

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND CONFESSING THE FAITH? Karl Barth's views on confession revisited

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Abstract

The question is what influence contexts of social transformation have on the use of the Bible when Reformed Christian churches respond to social issues by confessing their faith. Do the Reformed confessions merely reflect the general convictions generated during periods of social transformation? Do they simply use the Bible to legitimate these convictions? In order to reflect on this question, Karl Barth's influential and indeed representative views on the nature of Reformed confessions are discussed. Barth wrote extensively on confession during three periods of his life. In three sections, his views during these periods are called to mind. During the 1920s he developed a detailed position on Reformed confession, arguing that historical circumstances, like cultural crises, can indeed urge Reformed Christians to confess, but that the content of such confession should always be determined by the Word of God, and not by the kairos. During the 1930s these ideas are put to practice during the confrontation of the Confessing Church in Germany with Nazism and the writing of the different Barmen Declarations. In a dramatic way, Barth remains faithful to his earlier convictions regarding Reformed confessions. During the 1950s many Reformed Christians again feel themselves challenged by the destructive potential of the atom bomb, which constitutes, according to them, a status confessionis. Again, Barth remains in line with his earlier ideas and positions on Reformed confession. In a final section, some conclusions for the initial question are drawn

1. Focussing the question

There are many - and extremely interesting - questions embedded in the topic suggested to me by the organisers of this colloquium. For the purpose of this paper, I proceed from the research problem investigated in the project and therefore reflect on the question 'What influence do contexts of social transformation have on the use of the Bible when Reformed Christian churches respond to social issues *by confessing their faith?*' The words in *italics* provide the concentrated focus of the following observations. This focus implies that many other fascinating issues are not addressed. The cluster of questions at stake in this specific topic is limited. They inquire after possible inter-relationships that may exist between the issues indicated by four expressions in the topic: *social transformation - use of the Bible - Reformed Christianity - confessing the faith.*

In order to approach these relationships, I would like to focus on a case-study, in which these four elements came together in the most dramatic way possible, namely *Karl Barth's thought on the nature of Christian confessions.* Through his monumental life-work Barth (see Busch 1978 for the authoritative study on his life and work, and as introductions to his thought, Bromiley 1979, Frey 1994, Kreck 1978, Torrance 1990, and Weber 1950) has

perhaps contributed more than anyone else to our understanding of the nature of confession, within the Reformed tradition, appealing to the Bible, when faced with social challenges (see also Lienemann 1980 for an interesting discussion of Barth's ideas on confession, under the three rubrics of 'hear, confess, struggle').

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. In the *early years* he becomes well-known for his commentary on Romans, in which he sees the world as facing a radical crisis. He is appointed as Professor for Reformed theology in Göttingen. For several years he submerges himself in Reformed theology and thought. He teaches several courses on Calvin and major Reformed confessional documents. He speaks 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 is desirable to write a new Reformed confession. Very soon he is challenged by the radical social transformation taking place in and through Nazi-Germany. Together with other Reformed people, he plays a leading role in the *Confessing Church* and the writing of the *Barmen Theological Declaration*. Soon after the Second World War he participates 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*. In what follows, some of Barth's central concerns during *these three periods* are called to mind, before a few concluding remarks are made concerning the question under discussion.

2. 'Until further notice' - and a strong sense of crisis

During his appointment as professor for Reformed theology in Göttingen (October 1921 - October 1925), and during the following period in Münster, Barth very deliberately submerges himself in *Reformed theology*. He teaches, as he would do right through his academic career, on major confessional and theological documents of the Christian tradition, during this time particularly from the Reformed tradition (see in particular the volumes of early essays, including *Die Theologie und die Kirche*, without year, and Barth 1957a; as well as studies of Calvin, including Barth 1985, Barth 1990b, and Barth 1993, all three from 1922-1925; a 1923 study of the theology of the Reformed Confessions, Barth 1998; and a historical study of the role of Scripture in theology, Barth 1994b, from 1927). He is often invited to travel widely and to address diverse audiences (see the volumes with speeches, Barth 1990a and 1994a), and he uses every opportunity to give - soon to become well-known and influential - papers on themes like the nature and task of Reformed doctrine (1923, Barth 1990d), the Scripture-principle of the Reformed church (1925, Barth 1990f), church and theology (in which he deals with these issues as well, 1925, Barth 1990h), the church and revelation (1923, Barth 1990e, and 1927, Barth 1994c), the Word of God and theology (1922, Barth 1990c, and 1924, Barth 1990i), and the desirability and possibility of a universal Reformed confession (1925, Barth 1990g).

A strong sense of *crisis* pervades his thought during this period. This gives rise to the so-called dialectical theology which he and many of his friends and colleagues practise during these early years. The different editions of the *Commentary on Romans*, that made him so popular, interesting and controversial, all reflect this sense of crisis. It is also the underlying pathos of the influential periodical, with the significant title *Zwischen den Zeiten*, which Barth and his companions Thurneysen and Gogarten publish between 1923 and 1933, in which many of his important articles and essays are to be found (see the informative study

of Barth and Gogarten during this period, Lange 1972; also instructive is the correspondence between Barth and Thurneysen, in Barth 1974).

