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ON LEARNING TO SPEAK:

A SOUTH AFRICAN REFORMED PERSPECTIVE ON DIALOGUE

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Abstract

The paper makes a contribution to the official Roman Catholic-Reformed dialogue between the Vatican and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. After several years of reflection on the notion of "the kingdom of God" it became obvious to participants in the dialogue that different views of authority and of dialogue itself played a major role in the process. This paper was requested as an attempt to reflect on some of these differences from a Reformed perspective and from a South African experience. It therefore represents a case study of bilateral dialogue in which South African Reformed Christians have been participating. A first introductory section proves narrative background to the specific case study (par. 4-13). In four further sections four major clusters of crucial ecumenical issues that came to the fore in the dialogue are then discussed, namely questions concerning truth and community (par. 14-27), questions concerning doctrine and ethics (par. 28-46), questions concerning real reception (par. 47-56) and questions concerning speaking with authority in the church (par. 57-70). A final section offers some concluding reflections on the process of learning to speak when Reformed Christians and churches are involved. These concluding remarks are intended to contribute to this official bilateral dialogue.

Key Concepts: Ecumenical dialogue, truth, community, doctrine, ethics

Thinking About Dialogue: A South African Case-study

1. This is *a case study*, and a very particular and limited one. It is a story about experiences, insights and questions in specific Reformed circles in South Africa during recent decades, namely *the still ongoing struggles towards church unity in the so-called Dutch Reformed Church family*.

2. Several of the issues on which I was asked to reflect are indeed at the heart of this story, including questions concerning *the kind of unity* that is being sought, concerning *the role of dialogue* in this search, and *the role of joint decisions, documents and declarations* in such dialogue.

   Obviously, all these are well-known ecumenical questions at stake in all bilateral, multilateral and ecumenical dialogues. However, it may be helpful to reflect on possible ways in which characteristic assumptions and convictions of the Reformed tradition and community may impact on these common questions, giving them a particular form, even making it particularly difficult to address.

At the same time, the specific contextual nature of the South African struggles may be influencing our story to such an extent that other parts of the Reformed tradition and community may have better resources at their disposal to deal with these issues.

3. A first section will provide some *narrative background* that may be necessary in order to understand the issues involved. In the following sections four of the major complexes of insights and questions will briefly be raised, namely those dealing with *truth* and community, with *doctrine and ethics*, with real *reception*, and with speaking with *authority*. In a final section, some critical reflections on lessons learnt concerning dialogue will be drawn together.

A Story of Many Stories

4. The story of Reformed Christianity in South Africa is a very complicated one. It has been called "*a story of many stories*" (Smit 1992). Even if one focuses only on the story of Dutch Reformed Christianity – excluding Presbyterian and Congregational traditions and communities, as this case study will do – the story is still a complex one of division, conflict, and disunity.

5. In a way, it started with the eucharist. In 1855 white worshippers in a rural Dutch Reformed congregation refused to share the Lord's Supper with Coloured believers. In 1857 the Synod decided that it was "preferable and Scriptural" that all believers shared the same worship and the same congregation, but where these measures, "as a result of the weakness of some" obstructed the Christian cause, "Christian privileges could be enjoyed in separate buildings and even separate institutions".

   The "weakness of some" soon became the norm. In 1881 a separate "church" or denomination, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), was established for Coloured people, and during the twentieth century several others would follow, all divided according to race or ethnicity.

   Although they all belonged to the so-called "Dutch Reformed Church family", almost without any structural or visible unity, believers in the (white) Dutch Reformed Church were gradually made to believe that having separate churches for each nation (*volkskerke*) was the norm, according to Scripture and the explicit will of God. This church policy of separate churches would later form the religious roots of the ideology and since 1948 the official political policy of apartheid.

   The story is, obviously, much longer and much more complicated than this. The history of racial tension, discrimination and segregation reaches back to the beginning of colonization. Many philosophical, cultural, social, legal and economic factors contributed to what became apartheid. However, there is no denying that *Christian faith, and not exclusively in its Reformed version, also formed an integral part of that process*. The Dutch Reformed church and mission policy of separate churches played a pivotal role. The DRC increasingly appealed to government to introduce apartheid laws. "Scriptural proofs" legitimated the ideology.

6. The decades after 1948 saw increasing *opposition* against the apartheid policy, ideology and theology in church circles, both inside South Africa and in the ecumenical movement.

   In 1982, at the Ottawa meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), eight representatives from the so-called "daughter churches" in the DRC-family refused to participate in the official eucharist, claiming that it would be false to

do so in an ecumenical context, while they were excluded from the eucharist in the DRC in South Africa. After a long debate, the WARC declared a *status confessionis*.

7. Receiving the report from their delegates to the WARC, the DRMC also declared a *status confessionis* regarding the theological legitimation of apartheid. According to them, the issues were no longer adiaphora. A moment of truth had arrived. The truth of the gospel itself was at stake.

   Synod decided that they owed it to their own members, and to whoever might be interested, to explain why they now claimed – after decades of theological controversy and debate – that the truth of the gospel itself was at stake (Smit 1984).

   The *Confession of Belhar* was born, and four years later, in 1986, officially accepted as a confession of the DRMC.[1] Synod also published an official *Accompanying Letter,* which described their attitude, the authority, the purpose, and the expectations of *Belhar*.[2]

8. Generally speaking, the DRMC was truly convinced that the *Confession*'s contents would excite broad agreement and that a new phase of the discussions around apartheid would be introduced into church circles when it drafted and approved *Belhar*. The DRMC believed that the *Confession*'s contents was not merely the private opinion of their members, but that it indeed expressed common Christian convictions with which most Christians could agree. On the basis of such a newly found consensus and common faith apartheid could then hopefully be discussed. Therefore, following the Synod there was almost an optimistically enthusiastic spirit in the DRMC to see how other believers would react.

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1 In a short preface, appealing to Reformed ecclesiology as it is found in the *Heidelberg Catechism,* they confessed their faith "in the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects, and cares for his Church by his Word and Spirit." In a short conclusion, in the style of the *Confessio Belgica* and the *Barmen Declaration*, they confessed that they are called to obedience to the Triune God. In three articles they doxologically confessed their faith in the God who *unites* his church and calls his church to make this unity visible in many ways, who *reconciles* believers with Himself and with one another through his life-giving Word and Spirit and calls believers to practise this reconciliation, and who is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged and calls the church to be witnesses of this *compassionate justice*.

2 They knew that "an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but were of the opinion that the heart of the gospel itself was at stake." They "confessed their own guilt for not always witnessing clearly enough." They declared solemnly that this was not a political act, but something done for the sake of the church and the gospel it proclaims. They pleaded that "no-one would identify with the false doctrine which threatens the gospel itself, and for reconciliation, the true reconciliation which follows on conversion and change of attitudes and structures." The Confession was "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." Their prayer was that "the act of confession would not place false stumbling-blocks in the way, but would be reconciling and uniting, in spite of the pain and sadness, the repentance, remorse and confession needed on such a way of individual and collective renewal." They knew that this called for "the dismantling of structures of thought, of church, and of society which had developed over many years," but they prayed 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." Their prayer was "that the pain and sadness will be a pain and sadness that lead to salvation." They believed "that this was possible in the power of our Lord and by his Spirit, and that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope, liberation, salvation, and true peace to our country."

