so he never joined this kind of ecumenical endeavour of dialogue-ecumenism. As long as the churches are able to act together according their shared mission it is no problem as such that churches are linked to different confessions and

¹¹ Cf. Michael Weinrich, *God’s Free Grace and the Freedom of the Church. Theological Aspects of the Barmen Declaration*, in: *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010), 404–419 (and also in: Michael Weinrich, *Die bescheidene Kompromisslosigkeit der Theologie Karl Barths* (FSÖTh Vol. 139), Göttingen 2013, 138–152).

confessional writings. Acting together means that they are engaged in the same message to the world by listening to the same living Word of God. As long as it is recognisable that they are the witnesses of the one God of the first commandment they belong to the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”. The unity of the church is not provable on the way of agreed theological documents but emerges, in fact visibly, in its common and concrete witness to the liberating gospel over against the imprisonments of the respective present time. As I said in the first part of this paper, it is less about confessions but more about confessing.

In the situation of its emergence the Barmen Declaration was an act of confessing. In the peculiar circumstances in Germany in 1934 the church proved itself as a confessing church by saying the necessary word in a particularly pressing situation. It was clearly said and generally noticeable that Christian faith sets clear limits to the ideological and religious ambitions of the movement of the so-called German Christians and of National Socialism. This was, what the church confessed: there and then, concrete and on time.

This lively act of confessing in May 1934 became afterwards and is now a confession that remembers the church to particular threats it can be faced by. We are grateful for this confession since it is an impressing document of the church’s responsible consciousness that it is the church of the God of the first commandment. It still has to tell us something when we are looking for our current way of being a confessing church. Here we can discover the liberating power of faith under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This may comfort us in the sight of our so often fruitless negotiations and debates on the appropriate being of the church. In many cases these debates are abstract and not really linked to the everyday life of the church, where we are de facto ready to accept more than the authority of God alone, also in Lippe just as in other churches. The Barmen Declaration can be taken as a noteworthy event that happened to the church in a difficult situation where its truth and trustworthiness was fundamentally at stake. The church was gifted with a word that allowed the recognisable possibility of a perspective to nothing less than what is meant, when one dares to speak about the visibility of the true church. This is the reason why Karl Barth according Barmen spoke about “the very miracle that against all expectations had once again happened to the church.”¹²

3. The confessions and the confessing Church

When we have to confess here and now – and that is what the church is asked to do – it can be helpful to know, what the church confessed there and then, in Barmen, in Belhar or elsewhere. We are not asked to repeat these confessions, because we have to formulate our own contemporary witness. We have to give our own respond to what we receive as the gospel today. We have to find out, what the first commandment of the liberating

¹² Karl Barth, CD II/1, 176 (German: KD II/1, 198).

God wants us to witness to our contemporary idols and ideologies, to our contemporary powers and forces, to our contemporary prisons and prisoners. As long as we are not in the Kingdom of Heaven, we will have to face powers or at least interests and dynamics putting the freedom of God's merciful covenant into perspective or even totally in question. As long as humans want to build up and strengthen their own kingdoms and except rivalry as the basic driving force for development, we are still accompanying and supporting the human resistance against the necessity of a responsible and sustainable housekeeping of our planet that is already standing on the brink of ruin. As long as humans want to be or to become their own Gods, we live at the disastrous risk of becoming supporter of the human uprising against the creational destination of human. We have to be aware that there is no time in which the first commandment goes without saying. It always remains a lively provocation remembering us to the particular shape of Christian freedom.

This is the incessant situation of the church and of our Christian existence. Although in closer inspection the challenges are always new, we do not have to start from zero in any case. It is not the first time the church considers the will of the liberating God, and so we can know from which direction it comes in view. And again, it is not the first time the church gets into a difficult situation, and so we have the possibility to ask how it responded to different challenges in the past. It is always about the faithfulness to the particular mission of the church, and this is exactly the point where the creeds and confessions come in view. They are attempts that arose in particular situations to prevent the church from losing its destination. To a certain extent they can be used as a treasure of experiences and decisions, which helped the church to find a proper way in responding to this or that threat, and which can be proved regarding its relevance for contemporary adjustments of the church's way. It is not a matter of course that they are still speaking today but they should be approached under the grateful conviction that they were of some help in their time. They at least give us some ground to stand on, but on this ground we have to find our own answers for our time.

To sum up we can state on the one hand, that we do not believe in the confessions as we do not believe in the church, but in the risen Christ, and, on the other hand, that the confessions may – secondary to the biblical witness – prove themselves as the prolific soil for the fruits that are expected from us and may be brought up in this soil. In our case this has to be proved according the Belhar Confession of our African sister-church to which we are linked in a particular partnership.

4. The possible benefits of the Belhar confession for the Lippische Landeskirche

As already indicated, in many dimensions the character of the Belhar Confession is comparable with the Barmen Declaration. It was formulated under the pressure of a particular threat to the church and claimed to be the

voice of the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”. It is contextual and ecumenical at once. The confession emerged in close reference to the Barmen declaration and applicated its intention to the particular threat in South Africa. One really can say that Barmen was the soil in which this confession was brought up to say something new in the specific situation of South Africa.

I will close by sketching shortly five general aspects that our church may benefit by explicitly referring to the Belhar Confession:

1. A reference to the Belhar Confession can be seen as a noticeable sign of gratitude for the far-reaching ecumenical range of the Barmen Declaration. We express our thankfulness for the meaningful resonance of our particular confession from 1934 as being helpful for other churches on their own way of being a confessing church.
2. A reference to the Belhar Confession highlights the ecumenical meaning of this confession and the theological decisions made in the confession. We underline that we realise the same Spirit of whom we are convinced that it was present in Barmen.
3. A reference to the Belhar Confession confirms the deep sense of our partnership for our self-understanding. We express that the churches are tied together by the same living Spirit. This is not a one-way connection but a mutual relationship on all levels. The reference underlines that this is not just a matter of church politics but of the faith’s substance.
4. A reference to the Belhar Confession enriches and broadens our contemporary reception of Barmen in terms of content. Beyond Barmen we get something to learn for our contemporary mission as church. We are reminded in a different perspective to the decisiveness of the particular freedom given by the liberating God of the first commandment. I think, we will hear more about that from Margit Ernst later.
5. A reference to the Belhar Confession gives an explicit example of the concrete interrelatedness of our churches in the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church”. It can be taken as a sign of the visibility of the one true church.

We are not requested to believe in Belhar as we do not believe in Barmen but we express a qualified confidence to our church as it wants to be a church, in which Barmen and Belhar have a prominent respected place, not less and not more.