Combining these two major influences on his thought during these years - Reformed theology and a strong sense of crisis - Barth is often forced to consider the question whether a new confession may be desirable or necessary. A brief look at some of his important essays during this period may clarify his response to this question.

In September 1923 he addresses the Full Assembly of the *Reformierter Bund* in Emden on the topic 'Reformierte Lehre, ihr Wesen und ihre Aufgabe' (Barth 1990d). Over against many who no longer take Reformed theology and doctrine seriously, he affirms its importance. But what does this mean? How does one take Reformed faith seriously? He rejects three answers to this question, namely those of people who define and defend Reformed faith out of antiquarian, ideological, or emotional reasons respectively (*Reformiertheit aus antiquarischer, ideologischer oder emotionaler Liebhaberei*).

Some people, the antiquarians, simply use 'Reformed' as a description of who they are, of their own tradition and practices. They want the church to 'remain' Reformed, by which they mean remain what they already are, believe and embody. Against them Barth argues that this is a denial of the Reformed tradition.

The history of the Reformed church, the documents witnessing to its faith, its characteristic emphases in faith and life, are all indeed very important, and should be respected more by Reformed people, but they do not constitute the Reformed tradition, which only consists in a single, timeless appeal to the open Bible and to the Spirit, who speaks from this Bible to our spirit, argues Barth. It is not by accident, but very deliberately (*wohlüberlegterweise*) that the Reformed tradition does not have a single authoritative interpretation of the Biblical message, like the Lutheran *Confessio Augustana* or *Formula Concordiae*, or anything of similar authority, but only *confessions*. Many of them, says Barth, begins or ends with a very deliberate acknowledgement of possible future improvements (*mit dem offenen Vorbehalt künftiger besserer Belehrung*), and he refers to a whole series of Reformed confessions.

The Reformed tradition does not know doctrine in the strict sense of the word, he says. Teaching authority, for the Reformed tradition, does not reside somewhere in Christian history, but in Scripture and Spirit who are both outside (*jenseits*) the Christian history (*auch die Schrift!*). Loyalty to the tradition means, therefore, for Reformed people, loyalty to the forebearers precisely also in this respect: listening to the history, but in its reference to the revelation which is outside history (*die Geschichte reden lassen, aber als Hinweis über die Geschichte hinaus auf die Offenbarung*). Even respect for Calvin means exactly this: acknowledging the authority of Scripture and Spirit, Spirit and Scripture, also over and when necessary against the most respected aspects of Reformed teaching and lifestyle.

This means that *appropriation of Reformed confession could be the calling, but in principle also the writing of a new confession - should we claim to have the necessary authority and insight*. Both these possibilities belong to the Reformed faith. (*'Reformierte Lehre könnte also in einer wohlüberlegten Repristinatio der Theologie des Genfer oder Heidelberger Katechismus oder der fünf Kapitel von Dordrecht bestehen, sie könnte aber auch - wenn wir uns die dazu nötige Vollmacht und Einsicht zutrauen - in der Aufrichtung eines neuen Bekenntnisses, einer Helvetica tertia bestehen, so gewiß die Väter sich erlaubt haben, die prior durch eine posterior zu ersetzen. Beide Möglichkeiten sind in der Reformierten Kirche gleich mögliche Möglichkeiten,'* 1990d: 214). Many of these insights would remain central to Barth's thought through his whole theological career.

Some people, secondly, out of ideological reasons, in an eclectic way and serving their own interests, select from the Reformed traditions specific ideas, trends or institutions, and call these 'Reformed.' They want people to 'become' more Reformed, in that they adhere more enthusiastically to these corpus of truths, slogans or motifs. Barth offers a fascinating discussion of a whole range of typically Reformed 'truths' or institutional arrangements that have been used in such a way. Again Barth rejects this approach and argues that this is a denial of the Reformed tradition. Why? Because the church does not live from (a plurality of) truths, but from the *one* truth, which is not an idea, a principle, a doctrine - from which all else can then be deduced in a logical and artistic way - but *God*, and God alone. Again, this means that Reformed doctrine is neither a principle nor a system, but *the willingness to listen*, again and anew, the willingness to be taught rather than a teaching ('*Nicht die Korrektheit der einzelnen Formel und nicht die Systematik des Ganzen dürfte ihre eigentliche Absicht sein, sondern ... die Bereitschaft, ein Lernen viel mehr als eine 'Lehre' ... zu sein,*' 1990d: 218).