9. *How* was *Belhar*, then, *received*? *Within the DRMC* the reception process immediately effected a strong sense of identity, unity, and reconciliation.[3] The Confession's power to unite, reconcile, and motivate within the DRMC can hardly be overestimated. On several levels it cleared away earlier distrust and gave a new sense of identity and calling to the DRMC. Through a long process of reception it truly became part of the life, the identity, spirituality and practices of the church.

10. The 1986 Synod immediately appointed a Commission for Dialogue to conduct dialogues with *other members of the DRC-family* on the basis of *Belhar*, according to a specific procedure.

    No other church, including the sister churches, would be expected to accept the Confession as their own. The fact of a new, fourth confession was not to be an obstacle to church unity and true reconciliation. At the same time, the DRMC considered it very important that in-depth discussion about *Belhar*'s content should take place. Should other churches indicate that they too thought similarly about God and understood the gospel in the same way, further discussions could be held on this basis. However, should churches be of the opinion that they thought differently about God and believed differently, understanding *Belhar* to be at variance with the biblical message and the Reformed tradition and earlier Confessions, it would indicate that a continued conversation on this basis could hardly be meaningful.

    The Dialogue Commission communicated these decisions to the other sister churches in the DRC family.

11. Already during the first meeting between the Dialogue Commission and representatives of the (black, African) *Dutch Reformed Church in Africa*, the DRCA delegates immediately expressed their desire to accept *Belhar* also as their Confession, even though the DRMC had not required it. A long process then prepared for church union between the DRCA and the DRMC on the basis of the *Belhar Confession*. The united Church was born on 14 April 1994 and given the name *The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA)*. The term "uniting" was deliberately chosen to indicate an unfinished process and the hope that other churches would join this process of confession.[4] A new Church Order was adopted, to give concrete structure to the kind of church envisioned in the *Confession*.

12. The (white) *DRC*'s response to *Belhar* has still not been concluded. It is therefore still, after almost two decades, too soon to know whether *Belhar* indeed fully achieved the visible unity in the deeply divided DRC-family for which it was obviously intended at the time.

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[3] This was quite a remarkable process, as has become clear from the detailed description given by church historian CJA Loff in his Kampen-dissertation *Bevryding tot eenwording: Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika 1881-1994* (Liberation for unity).

[4] Several congregations from the old DRCA, mainly in the Free State, opposed the unification in court, because they were convinced the DRCA was not dissolved with due process, according to the then existing DRCA's church order. The Court of Appeals found for them under current South African law and because the DRCA had not adhered sufficiently to its Church Order regulations. During this process *Belhar* itself was never presented as a reason for the congregations' refusal to join the union. Actually, some objectors repeatedly stated that they did not even know what *Belhar* was. This was exactly the reason for their unhappiness, namely that they had not been sufficiently informed or consulted. Only afterwards some people complained about the origin, motives, and background of *Belhar* – those things which also repeatedly appeared in criticism from conservative, rightwing groups. Much speculation and mistrust, many perceptions, and even accusations existed about all the reasons and influences playing a role.

Against the backdrop of this narrative, at least *four issues* of extreme importance for all ecumenical dialogue, but now from this particular Reformed perspective and experience, can be raised.

Questions Concerning Truth and Community

14. The first issue concerns questions of *truth*. Reformed believers, like other Christians, know that we confess our faith in many, diverse and complex ways. They would strongly agree with Luther's dictum (*tota nostra operacio confessio est*) that all our activities, our whole lives, everything we do, are forms of confessing our faith.

    We can, therefore, have community with other believers and share our common faith and witness without necessarily sharing the same doctrinal formulae, confessional documents, expressions and decisions, or even theologies.

    We do not expect that the truth we believe in should be expressed in only one, universally accepted and authoritative way.

15. The Reformed tradition, like other Christian traditions, is aware that there are *many legitimate ways of talking about our faith*. The whole spectrum of ways of talking about the Christian gospel, as for instance described in the Lutheran Edmund Schlink's famous contributions to the Ecumenical Movement on the structure of doctrinal formulae (Schlink 1967), or in the Catholic theologian Edmund Arens' analysis of *Bezeugen und Bekennen* (Arens 1989, see also Arens 1994) are very helpful, yes, appealing to the Reformed way of thought.

    This implies that apart from authoritative documents and declarations, there are other, yet extremely important, ways of talking about the faith and sharing community with other Christians.

16. Reformed theologians, probably more than several other Christian traditions and communities, including Protestant traditions, are deeply aware of *the historical, rhetorical and therefore contextual nature of all formulations of their faith.*

    This conviction was already embedded in the origins of the Reformed tradition. Several recent studies of Calvin have again underscored the importance of this aspect for his own work.

    It explains why so many Reformed confessions were in fact written during the early years of the Reformation and why there was so little expectation that other believers, congregations or churches should adopt exactly the same expressions.

    All confessional documents, according to Reformed understanding, remain subject to the "Word of the living God and his Christ" who continues to speak to the Church. They therefore do not possess, in their final form, in their expressions and formulae, the same authority that some other Protestant traditions may accord them.

    Even interpretations of Scripture – irrespective of readers or form – all remain human readings and are therefore in principle revisable and open to evaluation and criticism. This applies equally to the regular Sunday worship service and the sermon and to decisions, declarations and documents adopted by universal synods of the church.

    This is the reason why all believers, themselves prophets, priests and kings, are called to become mature in their own faith and able to discern and judge for themselves in all spiritual matters. Ultimately, this is the ratio behind the presbyterian system of church governance, common throughout Reformed churches.

Even the controversies, sometimes threatening community and dividing communities of faith, are historical and contextual. They can only be understood by means of a careful and responsible hermeneutics of tradition, as is true of the decisions and documents that arose from them and in response to them.

17. Taken together, these insights helped Reformed believers in South Africa to understand that, in spite of the doctrinal and confessional decisions and documents we may share with other believers, even from our own tradition and community, on the basis of our common heritage, there may sometimes develop *other, new and real reasons for division* between us.

In some cases, merely appealing to what we share in common, particularly to our common confessional documents, may not be helpful in naming and overcoming these real differences. Some – perhaps many – of these causes may be so-called non-theological factors, social, cultural, ideological, political and economic factors impacting on our lives and on our faith, often without us having a clear understanding that this is the case.

We have learnt that a time may come where it is more important, specifically for our future community and unity, to address these new and really divisive issues of the present, rather that searching for or attempting to build on a common heritage, even a shared confessional heritage, that does not directly address our contemporary challenges and questions, whether theological or non-theological.

18. In our case, some Reformed believers became convinced that the real challenges of the present may become so divisive and urgent that a new moment of truth, a new time for confession, a *status confessionis,* should be recognised.