Some people, finally, defend the Reformed tradition from an emotional perspective. They want people to 'feel' more Reformed, because they have experienced a Reformed 'feeling,' piety or spirituality. They adore specific Reformed fathers, grounders or heroes. Their slogan is 'spirituality' (*Frömmigkeit*). Once again, Barth issues a strong warning (*eine scharfe Warnung*). In strict distinction (*in starkem Kontrast*) from, e.g. Lutheran confessions like the *Formula Concordiae*, Reformed confessions do *not* appeal or refer in any way whatsoever to people, like Zwingli or Calvin. Reformed theology does not even speak of the call to be Reformed (like the locus in Lutheran theology on *De vocatione Lutheri*). No interest at all was shown in Calvin's own conversion or spiritual life. Why not? Because, once again, the religious interest in Geneva was not in a person, in a kind of religious personality, in a spiritual type, but in the call to listen to and be obedient to the Word of God. The early leaders of the Reformed movement played a role, their *only* role, as VDM, as ministers of the divine Word.

In short, argues Barth, his criticism against all three these views finally rests on exactly the same foundation. In the history of the church it has become known as *the Scripture-principle* ('*Er ist bekannt unter dem Namen des Schriftprinzips*'). This is the beginning of the Reformed church and of all Reformed faith and teaching. All teaching should acknowledge Scripture as its unchangeable norm, not to be surpassed ('... *daß alle Lehre der Wahrheit also in der Schrift ihre unveränderliche und unüberschreitbare Regel zu anerkennen habe*'). Reformed doctrine is what people say because they *must* say, because Scripture itself gives them no other choice.

In a long argument, Barth then explains that this Scripture-principle is not, like some have claimed, merely the 'formal' principle of Reformed theology, but, in fact, 'present reality, the liveliest, fullest content' (*gegenwärtigster, lebendigster, vollster Inhalt*). That God speaks, is the *content* of Reformed faith, not a mere principle. For that reason it is impossible to give grounds for this claim. Which was the reason why the early Reformed theologians refused any attempt to give grounds for their claim. When revelation takes place, it is its own ground. '*Bei Gott ist kein 'Warum?'* *Was er will und spricht und schafft, das hat seinen Realgrund und seinen Erkenntnisgrund nur in ihm.*' How is it possible to prove that the Word of God is the Word of God, except if God does this through the power and persuasion of the Word itself? asks Barth. Would it still be God's Word, if it had been necessary and possible to prove, beforehand, that and why it is God's Word? he continues. This is not even, he points out, an axiom in the normal sense of the word, like some have claimed. According to its logical form, it may seem like an axiom, but it does not share the

self-evidence of a normal axiom. It is based fully on the self-evidence of *revelation*. This is the foundation of Reformed faith and confession.

The problem is, continues Barth, that the spiritual climate of his day and time is such that they compare like dwarfs to the original vision of the Reformation. They have lost almost all sense of what the claim that God speaks really means, and what it means when they call the Bible the Word of God. The misery of modern Protestantism is that they are caught in a prison, built on the four pillars of orthodoxy, pietism, enlightenment and religiosity. That is also the reason why they no longer understand what the nature and task of Reformed theology is. The most urgent task for them is, accordingly, to recover existential knowledge of this, the central and only claim of the Reformed faith and confession, namely that God speaks through his Word and Spirit.

When that, once again, would become a reality, it would be possible also to consider the possibility and necessity of confessing the Reformed faith in new ways. As far as he is concerned, he says, he would prefer to appropriate the *Catechismus Genevensis* (1545) as basis for a general Reformed confession. Although it is in principle possible to write a new confession, speaking out of their own situation in their own language to their own time, he personally is at that point in time not at all interested in that (*'es liegt mir ferne, heute dazu auffordern zu wollen'*). Before such an endeavour, the central challenge for Reformed theology for the coming period, he says, is first of all to reclaim the Scripture-principle again, the presupposition of all Reformed confession. This is their crisis, their *Zentralverlegenheit*.

In several other papers and essays from this period, Barth reiterates and develops these convictions. In a paper read in different Swiss universities during 1925, 'Das Schriftprinzip der Reformierten Kirche,' he explains his central claim concerning the Scripture as Word of God again, and in more detail (Barth 1990f). Also during 1925 he reads a paper called 'Kirche und Theologie,' again at different occasions (Barth 1990h). It is intended as a response to a publication by his former colleague in Göttingen, Erik Peterson, on the question what theology is. Again, he argues that Scripture, not doctrine (or tradition, or any other factor), has finally authority in the church. Peterson, in a sharp criticism of Barth and others, claimed that Christian theology consists essentially in obedience to 'concrete authority,' namely the dogma of the church. Barth agrees that theology is obedience to concrete authority, but denies that this authority is the dogma. Instead, he argues that theology is ongoing service to God's *revelation* through conceptual thinking in a particular time and place. This revelation, however, is Christ, and is *mediated* to us.

The concrete, mediated form through which revelation becomes contemporaneous with us, thus becoming the object of theology, includes four factors, namely the decisions of the church on the canon and text of the Bible, creeds (or the decisions of the church on fundamental statements of faith which have been more or less unanimously acknowledged), the so-called 'Fathers' or 'Doctors of the Church,' acknowledged as faithful expositors of those creedal statements, and, finally, the 'command of the hour,' in which theology finds itself, and which lays upon it the obligation to speak to the real needs of the present. None of these in isolation from one another, but all of them together, constitute the 'concrete authority.'

This authority of the church, argues Barth, accordingly remains 'secondary.' It does not replace Christ's authority. It can only be seen as '*temporal, relative, and formal*' authority. That it is temporal means that it can never become infallible and immutable. That it is relative means that it is always only an authority in relation to Another, never in itself. That it is formal means that its content is not generated by and from itself, but given to us.

Together, these factors form the channel through which revelation comes to us, but their content must come from Scriptures, if they were to have any authority. The 'cardinal point' where the subordination of the church to its Lord comes to expression, is Scripture. Real freedom exists in the church - a theme to which he would later return repeatedly - but real freedom is freedom *under* the Word, not over or from it.

Finally, in a third very important paper, also from 1925, Barth gives what has become an almost classic discussion of the nature of Reformed confession. It is called 'Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses' (Barth 1990g). It was prepared on request for the 12th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, in Cardiff. (Already on his copy of the invitation itself, Barth made notes in pencil for a possible reply. The first comment reads: '*Möglichkeit der Frage beweist, daß sie zu verneinen ist. Kirche die ihren Gl. bekennen will, fragt nicht, ob das wünschenswert u. möglich ist, sondern sie tut es!*', 1990g: 605).

He begins with an attempt to provide a definition of Reformed confession, and then explains 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 (8) spontaneously and publicly formulated (7) presentation (4) to the Christian Church in general of a (5) provisionally (3) granted insight from (1) the revelation of God in Jesus Christ (2) attested to in Holy Scripture alone (10) by a geographically circumscribed Christian fellowship which, (6) until further notice, (9) authoritatively defines its character to outsiders and which, until further action, gives direction to its own doctrine and life.'

A few brief remarks on his long and detailed exposition of these characteristics may be helpful to gain a better insight into his views during this period.

1. That Christian confessions should be based on God's revelation in Jesus Christ speaks for itself, and all Christians would agree.
2. That this revelation is given in Holy Scripture alone is controversial. Reformed confession makes this claim over against the Catholic Church, but equally so over against orthodox or liberal, modernist forms of protestantism and sectarian groups, who somehow regard history, historical events, experiences and developments as only quantitatively distinguished from Scripture - '*unerbittlich auch gegenüber der verstreckten Apotheose der Geschichte, die für das positive Neuluthertum nicht minder bezeichnend ist wie für das liberale*'.
3. Reformed Christians acknowledge that this confession is given, granted to the church, by the Holy Spirit. It is therefore not simply the presentation of arbitrary human insights, opinions or beliefs, but nothing less than doctrine, albeit expressed by humans. Accordingly, mainline Reformed thought contradicts the opinion of many Congregationalists, who overemphasize the aspect of human conception, and underestimate the divine content.
4. 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, to the extent that they do not even deny the presence of the church of God in the church of the Antichrist. It deliberately does not call itself Calvinist or 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*.

5. 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 the Reformed doctrine, and the attitude of freedom that always remembers the relativity of its own attempts and insights.
6. 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.
7. 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*.
8. 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 - in the way some other Protestant traditions regard their confessional documents, says Barth.
9. 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 marketplace, for the city hall, for the fellow-citizens - '*hinter dem reformierten Bekenntnis steht letztlich ... (mindestens in der Idee) der Marktplatz oder das Rathaus und daselbst die als christliche Abendmahlsgemeinde sich konstituierende Gemeinde der Stadt- oder Volksgenossen*'. The earliest Reformed confessions were the products of discussions and controversies which took place in public, with wide-open doors. A Reformed Synod receives its mandate to accept the confession from the congregations it represents.

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'*.

At this point of his paper, towards the end of the first section, Barth clearly shows his own doubt whether the Reformed churches of his day were in a position, were able, to fulfil these first nine characteristics of a truly Reformed confession.

In the second part of his paper, he focuses at length on the tenth characteristic, given the nature of the question put to him.

- (10) Normally, the subject of a Reformed confession is a geographically circumscribed Christian fellowship. Local or national Reformed churches confessed. Precisely for that 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, explains Barth (referring to Calvin's strong orientation towards international Christianity, his judicial instincts, his manifold personal relationships to so many countries, his intense interest in practical cooperation between different churches, Barth 1990g: 623-624) - 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 (for an instructive discussion, Barth 1990g: 626-628), but the writing of a common confession never came to mind. Why not? Barth argues 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 expresses scepticism concerning the possibility and desirability of a common, universal Reformed confession. It may, he seems to think, too easily become an instrument of power, a *wordly* confession (*ein rechtes Weltbekenntnis*), but not one that really lives in the hearts and lives of the believers in their local congregations and everyday context.