19. During this process, Karl Barth's views concerning the nature of Reformed confessions played a major role. Although these themes occupied him throughout his career, it was particularly during three periods of his life and work that Barth made major theological contributions concerning the nature of Christian confession.[5]

Particularly instructive is his address, prepared on request for the 12th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1925, on the "desirability and possibility of a universal Reformed confession" ("Die Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses"; for references that follow, see Barth 1990). He began with an attempt to provide *a definition of Reformed confession*, and then explained the definition briefly – in the first part of his very long paper – by pointing to ten characteristics of a Reformed confession contained in the definition:

> A Reformed confession of faith is the spontaneously and publicly formulated presentation to the Christian Church in general of a provisionally granted insight from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ attested to in Holy Scripture alone, by a geographically circumscribed

[5] In the early years, after he became well known for his commentary on Romans, in which he saw the world as facing a radical crisis, he was appointed as Professor for Reformed theology in Göttingen. For several years he submerged himself in Reformed theology and thought. He taught several courses on Calvin and major Reformed confessional documents. He spoke widely and repeatedly on questions concerning Reformed identity, including questions concerning the role and authority of the Bible in Reformed theology, the Reformed confessional heritage, and whether it was desirable to write a new Reformed confession. Very soon he was challenged by the events in Nazi-Germany. Together with others, including Reformed people, he played a leading role in the Confessional Church and the writing of the *Barmen Declaration*. Finally, after the World War Two, he participated in the initiatives by Reformed Christians to respond to the potential for destruction and war offered by nuclear arms in the form of the declaration of a *status confessionis*.

> Christian fellowship which, until further notice, authoritatively defines its character to outsiders and which, until further action, gives direction to its own doctrine and life.

A few remarks on his exposition of some of these characteristics may be particularly relevant to the present discussion, confirming what has already been said, but also introducing some further themes.

20. Reformed confession understands itself as expression of the general, universal, common catholic and apostolic faith of the whole church – in spite of the fact that this particular insight may have been widely neglected, forgotten or even denied. It gladly acknowledges the common faith in all other embodiments of the church, and does not deny that the discussion partners and adversaries are also church. It deliberately does not call itself Calvinist of Zwinglian, but Christian. It does not want to further and cultivate its own so-called *Eigenart*, not even what people sometimes call a divinely ordained (*gottgewollte*) *Eigenart*. It wants to be the voice of the *Una Sancta – daher seine Versöhnlichkeit und seine Härte*, said Barth.

21. This insight granted to the church is *provisional*. Reformed confession claims a third way between the unchanging Word of God on the one hand and mere religious human opinions and convictions on the other hand. This third way is that of doctrine: At the same time authoritative *and* open for revision, because God can always lead the church to new and even better insights in the eternal revelation. Depending on which of these aspects one emphasises, one finds the peculiar ambiguity of Reformed confessions: A strong, serious attitude that does not retreat from drawing consequences from doctrine, and the attitude of freedom that always remembers the relativity of its own attempts and insights.

22. The expression "*until further notice*" appears twice in Barth's description of Reformed confession. Until further notice – it both authoritatively defines its character to outsiders and it gives direction to its own doctrine and life. Radically different for example from Lutheran confessions, Reformed confessions can be revised, they are provisional, *diskutabel, verbesserlich und ersetzbar*. Calvin also underlined this. Reformed doctrine, however seriously it should be regarded, is in flux (*im Fluß*). The reason for this is immediately clear from what we have seen before. Scripture alone is "law and norm". Reformed confessions are commentaries on the Bible. They have obligatory power, authority, but only *as* commentary on the Bible. The commentary can never be perfect and final. Improvement is always possible. The only "further action" which may, therefore, set aside the authority of a confession (or any of its parts) is a more sound exposition of Scripture.

23. This means that Reformed confessions are truly human presentations – to be read, understood and respected *in their historical nature and context*. In principle, they are all, like the creeds of the early church, fallible human documents. The crucial distinction between confession and Scripture must never be forgotten – *Schrift bleibt Schrift, einzigartig und unvergleichlich, außerhalb der Reihe*.

    Every Reformed confession is particular, and in its particularity authoritative and to be understood and respected, as Calvin also taught. *Wir, hier, jetzt – bekennen dies! (gewiß im Bewußtsein, im Namen der Una Sancta, im Bewußtsein, die Wahrheit zu reden, aber: Wir, hier, jetzt, dies).* It is unthinkable for Reformed Christians even to consider the idea that the *Heidelberg Catechism* or the *Canons of Dordrecht* may be

inspired – like some other Protestant traditions regard their confessional documents, according to Barth.

24. Reformed confession is spontaneously and publicly formulated. It is *not decreed from above*. It is confessed by the believers, by the congregation, and for the market place, for the city hall, for the fellow-citizens – *hinter dem reformierten Bekenntnis steht letztlich ... (mindestens in der Idee) der Marktplatz oder das Rathaus daselbst die als christliche Abendmahlsgemeinde sich konstituierende Gemeinde der Stadt- oder Volksgenossen*. The earliest Reformed confessions were the products of discussions and controversies that took place in public, with wide-open doors. A Reformed Synod *receives its mandate* to accept the confession *from the congregations and therefore the believers* it represents.

25. Reformed confessions have *practical implications for both faith and life*. Reformed confessions deal much more easily and directly with public issues and with the fullness of human life in state and society than the confessional documents from other communities of faith – *Sie rollt das Problem der Ethik auf, und zwar grundsätzlich auf der ganzen Linie*.

26. Normally, the *subject* of a Reformed confession is a geographically circumscribed Christian fellowship. Local or national Reformed churches confessed. Precisely for this reason, Reformed confession proliferated during the time of the Reformation. Other Christians, both Lutheran and Catholic, longing for a single teaching authority, could not understand this attitude, and called the Reformed people *Confessionistae*. Still, *even Calvin* – quite remarkably, explained Barth – *never seriously considered the possibility of a common Reformed confession*.

    Between the Reformed Churches with different confessions at least five interesting ways of uniting and cooperating existed, according to Barth, *but the writing of a common confession never came to mind.*

    Why not? Barth argued that it would contradict the Reformed notion of the Church itself, in which confessing is something concrete and practical, that believers do in concrete, everyday and real fellowship with one another. Again, he expressed scepticcism concerning the possibility and desirability of a common, universal Reformed confession. It may, he seemed to think, *too easily become an instrument of power*, a *worldly* confession (*ein rechtes Weltbekenntnis*), but *not one that really lives in the hearts and lives of the believers in their local congregations and everyday lives.*

27. *Several of these considerations* are clearly important to keep in mind in order to understand the specific Reformed perspective on ecumenical dialogue and documents, particularly *also* as it took shape *in recent South African experience*.

Questions Concerning Doctrine and Ethics

28. A *second issue* of major importance in our recent experiences concerns *the relation between doctrine and ethics*. Again, this address by *Barth* is helpful to see the problem involved from a Reformed perspective. In a third and final section of his paper he considered a few criteria that should ultimately determine whether a universal Reformed confession is desirable and possible. Some of the questions he dealt with also came to the fore in our own experience.