In a third section, he considers a few criteria that should ultimately determine whether a universal Reformed confession is desirable and possible. The first criterion is the awareness that the authors of such a confession is doing that in obedience to God's will, and not out of any other motive. It must be an awareness 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'*.

This view, continues 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, bear witness to two aspects at the same time, namely something to know and something to do - *eine doppelte Mitteilung, etwas zu Wissendes und etwas zu Wollendes*.

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 leads 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 is to be found. As far as he is concerned, their time lacks this kind of seriousness. They find themselves in a crisis, yes, but it is the crisis of living 'between the times,' one they must get rid of, and one they do not yet see.

On the other hand, this means that such a confession must command something, call them to a new lifestyle, to ethics according to God's Word. This has always been a characteristic of Reformed confession, argues 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 today, he says (in 1925), should 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 itself.

Again, he expresses his doubt whether they are ready and able to do something like this. The ethical problems all seem too controversial, too difficult, too complex. As long as they are unable to speak God's Word and will to these issues, however, they should not attempt to confess, because it would be tempting God.

To conclude. It is not difficult to see how Karl Barth answered the question of this paper during this phase of his life and work. Reformed churches confess under the pressure of the Word of God only and the authority of their confession depends on the Word itself. Circumstances can urge them to confess, but the content of what they confess should be an attempt to speak God's Word to the kairós. At this point in time Reformed churches were in a deep cultural crisis, between the times, but they were not yet ready or able to confess with integrity to the truth and calling of God's Word for the hour. He would remain faithful to these convictions, but the opportunity would soon arise for them to be put to the test.

3. 'Under the Word' - and radical social transformation

In 1933 Barth and Thurneysen founded a series of brochures under the title *Theologische Existenz heute!* The series eventually contained sixty-two volumes and was published until 1939 (see Barth & Thurneysen 1980). There can be no doubt at all that, in a very remarkable way, it addressed the dramatic challenges brought about by the *radical social transformation* undertaken by Hitler and Nationalist-Socialism. Some of the best-known theological analyses, protests and guidelines of the years of the Church Struggle were published in this series, by many of the famous figures involved in the opposition to Hitler and the German Christians. Barth himself very often published contributions (see e.g. Barth 1980b, Barth 1980c, Barth 1957b, Barth 1957c, Barth 1957d).

In this light, the argument of Barth's own programmatic essay, carrying the title of the series itself, '*Theologische Existenz heute!*,' and the first one in the series, is even more remarkable (Barth 1980a). It is written on June 25, 1933, shortly after the final takeover by the Nazis in Germany, and in a time when the influence of the German Christians in the Protestant Church is becoming increasingly stronger. This is Barth's first direct public encounter with the Nazi-ideology. According to some observers, this is almost a kind of confession in embryo. Although not written according to confessional style or structure, some of the major ideas that would reappear in later confessional documents during this period are already present here, including the authority of Scripture as the only revelation of

Jesus Christ, the emphasis on obedience in the church to this Word and on complete trust in God, and the appeal to structure and organise the church according to this Word alone.

What is remarkable is Barth's own explanation of the purpose of this work. The most important task for the church under these difficult circumstances, he says, is to continue with their theological work 'as if nothing has happened' - *als wäre nichts geschehen*. This essay should also be understood in this way, as a *Wort zur Sache* and not as a *Wort zur Lage*, a word about the real theological issues at stake, and not a mere commentary on the political situation.

Even his participation, together with some Reformed colleagues, he explains, in the writing of recent public declarations should be seen in this light. The people who criticized those declarations because of a lack of relevance and direct reference to problems of the day, in fact gave them the highest praise possible, he says. The most serious challenge facing the church at the time is not that the state will oppress it, but that the state may tempt and mislead it, eventually to lose itself in betrayal of Jesus Christ and the true nature of the church.

Towards the end of that year, this crisis would become more intense, and this temptation more concrete. It came to a head when the Aryan paragraph was introduced into the church. According to it, only Aryans - no Jews - were allowed to become preachers or office bearers in the German Evangelical Church. Miscellaneous forms of protest broke out, while German Christian theologians reminded people about the so-called adiaphora or neutral things and explained that this paragraph concerned merely 'neutral' matters like membership and church discipline, not the pure preaching of the gospel.

In a private letter of 9 September 1933, Bonhoeffer reminded Barth of his earlier position that whenever the Aryan paragraph was introduced into a church, that church would stop being a Christian church. He asked on behalf of many friends, preachers and students whether Barth considered it possible to remain in a church that had stopped being a Christian church and to stay on in a ministry that had become the exclusive right of Aryans only. Barth answered by acknowledging that the *status confessionis* had undoubtedly dawned, but that it was not equally clear what exactly the right steps were that had to be taken immediately. Especially because the Jewish Christians were as yet not excluded as members of the German Church, he pleaded for a 'highly active, polemic period of waiting,' so that the schism, which surely had to come, would come from the other side.

Martin Niemöller founded the well-known Pastors' Emergency League in September 1933 and between six and seven thousand pastors signed the four propositions of confession, resistance, and solidarity. The infamous Sport-Palace meeting of November 1933 caused a mass desertion of pastors and lay people from the German Christian movement. During 1934, the so-called confessional synods of Barmen and Dahlem took place. Particularly instructive concerning Barth's own views was his involvement in the so-called *First Declaration of Barmen* (see the very informative Ahlers 1984, also with the text of the *Declaration* and the introductory lecture by Barth).

On January 4, 1934, Bishop Müller published the so-called 'muzzling edict,' intended to suppress all opposition in the church. In an ironic and cynical move, worship services were to be used exclusively for worship, and not for 'political agitation.' Violation of the edict risked suspension from the ministry. Precisely on that day, the first Free Reformed Synod met in Barmen. Reformed pastors and presbyters had been invited who could solemnly declare that they were free from all church-alien ties in matters of faith, and who confessed without reservation the Word of God revealed exclusively in the Old and New Testament.

This was in line with Barth's repeated exhortation, also directed at Martin Niemöller himself, not to function politically but theologically.

Barth was invited to draft the main theological statement as well as to deliver the introductory lecture that was intended to explain that statement. This lecture was later published as 'Gottes Wille und unsere Wünsche' (Barth 1957b). The purpose of the statement was to interpret the nature of the church, to evaluate the new church constitution in the light of that interpretation, and to show by this argument how the German Christians have failed theologically. Significantly, the document is called '*Declaration on the proper understanding of the Reformed Confession in the German Evangelical Church of the present time*'. In this title, and already in the preamble, the 'present time' or 'the ecclesiastical events of the year 1933' is explicitly mentioned as the historical *cause* for the action - according to Ahlers 'true to the best Reformed tradition.'

The *content*, however, is the nature of Reformed confession and in particular, the Reformed confession concerning *the church*. This ecclesiological focus is very obvious from the structure and the argument of the whole document. The headings of the five sections (a preamble with four points) are: The church in the present time; The Church under Holy Scripture; The Church in the world; The message of the church; and The form of the church. In its structure it deliberately follows the confessional structure and logic of earlier confessional documents, like the *Formula Concordiae*. All five sections include positive theses or *affirmata* (in total seventeen), followed by one or more repudiations or *negativa*.

In his introductory lecture Barth underlines what is already clear from the *Declaration* itself. The 'error' of the German Christians only superficially constitutes the main thrust of the *Declaration*. The far greater, underlying significance of their deviant theology lies in the fact that in it an error and deviation that has plagued Protestant theology for centuries becomes fully apparent. It is a most serious error for both theology and the church, since it introduces the gravest devastation into church-politics.

What is that error? The preamble makes it clear: 'In view of the ecclesiastical events of the year 1933, the Word of God commands us to become penitent and to have a change of heart. For in these events an error has become ripe and visible that has corrupted the evangelical church for many centuries. That error consists in the view that besides God's revelation, God's grace, and God's honor, human authority also has power to determine the message and the form of the church or the temporal path to eternal salvation. Therewith is repudiated the view: That the development of the church has since the Reformation been normal and that the problems of our church today are only a temporary disruption, after the elimination of which that development can continue uninterrupted.'

Time and again throughout the *Declaration*, different manifestations of this fundamental error are repudiated - regarding human arbitrariness in matters of the message and form of the church; regarding the acceptability of different, traditional 'points of view' instead of confession and action against error and truth; regarding a divine revelation in nature and history, accessible to humankind after the fall; regarding Scripture as merely different witnesses to the history of human piety, and that the criterion of Christian piety is not the whole Scripture; regarding the view that the church should also recognize, acknowledge and proclaim the actions of God in the events of the present time; regarding the view that the church should serve humankind by accommodating its message and its structure to humankind's various convictions, desires and purposes; regarding the view that the church receives its temporal and visible form on the basis of its own arbitrariness or external necessities, such as religious association; regarding the view that membership and ministry

of the church on the basis of race can be compatible with the unity and message of the church; and many others.

In short, Barth explains that the error consists in the tendency that has grown in Protestantism to confuse the confession of the church with the mere subjective interests of people who, in club-like fashion, want to canonize their own interests objectively in a document like a confession. Confession is then based on the self-interests of people who religiously think alike. Religion is everyone's own private affair - as Article 24 of the Nazi Party Platform stated.

Barth's contribution to the *Barmen Declaration*, formally approved by the Confessional Synod of the Lutheran, Reformed and United German Churches on May 29-31, 1934, is well-known (for instructive comparisons of *Barmen* with later documents, see Horn 1984, Berkhof 1985, Huber 1991, and Niemöller 1998). Not only did he write it - while the other members of the committee slept - but the content was also to a large extent a reflection of ideas typical of his theological viewpoints (for an extraordinary interesting explanation of his own ideas and involvement, see Barth 1976, an essay already written during 1934, but only published in 1976).