29. His first criterion was that the authors must be aware that their confession was done in obedience to God's will, and not out of any other motive. They must be aware that they do not have any choice, *das Bewußtsein (einer) höchsten Notwendigkeit*. May God protect us from anything else. There are things that one may only do when one *must* do it. Such is the case with Christian confession. It must be motivated by Christian need (*Not*) and Christian compulsion (*Zwang*) only. No enthusiasm, no good intentions, no neighbourly love, no church political considerations can justify the act of confession. *'Credo' sagt man erst, wenn alle anderen Möglichkeiten erschöpft sind, wenn man, auf den Mund geschlagen, nichts mehr anderes sagen kann als eben 'Credo.'*

30. This view, continued Barth, implies two presuppositions, namely *a doctrinal and an ethical one*. Reformed Christians who feel the need to confess, because they have no choice, but are compelled by God's Word to speak, simultaneously bear witness to two aspects, namely something to know and something to do – *eine doppelte Mitteilung, etwas su Wissendes und etwas zu Wollendes*.

31. On the one hand, this means that such a confession must bring new insight from *God's Word*. This insight will be a rejection of falsehood and it will be the product of a long and difficult struggle. Reformed confessions are not intended to compromise between positions, to harmonise different viewpoints, to serve as preamble for a Church Order, or to express friendliness, or an ideal of unity. A confession without a pre-history, without a conflict, is no Reformed confession.

    This brought Barth to *the critical question where, in their time, such a struggle, such a heresy, such a history of conflict about the truth of God's Word was to be found*. As far as he was concerned, their time lacked this kind of seriousness. They found themselves in a crisis, yes, but it was the crisis of living "between the times," one that they had to get rid of, and another that they did not yet see.

32. On the other hand, this means that such a confession must command something of the authors, call them to *a new lifestyle*, to ethics according to God's Word. This has always been a characteristic of Reformed confession, argued Barth. *Sie ist von Haus aus Ethos*. It was precisely as a result of its ethical appeal that the Reformed confession had such an enormous impact on the construction of Europe. Any church that would risk confessing in their time, he said, had to be willing to say something about ethics, about life, as well – about the up-coming fascist nationalism, about anti-semitism, about the destruction of war.

    Again, he expressed his doubt whether they were ready and able to do something like this. The ethical problems of their day all seemed too controversial, too difficult, too complex. As long as they were unable to speak God's Word and will to these issues, however, they should not attempt to confess, because that would be to tempt God.

33. In our experience, the question whether the issue at stake was doctrinal or ethical in nature was also regarded as very controversial. Russel Botman often remembers the story how the DRMC's historically significant rejection in 1978 of apartheid as a contradiction of the gospel originated in a systematic theology course at the University of the Western Cape where the students were challenged to reflect on the question what was *theologically*, not merely morally, ethically or politically, at stake in apartheid South Africa (Botman 1996).

34. Clearly the *ecclesiological question* about the unity and therefore of the nature, the identity, of the Church was at the heart of our struggles. For decades, debates continued in Reformed circles in South Africa about the best way to give visible form and structure to the invisible and spiritual unity of the Church and of our common faith. *Questions of "faith" and "order" were fundamental to the struggle about apartheid theology*.

35. But was there also *more involved*? Were questions about the calling of the Church also at stake? Were moral, ethical, political issues involved, and were they indeed related to the truth of the gospel, to doctrinal and theological convictions? Could differences of opinion about ethical questions be elevated to the level of truth and confession? Was apartheid itself, and not merely the theological legitimation of apartheid, contradicting the gospel? Could political policies and ideologies be seen as contradicting the truth of the gospel?

36. The fact is that, for a Reformed mindset, doctrine and ethics cannot be separated that easily, if at all. *Belhar* was rejecting *a doctrinal error*, yes, namely the Biblical and theological justification of apartheid, but it was an error *with clear moral and ethical implications*. Some believers in South Africa in fact elevated apartheid to a matter of confession, albeit unconsciously. For them it was the catechism of their heart, while not of the book. This became clear from their lives, both in and outside the church.

37. The DRMC confessed that such behaviour was the consequence of a perversion of the gospel. The deepest problem was therefore not only the so-called (practical) implementation of an (innocent, neutral, yet unfortunately impractical, unfeasible) ideology. The most profound problem lay in the convictions and theological views, founding apartheid praxis, yet contradicting the gospel. The *public practices*, witnessing to a lack of reconciliation, really *depended*, even if unconsciously, *on a form of faith* in the impossibility of reconciliation.

38. According to the DRMC, *the existing Reformed Confessions* from our particular tradition *did not sufficiently address these matters*. Therefore a more explicit confession of these aspects of the gospel became necessary.[6]

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[6] Different South African Reformed systematic theologians later made similar comments. WD Jonker, DRC systematic theologian emeritus of the Stellenbosch University, wrote: "The *Belhar Confession* is a gift of God to our churches. It enriches and deepens the church's historical confessional treasury. In the Reformed tradition we have always known that God is not merely the God of justification by faith, but also the God of sanctification; not only the individual's God, but also that of the community; not only the God of worship services and private devotions, but also of politics and social justice. God does not merely save us from our guilt, but also from enmity and the many forms of suffering and injustice which people inflict on one another. God wants the sanctification of all of life. Yet these insights are given little concrete expression in the historical confessions. They are definitely not spelled out there. It has cost the evil and suffering of the South African situation to wring this aspect of our confession from the church's heart. The essential contribution to the Reformed world's confessional treasury is an unexpected gift from God to all of us in this country and to all Christians worldwide. The message of the *Belhar Confession* is universal. By God's grace it is a contribution from our country to the treasury of the world wide church" (Jonker 1998).

JJF (Jaap) Durand, URC systematic theologian emeritus from the University of the Western Cape, concluded his sermon during the 1997 General Synod of the URC: "Whatever the background of *Belhar*, we cannot ignore its contents. I want to state clearly that Reformed churches, not only in South Africa, but in the world, let us say all the member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, would have been considerably poorer without the confession expressed in *Belhar*. The implications of *Belhar* reach far beyond its initial context. I wish that the Reformed family would recognise this and not consider it limited to South Africa. I am convinced that the traditional Reformed confessions from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,

Although apartheid was deliberately not mentioned in the *Confession*, there can be no doubt that the particular political and ideological situation and the way the Christian faith was appropriated gave rise to *Belhar*, particularly since the underlying claim was that the truth confessed was not tied to the historical context alone but was the truth of the gospel.

39. Although the earlier Reformed Confessions did not address the ethical challenges we faced, it should also be obvious that this intricate relation between doctrine and ethics was and remains *an integral part of the Reformed tradition* itself.

    It is already clear from the original meaning of the term "Reformed" itself, which expresses the longing that everything – personal life, but also church and society – should continuously be reformed according to God's Word (the well known *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*). This is clear from typologies describing the Reformed faith as "Christ transforming culture" (Niebuhr 1951) or as "a world-transformative form of Christianity" (Wolterstorff 1983). It is clear from the characteristic way in which the Reformed tradition understood the "catholicity" of the Church and from the – also – ethical interpretations Reformed Confessions, like the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and Reformed theologians, from Calvin to Barth, gave to prayer and the spiritual life. It is clear from the way popular Reformed notions function, including "covenant" and "covenanting", "the Lordship of Christ", and "the kingdom of God".

40. With regards to the "*kingdom of God*", it may be instructive to note Barth's question of amazement when he discusses the miracles of Jesus – how the whole Western tradition, including both the Catholic Church and the Reformers and their followers, could ignore the presupposition of all Jesus' works, namely the kingdom of God, turning it into such a moralistic, dull affair, indifferent to the question of humanity and human need and suffering?

41. It is therefore no wonder that *the World Alliance of Reformed Churches* has since its very beginnings been passionately involved in issues concerning social justice. It is also no wonder that it is also possible to claim, in an ecumenical evaluation of the Alliance, that "the major contribution of the Reformed tradition to Christianity has often been its deep interest in theological reflection" (Schaeffer 1991, see also Schaeffer 1998). To the Reformed mind theology and ethics, doctrine and life, confession through words and confession through actions, are integrally intertwined and impossible to separate.

42. This inseparable link between theology and ethics is again visible in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches'declaration of a *processus confessionis* regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction, also adopted by the World Council of Churches at the Harare General Assembly. During the WARC's Debrecen General Council in 1997 it was still called a project on "Reformed Faith and Economic Injustice".

43. In *The Declaration of Debrecen*, a message or "covenantal liturgy" written in confessional style, adopted and sent to all member Churches for consideration, both Calvin's description of the Christian life and the *Heidelberg Catechism*'s description of

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their value and relevance for the church notwithstanding, are insufficient expression of the full Reformed faith. They do not address three main themes of the *Belhar* confession: church unity, reconciliation between people, and God's justice for the poor and needy. Very little is said about church unity. Reconciliation amongst people and justice for the poor are completely absent. The *Belhar Confession* is not meant for South Africa alone" (Durand 1997).

our deepest comfort, namely that we are not our own but belong to Jesus Christ, are used as a motto. Again, this formulation expresses theology (faith, comfort) and ethics (Christian life, calling, commitment) simultaneously, without any possibility of separation.

It is not surprising that the South African Reformed experience, as expressed for example in *Belhar,* also played a role in the story of this *processus confessionis* and that (Southern) African Reformed Christians will be eagerly involved in its further developments.

44. Reformed Christians will therefore probably go along with *the Ecclesiology and Ethics* initiative in the Ecumenical Movement, which aims to bring the respective agendas of Faith and Order[7] and Life and Work[8] closer together (for references that follow, see Best and Robra 1997). During the last decade voices grew stronger – from both sides – that these two emphases belong together and that the tension between the struggles for unity and justice should be overcome. From different sides the conviction seemed to grow that the notion of *koinonia* – the Greek word indicating something like communion, community, sharing, fellowship, society, participation, solidarity, or *Gemeinschaft*, but deliberately kept untranslated in the earlier study documents because

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[7] The focus of Faith and Order has been, broadly speaking, on the *visible unity* of churches in the world, both globally and locally. Faith and Order always understood that "efforts towards manifesting the unity of the church" and "efforts towards common witness and service in the world" should "be held together." Several studies therefore sought to reflect on this relationship. A serious effort was made in a study programme called "The unity of the church and the renewal of human community," which led in 1990, after a long process and many consultations, to the document *Church and World. The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*.

The purpose of *Church and World* was to affirm and explore the inter-relation of these two fundamental ecumenical tasks: The search for the visible unity of Christ's Church, and the search for common Christian proclamation, witness and service as expressions of God's mission and love for a world crying out for renewal."

The guiding questions, however, remain *ecclesiological* and the main argument of the document also. The (identity and task of the) church is understood within the perspective of the kingdom of God (as God's creative, redeeming and sustaining rule), as both mystery (with emphasis on the reality of the church as body of Christ) and prophetic sign (with emphasis on the church's role as instrument of God's grace given to a world crying out for healing and renewal), pointing (doxologically) towards an eschatological realization of God's saving purpose for all humankind.

[8] The focus of Life and Work, on the other hand, has been, broadly speaking, on *furthering justice* in the world. Again, diverse, successive, and sometimes competing notions have served as visions for this endeavour. For those involved in Life and Work, ecclesiological issues, including the visible unity of the church, were often regarded as irrelevant, sometimes even obstructive, but in any case secondary. At the most, ecclesial unity would sometimes be regarded as necessary for practical reasons, to make the collective efforts of the churches stronger, in the face of the enormous social, political and economic challenges they were facing. A statement of the First Life and Work Conference, in 1925 in Stockholm, already admitted that "The sins and sorrows, the struggles and losses of the Great War and since have compelled the Christian Churches to recognize, humbly and with shame, that 'the world is too strong for a divided Church'." Later, South African Archbishop Tutu would allude to this, saying that "apartheid was too strong for a divided church." The interest in visible unity was functional and practical. The primary focus was *ethical* rather than ecclesiological.

A major meeting in the Life and Work tradition was held in Seoul, in 1990, with a view "to engage member churches in a conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation." The two expressions "conciliar process" and "covenant" are ecclesiologically very significant and together demonstrate the underlying intention to commit churches in a unified and in some sense mutually binding manner to confront the life-and-death issues of the time. However, the result was again a lack of integration between the two sets of concerns.

of the crucial differences caused by any translation – could serve as a vision integrating these two concerns.[9]

45. The purpose behind this recent focus on *koinonia* is therefore the attempt to bring *ecclesiological* and *ethical* concerns together in a new and fruitful way. Three consultations were held as part of this process, jointly organised by Units I (Faith and Order) and III (Justice, Peace and Creation) of the WCC.

Their three final statements were published together as *Ecclesiology and Ethics*. Since they are called "Costly Unity,"[10] "Costly Commitment,"[11] and "Costly Obedience,"[12] respectively, the ecclesiology and ethics-project has been described as "a litany of 'costlies'."

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[9] The Seventh Assembly of the WCC in Canberra (1991) already issued "The Canberra Statement," using the notion of *koinonia* to set the unity of the church in the broader context of God's design. The Fifth World Conference of Faith and Order met in Santiago de Compostela in 1993 to draw out and develop this picture of visible unity painted at Canberra. The notion of *koinonia* played a major role in the proceedings. Its official report was also published under the title *On the way to Fuller Koinonia.*

[10] "Costly Unity" was the report of this first meeting in Rønde, Denmark, in 1993. The explicit purpose was serious dialogue about these "long-lived tensions and divisions," this "cleft ... exposing a history of differences which runs the length of the modern ecumenical movement."