Barth's ideas on confession are to an extent summarised in the well-known paragraph 20.2, 'Authority under the Word,' in *KD I/2*, completed during the summer of 1937 (Barth 1956; this discussion played a major role in the 1982-Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, when the Draft Confession of *Belhar* was accepted, see Smit 1998). As always in Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik* the exact location of any part within the overall monumental structure is very important. The broader context here is a (more than 300-page) discussion of *Holy Scripture*. This exposition includes three sections, on The Word of God for the Church, Authority in the Church, and Freedom in the Church. The central section, on authority in the church, again has two sub-sections, dealing firstly with The Authority of the Word and then with Authority under the Word.

It is within this context that Barth discusses Christian confession. He is interested in the question *how* the authority of the Word of God functions in the church. As we have already seen in his earlier writings, this authority becomes *concrete* in that it is *mediated*. How? The church confesses (in a general sense). This simply means that the church hears and receives the authoritative Word (in the many ways he has already indicated) and shares it with one another. This happens in the form of concrete decisions. It takes on historical form, it becomes letters, words and statements.

What are the concrete forms of these confessional decisions in the church, leading to instances of mediated, but genuine authority? In this context Barth (again) discusses three forms of authority under the Word at length, namely canon, theological teachers (Church Fathers, theologians, expositors of the Bible; ecclesial authority), and confessions in the strictest sense of the word (or creeds, or doctrine). All three are human. All three are genuinely authoritative and deserve respect, and yet they are also provisional, partial, limited, preliminary, temporary, for several reasons.

In his discussion of the last of the three, namely confessional writings, he makes extensive use of his earlier work, from the 1920s. The definition that he analyses differs slightly from his earlier one, but not in any significant sense in content or in the way he comments on its different aspects: 'A Church confession is a formulation and proclamation of the insight which the church has been given in certain directions into the revelation attested by Scripture, reached on the basis of common deliberation and decision.'

The confession is a commentary on Scripture. It represents an insight given to the church and presupposes risk and danger. It is born out of compulsion. It is geographically,

temporally, and materially limited. It always arises in a definite antithesis and conflict. It says a definite Yes only because a definite No is always implied, otherwise it is no confession. It is public speech, on the basis of solid theological preparation and intended to be heard, tested and evaluated by others. Since there is 'a notorious connection, even a unity, between the heresies of every age and place,' it can be confidently expected that confessions written for another time and place, if they really express the Word of God, can again reveal and address conflicts at other times and in other places.

Again, to summarise. How does Barth answer our question during this period? It is a time of radical social transformation. The challenge is such that he is driven to the point where he plays a major role in the writing of new confessions. At the same time, he would not for one moment accept the possibility that the social circumstances determined the content of these confessions. He warns his friends in the struggle against political interests, instead of theological ones. He sees theological work *als wäre nichts geschehen* as the primary and in fact only task for the moment. He addresses the social issues by speaking *zur Sache* and not *zur Lage*. In fact, the error he opposes is to be recognized as a heresy, as a theological error, not as political, ideological or social developments only. When discussing the nature of Christian confession, he still holds exactly the same position than before, and he hardly refers to *Barmen* or recent confessional developments at all (for detailed discussions of the relationship between theology and politics in his thought, see Horn 1987).

Why? Because, what is at stake in the Confessing Church is precisely the authority of the Word of God alone, for, in and over the church. This is the Reformed way of confessing. To presuppose that any social transformation, even one as dramatic and terrible as the events in Nazi-Germany, could become the basis, content and legitimation for a confession, would be to fall into precisely this error that they were unmasking and rejecting. Social transformations could become the historical *cause* for confession, as had always been the case in the Reformed tradition, but only to the extent that a temptation, an error, even a heresy, became manifest in the process.

4. 'Free before God' - and a *status confessionis* regarding nuclear destruction

Already since 1938, Barth edited and published a new series of brochures, called *Theologische Studien*. Once again some of his famous essays were published in this series. After the War, a sense of crisis or radical social urgency was now less obvious. Although there were many new and indeed urgent social issues on the agenda during a time of reconstruction, after the World War, the underlying mood was definitely different (see also his Gifford Lectures, Barth 1938; essays like Barth 1949, Barth 1957e; discussions of confessions written during this period, e.g. Barth 1958a, Barth 1963, Barth 1964, with two texts from 1948 and 1960, respectively; and the letters in Barth 1984 as well as the other conversations in Barth 1995 and Barth 1997).

During this period, Barth considers the question of a possible *status confessionis* once again, within the context of his lectures in systematic theology, on the ethics of creation, and published in the *Church Dogmatics III/4*, in particular par. 53.2, eventually published in German in 1951 (Barth 1961). Now he discusses confession, together with The Holy Day and Prayer, as three forms of practising our Freedom before God, within the broader context of the question what God the Creator commands of us.