To achieve that, they proposed to see the church itself as *moral community*. "It all came to the same point: The church not only has, but is, a social ethic, a koinonia ethic … "The being (*esse*) of the church is at stake in the justice, peace and integrity of creation process" and "*koinonia*," they argued, "is an apt term for both." The major part of the document consisted of an exposition, under different headings, of the nature of such *koinonia* and its implications.

"Cheap unity" avoided morally contested issues because they would disturb the unity of the church. Costly unity – and therefore the title – in the church as moral community meant discovering the churches' unity as a gift of pursuing justice and peace. It can often only be acquired at a price.

Church as moral community began with the moral meaning of the sacraments themselves. The sacraments as person-shaping rites can lead into sacramental living. The bridge between ecclesiology and ethics was to be found in the experience of worship and the deepening of spirituality.

This report served a few months later at Santiago de Compostela and contributed to the important role that *koinonia* as integrating notion would play there. Already, however, a second joint meeting was planned, partly because the idea of the church as a moral community was unclear and led to many questions and criticisms.

[11] "Costly Commitment" was the report of the second meeting at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem, Israel, in 1994. Part of the problem with the description of the church as moral community was that it could seem like a description of what was already and always the case, particularly when it built on the experiences of the sacraments, worship and spirituality. This would not sufficiently account for the many differences between churches, and for their lack of ethical involvement.

Accordingly, they wanted to emphasise the calling, the vocation, of the church. The churches – even as moral communities – were called to *commit* themselves to one another, recognising that they need each other on their ecumenical journey. Such commitment was an essential foundation for their common reflection and action. It had become increasingly clear – they claimed – that the road to costly unity led necessarily to a *costly commitment* of the churches to one another. Those who had previously been wary of "moral reductionism" had to commit themselves to the ethical character of the church. Those who had been deeply engaged in ethical praxis only, had to commit themselves also to ecclesial renewal.

[12] "Costly Obedience" was the report of this third and final meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1996. The theme of moral formation was further pursued by asking "what it might mean to speak of the church as a global communion of moral witnessing."

The obedience to which the church is called – it was said – is often costly. It may require the churches to position themselves in relation to the issues of particular times and places in ways that call for courage, perseverance and sacrifice. Such faithfulness may even come to the point of martyrdom.

Again, the consultation found it necessary, but difficult, to interpret the particular time and place, and did that in terms of globalisation. In the light of this description, the document then discussed at some length the meaning of moral formation in the world, the churches' moral failure in face of nationalistic, ethnic and

This study process sought to explore the link between what the church *is* and what the church *does*, and in doing this, both these aspects also came under scrutiny and critical reflection. The *koinonia* to which the *oekumene* is called, which involves communion in faith, in life and in witness, takes the form of costly unity – which means that faith involves discipleship – and calls the churches to costly commitment to one another, as well as to costly obedience, facing the struggles for life of every age. It is still an open question whether these attempts to integrate ecclesiological and ethical concerns have been successful, however, at least for Reformed people this should be a very important ecumenical undertaking.

46. This has indeed also been *our own experience*. Doctrinal questions – about the church, but therefore also about the Triune God, Christ, and the Spirit – cannot be isolated from moral or ethical questions about the calling and the life of the Church in the world, and vice versa. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, at least for Reformed Christians, to be interested in the one and not the other.

Questions Concerning Real Reception

47. This leads to a third issue of major importance during our developments, namely that of "*reception*". Again, it is a common ecumenical problem, but one that takes on specific problematic features for Reformed Churches.

"Reception" has been called the single most important issue in the ecumenical movement, the main future problem of the ecumenical movement (Rusch 1988), the number-one problem of the ecumenical movement (Kilmartin 1984).

"Reception" is an umbrella-term, referring to many aspects and issues. How can local churches and congregations be persuaded to take ecumenical challenges, opportunities, issues, decisions, notions, documents, and initiatives more seriously? When have local churches really received and appropriated these documents and decisions, including those of their own denomination? How can churches accept the decisions and documents of other churches and face common challenges collectively? How can local churches and congregations be effectively involved in drawing up these documents and making these decisions?

48. It is not possible to deal with the wealth of literature already available on the related notions of consensus, recognition and reception. Highly simplified, reception refers to the process whereby churches accept one another in full communion as a result of ecumenical encounters. Perhaps Rusch's definition of ecumenical reception can suffice: "Ecumenical reception includes *all phases and aspects of an ongoing process* by which a Church under the guidance of God's Spirit makes the results of a bilateral or multilateral conversation *a part of its faith and life* because the results are seen to be in conformity with the teachings of Christ and of the apostolic community, that is, the gospel as witnessed to in Scripture" (Rusch 1988, my italics; see also Naudé and Smit 2000).

49. The words in italics – not to mention some of the other aspects of the definition – point to challenges that the DRMC and (after unification) the URCSA have had to grapple with. For Reformed Churches, they present serious questions, even with regards to the decisions of the specific denomination. *When* has a document, decision or declaration

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economic violence, the grounding of the church's moral formation in the eucharist and baptism, and finally the idea of an ecumenical moral communion and the possible role of the WCC in such an endeavour.

truly become "part of the faith and life" of a Church community, particularly if that Church is Reformed, and the "faith" of the Church therefore not a fixed doctrinal deposit, but the real, living everyday faith of believers?

50. For us this presented a major concern from the very beginning. How could we at least try to ensure that a new Confession was truly a part of the faith and lives of our members?

    In a *first attempt* the Committee that was appointed to draft the Confession argued that it was not their task to write a Confession with new theological ideas and positions and then to present it to the members expecting that they should accept and believe such claims. Reformed Christians do not believe their confessions, it was said, but they confess their beliefs. This implied that the Committee only had to ask what the members already believed regarding the gospel and apartheid, and to try to put that into words.

    This made the task much easier. At that time, the DRM Church had already expressed itself on several occasions and very clearly about the unity of the Church and about reconciliation in Christ, and had accordingly rejected apartheid and its Biblical defence in the light of these two convictions. They also knew that the members rejected apartheid because they experienced it as injustice and because they were convinced that this contradicted the Biblical proclamation of God's justice and care. They therefore only had to find words to express these three fundamental convictions in such a way that the members could recognize their own faith in these words.

    The Committee deliberately did this by making use of a number of Biblical associations, because they knew that the members knew the Bible well and would recognize these allusions.

51. In the *Synod Meeting* where this Draft Confession was discussed the next day, this indeed led to an overwhelming acceptance, which was in many ways unexpected given the deep divisions and mutual mistrust that had been present in the church and even in the meeting itself during the preceding days. This first moment of reception already had an immediate and major impact on the church.

52. The *next important phase* was that this Draft Confession had to be discussed in the church as a whole, on all levels and by everyone, for their approval. Without such a process of common reception, there could be no possibility of calling it a Confession.

    Again, it was absolutely remarkable to see how members accepted the Draft with enthusiasm. It was discussed over a period of four years, until the next national Synod, in all congregations of the church, by different groups, inviting and involving every member of the church. Every congregation finally had to report in writing to Synod on whether they found the Draft acceptable as their Confession or whether they would like to suggest any changes. Only after this long process of study, discussion and reception did the next Synod accept the Draft as *Confession*.

53. Now a *new phase* in the process began. The new *Confession* and its content had to find its way into all the normal ways in which Reformed Churches express and practice their faith. This included regular sermons, litanies and prayers, songs and hymns, instruction, teaching and catechism, pastoral work, but also public witness and our dialogues with other churches. As a Reformed Church, we knew that we could only claim that we have truly received *Belhar*, once it was clear to everyone that the content of this *Confession* had really made an impact on our spirituality and our lives.

To a large extent this was indeed the case. The unification between the former DRCA and the DRMC into the URCSA on the basis of *Belhar* and the new Church Order which resulted from this process gave a major new impetus to the reception of *Belhar*, as indicated earlier.

In summary, one can indeed claim that the short history of *Belhar*'s reception may be divided in three phases. In the first phase the DRMC tried to express and confess its members' faith (in the face of apartheid). In the second phase the DRCA and the DRMC tried to embody this confession together, to give it form, presence, structure, organisation, and existence in the URCSA *Church Order*. In the third phase the URCSA had become this confession, had sought to practice, enact, and be it. This, in turn, had major implications for future reception and for dialogue and unification with other Churches.[13]

54. Yet, having said this, it is also clear that for Reformed Churches such a process of reception is *never complete*. It is always possible to appeal to the convictions in a Reformed Confession to criticise the Church to which this Confession belongs, to unmask any lack of reception that may still exist.

In September 1997, for example, a doctoral student from the University of the Western Cape, Pieter I van Niekerk, completed his research in a rural congregation of the URCSA in the Eastern Cape and found that the members of the congregation did not really know *Belhar* and that they had not appropriated its content (Van Niekerk 1997). Their own views of God did not correspond at all with the convictions expressed in the *Confession*. This clearly called for further reception.

55. *Other Reformed Churches* involved in our South African dialogues had *similar difficulties with reception*. The (African) DRCA did not successfully convince all its members and congregations, in all the regional Synods, that they were fully involved in the process of uniting with the DRMC and that they received a proper opportunity to respond to the outcomes and proposals of the official negotiations between the Churches. The result was – and in fact still is – a painful legal conflict.

The (white) Dutch Reformed Church, similarly, had difficulties regarding reception. Officially, it took a series of important and far-reaching decisions in its document *Church and Society (1986; revised 1990)*, but it failed to properly communicate with its members about those decisions, both before they had been taken and afterwards. The result was that some members left the Church to establish a new one – a phenomenon which is sadly very characteristic of Reformed communities, precisely because of these problems involved with reception – once they heard about the decisions, while many other members are still not fully aware of these decisions, often leading to tension between members as regards official claims on behalf of the Church and the everyday practices in local congregation – an example being church unity.

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[13] During the first phase the DRMC could still declare that it did not expect other churches to accept *Belhar*, because it was only its own confession, wrung from it by a historical moment. It had to witness, aided by the gospel, to its own identity, against false arguments. In the current third phase the URC will no longer be able to say the same in conversations about church unity amongst the DRC family. Eighteen years have been too long a time and the uniting, reconciling, motivating, identity creating role played by *Belhar* has become too significant ever to let go of it again. It has become part of the URCSA's own life. The URCSA *is Belhar*. *Belhar* has united it and is the vision that determines the URCSA's church order and life. It is the foundational part of this church's truth and existence. The URCSA's birth and existence is a consequence of *Belhar*'s history. Any kind of "reception" of the URCSA consequently implies receiving *Belhar*.

One of the decisions was that the DRC officially acknowledged guilt concerning apartheid. During the WARC General Council the official delegation of the DRC went further and clearly stated that apartheid was sinful. It is, however, far from convincingly clear that many members of the Church share these official positions. The same is true of the response of the DRC to *Belhar* itself. Although the Church has officially, on several occasions, declared that they can agree with the content of *Belhar*, this has seemingly not been fully received by members and congregations.

56. Ultimately, it will be clear that, at least *for Reformed Churches, "reception" entails more* than merely "receiving" common decisions, documents and initiatives. It concerns the questions how we receive one another, how we learn to live with one another, how we come closer to one another in visible and concrete forms of living unity.

    Certain fundamental presuppositions about the Reformed way of life and of being church, may prevent authoritative documents and declarations, even consensus documents from ecumenical discussions and study documents of the specific denomination itself from achieving the kind of "reception" needed to make a real difference.

    Harding Meyer (Meyer 1991, see also 1986, 1988, 1989 and Meyer and Vischer 1984), in a helpful description of bilateral dialogues, therefore correctly argues that it is easier and more natural for those churches, like the Roman Catholic Church with "its strong sense of identity and universality" and "other churches, particularly those which themselves have a fairly strong sense of identity and worldwide coherence in doctrine, worship and practice" to engage in such dialogues. They can "receive" the results of such dialogues more easily and effectively than others, including those from the Reformed community, interested in and dependent upon a more difficult process of reception.

    Precisely this acknowledgement, however, leads to a *fourth* and final issue which is so crucial that it deserves special attention, namely questions of *authority*.

Questions Concerning Speaking with Authority

57. It is not without good reason that Gillian R Evans began her very instructive trilogy of studies, intended as a contribution to ecumenical dialogue, with in-depth discussions of the problems of authority in the Reformation debates (see *Problems of authority in the Reformation debates*, 1992: *The church and the churches. Toward an ecumenical ecclesiology*, 1994; *Method in ecumenical theology. The lessons so far*, 1996; also *The reception of the faith*, 1997).

58. Each dialogue partner in ecumenical discussions also has to deal with *problems of authority in its own ranks*, in addition to the problems it might experience in the relationships with others. Different churches deal with these questions in diverse ways. *For Reformed people, this is extremely difficult*, as we also experienced in our recent struggles within our family.

59. Reformed churches *do not have a final authority* to appeal to, neither in the form of an authoritative ecclesial body, nor in the form of authoritative documents. Their only appeal can be to the authority of the Scriptures, or rather, to the authority of "the living God and his Christ" still speaking through the Holy Scriptures, but that obviously only raises new and complex questions in any dialogue.

60. The very fact that such claims to *the authority of Scripture*, according to the Reformed faith, can never be formulated in final, infallible and timeless expressions, decisions, formulae or documents, but remain themselves historical and therefore contextual claims – and therefore, in principle, revisable – makes dialogue with Reformed theologians and Christians difficult.

61. The additional fact that all such claims should ultimately, according to Reformed faith, be tested against their understanding of Scripture in a process of real reception by *all the believers* themselves, makes the challenge even more difficult.

62. The further fact that these Reformed believers may probably be more interested to hear the Scriptures speaking to them, in *their historical context*, about their own identity and calling, about the issues that they themselves face rather than about earlier conflicts, further complicates any attempt at dialogue. Reformed believers may normally be more interested in dialogue about the present and the future than about the past.