We receive an invitation and obligation, Barth says, to bear express witness to God. We do this generally, always, with our whole lives, but sometimes, particularly in ethical contexts, we are called to do this in the form of a single and concrete action. It is about this *particular* witness or *status confessionis* that Barth makes his comments that would become

so well-known. He refers to four characteristics of such a moment of confession, again reiterating ideas from his earlier work.

1. This witness and confession must always bear the character of an action without an ulterior goal. The one who confesses temporarily steps out of the sphere of purpose, intentions and pursuits. Such a person does not confess with an aim in view nor to carry out this or that. We aim at no results and expects none. We confess because we cannot keep silent. It is a serious act, but in its freedom from purpose it has more the nature of a game or song than of work or warfare. For this reason confession will always cause head-shaking among serious people who do not know the particular seriousness of confession. Why? they will ask themselves and us, and the more seriously we confess, the less they will find an answer. Without this risk of being ludicrous, there is no confession. The intention can not even be to teach, instruct or convince others. The only concern should be the honour of God.
2. Confession occurs when the faith of the Christian community is confronted and questioned either from within or without by unbelief, superstition and heresy. This is always the case in the church, but special moments may arise. Believers should be aware, willing, ready for such moments. There may be premature confession, but also no confessing at all, because of fear of making a mistake. This makes confession dangerous, in addition to ludicrous. The most difficult struggle is with the unbelief and doubt in the confessors themselves.
3. The confession should never be bitter and scornful. The Yes must be heard in the No. It should be a word *for* and *with* those who may be attacked, and they should experience it as such.
4. Confession is not a private affair, but the word of the church, after hearing Scripture, and witnessing to Jesus Christ, as the all-controlling theme of Scripture. It should lead to public action.
5. Confession is free action. None can demand it from anyone. Fear can play no role.
6. It was not too long before Barth and his friends were again challenged to put these ideas into practice by what they regarded as an urgent social issue. In the aftermath of the War, many Christians were seriously considering the theological and moral implications of the atom bomb. During 1958 Barth wrote, at first anonymously, a number of theses in which he objected to the godless character of nuclear arms. In conclusion he said that any other position, or even a neutral attitude with regard to this matter, was 'impossible for a Christian, because it would mean a denial of all three articles of the Christian faith.' He prepared this as a kind of draft for a church confession concerning nuclear armament for a meeting of the 'Brotherhoods' (*Bruderschaften*) in Frankfurt. This was accepted with certain additions and laid before the synod of the EKD, which, in the end, after protracted and intense debates in the church and in public, rejected this draft and affirmed a much more balanced, calculated point of view, the so-called *Heidelberg Doctrines* (see, for a detailed and informative analysis, Möller 1999; for Barth's own words, Barth 1958b, in Green 1989; also as brief introduction, Brinkman 1979).

To conclude. During this period, Barth expresses himself more clearly than before on the question of a possible *status confessionis*, which involves the question of the relationship between social issues and transformations and Christian, and specifically Reformed, confessions. He does not, however, change his mind. In fact, he repeats the major lines of his thought from the earlier phases of his life and work.

5. Concluding remarks: social transformation - use of the Bible - Reformed Christianity - confessing the faith?

Weaving some of the threads together is not difficult. The overall picture is fairly clear.

In order to answer our original question, it may be important to keep in mind that Karl Barth - at least in this respect, on the nature of Reformed confessions - is not merely one case-study amongst many others, but that his position to a large extent represents mainline Reformed thought on the nature of confessions. There are, obviously, many people within the Reformed family today who - *inter alia* for some of the reasons already discussed by Barth - are not much interested in confessions at all. Amongst those believers, churches and theologians in the worldwide Reformed community, however, who do show an interest - for whatever reason - in confessional documents, his thought, developed over several decades, in close reading of and conversation with the history of the church and the Reformation, and then, more than once, challenged and tested under severe circumstances, still represents mainline convictions (for useful introductions to the notion of confession in Protestantism, see Jonker 1994, Link 1998, and the collection *Towards a common testimony* 1989).

In several respects, as we have seen, the specifically Reformed understanding of confession differs from those of other - also Protestant - communities, even some very closely related ones. One of those differences has to do with the relationship between socio-historical challenges and confessions. The Reformed tradition has always acknowledged that confessions may have historical causes. That is in fact one of the reasons why Reformed churches have practised a certain freedom in writing new confessions, when circumstances made them necessary. Their content, however, was never determined by these occasions. The historical context is present in the confession, sometimes implicitly, in the form of the No embedded in the Yes, but it never becomes the authority to which the confession appeals. The intention and claim of a Reformed confession is always to witness to truth that is above the historical context and to faith that properly belongs to the whole church, and will remain so.

The reason is that Reformed confession rests on the confession of the authority of the living God who speaks through Word and Spirit. In making this claim, we have returned to many of the interesting, indeed fascinating, questions embedded in the theme given to me. In a way the question has been turned around, to Biblical scholars as well. What is ultimately at stake is the characteristic Reformed way of seeing the Word of God, the way Reformed believers think about reading, interpreting, hearing and preaching God's Word.

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