63. Finally, the fact that these issues involve, for the Reformed mind, not merely doctrinal questions but *also moral, ethical, social, economic and political ones*, further contributes to the controversial and conflictual nature of such dialogues. Christians disagree fundamentally about moral questions, often more than about those that may seem doctrinal.

64. When Christians hope to come to some agreement about moral questions in *typically modern, pluralist and democratic societies*, where the church or the churches often hardly have any voice with authority at all, these problems become even more urgent.

65. Of course, these basic Reformed convictions concerning authority may also have particular *positive contributions* to bring to ecumenical dialogue.

66. The first contribution should certainly be the ability, yes, *the willingness* of Reformed people *to revise* earlier positions, formulations and decisions. Since any such decisions do not possess any a-historical authority as propositions in that specific form, or as doctrinal and confessional documents formulated in that specific way, but are provisional, Reformed people should have much freedom to commit themselves to new interpretations and expressions of Christian faith, provided it can be convincingly demonstrated that and how these new claims appeal to the clear message of the Scriptures.

67. A second contribution could be the total *commitment* of the Reformed tradition and community to the *unity and catholicity* of the Christian Church. Again, since they do not attach the same authority to their own confessional history and documents as some other Protestant traditions, they do not have that much interest in preserving themselves, even during and in spite of ecumenical dialogues and initiatives. They are less interested in remaining reformed than in serving and being part of the One Church. Even when the Reformed Alliance was formed during the 19th century, they immediately took pains to explain that their intention was not to separate themselves, but that they were open for dialogue, co-operation and union with other Christian traditions and communities.

68. Reformed believers are – or could be expected to be – fully committed to the visible, structural unity of the church, including a unity of faith, order, life and work, but *without any final, fixed ideas* about the nature or form that such unity should take in future. Again, they do not lay claim to any authoritative vision in this regard. They are more inclined to be (also self-)critical of any lack of unity that they may sense –

whether in faith, order, life or work – than they are to be prescriptive with regard to the form this unity should take.

69. Our *own experiences* in South Africa indeed *confirmed many of these claims*, as the story has already indicated. With *Belhar*, the church could not appeal to its own authority, not even that of Synod or to its own earlier Confessions, but had to appeal to the Scriptures, and in such a way that believers could recognise their own faith and could agree with the claims made, in a long and intense process of reception. In the dialogue with other churches, the appeal to Scripture was again the only possibility, together with the willingness to listen to the brothers and sisters and to take their responses seriously.

    At the same time, on the positive side, we could count on the deep commitment to the unity and the catholicity of the church on all sides. What was really at stake, was the visible nature of such unity, and the mutual acceptance that there is no authoritative or timeless answer to that question kept the difficult and painful dialogues going under extremely difficult conditions.

    Our own commitment to a living unity included and therefore expected a shared commitment to real reconciliation and caring justice. In other words, it had a moral or ethical aspect as well, and called for forms of discipleship and obedience. This made the dialogue much more difficult. Everybody involved knew that these commitments would have serious political and economic implications for our lives in apartheid South Africa.

    Again, on the positive side, the awareness amongst almost all participants in these dialogues that the Reformed faith inevitably involves such an ethical commitment as well, and that it was not merely political opportunism on the side of our black churches, helped the dialogues to continue, despite the controversies.

70. *Since the transformation* in South Africa to a democratic, pluralist and secular society, South African Churches have been experiencing *the problem of authority* in a very acute way. During apartheid, both the churches supporting the system and those struggling against it, almost took it for granted that they could speak publicly about moral and political issues with some authority, and that at least some people would listen to their voice and opinion. This changed dramatically after the transformation, which brought new challenges to churches and to the Ecumenical Church in our country.

    Within our churches, we need to take questions of authority and reception far more seriously. We need to find new ways of involving members in the discussions and decision-making processes of our churches, particularly when it concerns the moral challenges we face.

    As churches, we also need to rethink our own position and calling in society, and to find *new ways of "learning to speak"* (Clements 1995) in a public voice in ways that will be more modest than before, but that will still be heard and could still make a meaningful contribution.

Concluding Remarks: On Learning to Speak

71. Looking back, it must be obvious why *our story is still ongoing* and why we are, in many ways, still learning to speak amongst ourselves as Reformed Churches, to one another in ecumenical dialogues, and publicly. In the process, however, we *have already had several experiences* that could perhaps invite further critical reflection on the nature of ecumenical dialogue.

    The *visions of unity* that participants bring to an ecumenical dialogue will have a major impact on the dialogue itself, since it will determine what respective participants may see as

the possible outcome and therefore as the best way to proceed. It will make a major difference whether people look for formulations that will solve earlier doctrinal conflicts or lead to new consensus documents, or whether they are looking for some form of visible church unity. It will make a major difference whether the product of the dialogue is seen as the ultimate purpose, or whether the dialogue merely serves as a step on the way to something more. For Reformed people, the latter expectation will probably be the case.

73. There can be no doubt that *serious and informed theological reflection and argument* could and should play a major role in ecumenical dialogue. Reformed believers will hopefully never underestimate the crucial importance of theological discussion.

    At the same time, *different structures of authority* in different traditions will have a major influence on the value and impact of such theological reflection. For churches with a strong sense of identity and clear structures of authority, it will be much easier to participate in ecumenical dialogue and to take the outcomes seriously. For Reformed churches, this will always be more difficult. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches will, for example, probably always face serious and difficult questions of reception regarding the dialogues in which it is involved. This may even frustrate the dialogue partners. The same is, however, always true for Reformed churches, even on a national, regional or local level. When official bodies in these churches have accepted common statements, the real test still lies ahead, namely to involve members of these churches in a full process of reception.

74. Even when Reformed churches cannot receive the results of ecumenical dialogues with the same processes of authority than some other churches may, *the immeasurable potential value or impact of such common decisions or statements* for these Reformed churches themselves should not be underestimated. *Belhar* proved this for us, and is still proving it in ever-widening circles. Such documents can call believers to new processes of reflection, debate and discussion that could indeed lead to wonderful forms of reception. This will, however, depend on the enthusiasm with which the churches involved, on all levels, from national to local, take such common statements seriously. The *processus confessionis* programme of the WARC will illustrate this. Everything will depend on the willingness of churches to become involved.

75. Reformed Christians – and even churches and theologians (?) – will probably be more interested in *questions of the present and the future than in those of the past*. They have less at stake in finding new formulae for doctrinal controversies of the past, including *Lehrverurteilungen und Verwerfungen* – do Reformed churches really have any of these (?) – than in finding common ground and shared commitments regarding questions of today and the future.

    This may make the dialogues more difficult, rather than easier. They may become more difficult because there may be new and very real causes of division amongst us. Many of the factors involved in these divisions may be non-theological in nature, and may include issues of race, culture, class, and sex, and may call for moral or ethical commitment about which there may be very strong disagreements. At the same time, however, these factors may lead to more serious involvement and participation, as our story hopefully also illustrates.

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