

**“STANDING WITH GOD IN THE HOUR OF HIS GRIEVING”**  
***Reflections on twenty-five years of sharing***  
***with German Reformed Christians***

I

Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen, my dear friends. What a wonderful privilege and great joy it is to be here with you today. I am deeply grateful for this opportunity, to Johann Weusman for organizing it, and to all of you for being here. What joy it gives me to see so many old friends here today, and to be able to renew old friendships even while forming new ones.

When Johann Weusman and I discussed my presentation here today, we agreed that it should take the form of reflections on the more than a quarter century that we, first the Sendingkerk, (now lately the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa) and the Reformed churches in Germany, and at a more personal level you and I, have been involved with each other.

Ours was a relationship that was forged in the fires of struggle, shaped by both suffering and joy, rooted in our common understanding of the Scriptures and the Reformed tradition, inspired by faith in the One who is Lord of all, and nurtured by a hope that transcended all geographical, political, national and human boundaries.

What stood at the centre of our attention then was apartheid and the struggle against it. But not just apartheid as a racist system of political oppression, social degradation and economic exploitation, but apartheid also as a false gospel, a perversion of the Reformed faith and a distortion of Scripture. Apartheid as a crime against humanity certainly, but for us also as a Babylonian confusion of pseudo-innocence and deliberate resistance against the will of God for humankind in general and the church in particular. You understood, with us, that it was the innocence that constituted the crime, and that the rest of us could not hide in a pseudo-innocence of our own, acting as if this was beyond our concern.

You listened to us, and you heard us.

So when we, black Christians in South Africa, resisted the temptation to shun the Christian faith as the religion of the colonizer and the instrument of our oppression, and turned to the Scriptures to rediscover Yahweh as the God of liberation and Jesus as the One who came to proclaim good news to the poor and liberty to the oppressed, you rejoiced with us. With the biblical songwriter we cried, “How long,

LORD?" (Ps. 13); we shouted, "Awake, O LORD! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! ... Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" (Ps.44); we rejoiced, "The LORD upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry; the LORD sets the prisoners free, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down..." (Ps.146) And you cried, shouted, wept and rejoiced with us.

In you we found a partner who called upon the God of the exodus to once again hear the cry of his people, see their suffering and to come down to rescue them out of the hand of the Pharaoh. Together we once again made loud the voices of the prophets, who cried out for justice for the poor, the weak, the defenceless and the outcast. You helped us to understand even better the passion of Isaiah and the pain of Jeremiah, the compassion of Micah and the anger of Amos.

## II

Moreover, what brought us together was the most disturbing fact that even though all Christian churches in South Africa were guilty of racism, it was the white Dutch Reformed Churches that in a special way made apartheid their way of life, its implementation a Christian duty, and its justification, in all its theoretical conceptions as well as its horrific practices, a theological mission.

When we therefore pointed out the dilemma we were facing, namely that of being black and Reformed, it did not take you long to understand. What is also at stake, we explained, was the integrity of the Reformed tradition. The interpretation of those biblical texts, the justification of racial superiority, the division of the church on the basis of race, culture and ethnicity – is that what it means to be Reformed? Calvin's dictum that for "anyone to be my neighbour, it is enough that he is a human being" – does that not have universal application? And the call for resistance to oppression that became such a resounding bell through Reformed political thinking, from Calvin to Beza; from the Scottish Confession to the fiery writings of the Huguenots; from Duplessis Mornay to Karl Barth – why was that not allowed to become part of our thinking as well?

It raised another important issue as well. We have always argued that apartheid was unique. Its uniqueness, however, did not lie in its myths of racial superiority, its economic exploitation, or its vast political machinery backed by violence both systemic and physical. Rather it lay in its explicit claim that it was a Christian policy, that it was the will of God for South Africa (and the world actually, if the world would only

listen) and that it sought underpinning in the Bible and theological arguments from the Reformed tradition.

We understood further that since the people who made these claims were in their own self-understanding highly religious and professed in all things to seek the will of God, the exposure of this self-deception would in itself become not just an act of theological integrity, but of such an explosive political nature that it would undermine the foundations as well as the edifice of apartheid. So apart from our political work, mobilization of the masses and of world opinion, protests on the streets of South Africa and campaigns for sanctions world-wide, political consciousness-raising at home and political isolation of the apartheid regime abroad, that became our life's work.

We could not do that alone. We needed first of all the church in South Africa, next the Reformed family world wide, and finally the whole ecumene to understand the importance of these actions, not just for our sakes, or for the restoration of the Reformed faith, but for the sake of the integrity of the Gospel itself. Hence the quest for the world and also for the white Dutch Reformed Churches to understand that apartheid constituted a *status confessionis*, that it was a sin, a heresy and its theological justification a blasphemy. It is a quest that began in the late seventies, found understanding in the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians of Southern Africa, and finally found support and approval in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Your support and understanding throughout these years have been invaluable.

In light of all this it was no wonder that in the late seventies already you raised the most important matter of a confessing church, and when we discussed the possibility of a new confession, you pointed us to your own Barmen Declaration. Together we explored the difference between a church with a formal confession, and a confessing church. In our discussions you spoke with honest clarity about the situation in Germany during Nazi rule, the failure of the church to respond timely and adequately to that situation, and the dramatic events that led to the Confessing Church and the Barmen Theological Declaration.

The whole of that Declaration remains of utmost importance, but at the time what struck me most was Thesis 5, which reads: "(The church) calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and the ruled."

In this one sentence, Barmen reminds us all that the church does not live for itself alone, that its horizons are not drawn by its own interests, or that of the nation. The concern of the church is no less than the kingdom of God, not codified agreements, contracts and

understandings between the government and the church. Neither can the church be led by the dominant sentiments of the nation. The church discerns the times, reads their temper, and rises up in opposition to the state not for its own sake, but for the sake of the Kingdom.

In one stroke, Barmen calls on us to understand that the responsibility of both rulers and the ruled are not defined by power or might, or by fear and subjection, but by the demands of the Kingdom of God. At the same time, Barmen recalls that biblical truth, faithfully upheld by the best of the Reformed tradition, that the Christian faith is never a private affair, but at all times a public witness and proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Barmen declares that the demands of the Kingdom of God are for the rulers *and* the ruled, and that those responsibilities are not luxuries to be withheld at will or avoided when convenient. They are *responsibilities* to be fulfilled. And the One who will ask for accountability is not the church but God.

It does not ask whether the ruler considers himself willing to hear or whether the church is afforded the right to speak. The power of the church to speak does not rest in its worldly power, nor in its connectedness to the power of the state, nor in a mandate received from the nation. Hence the church speaks and reminds the ruler and the ruled of the righteousness and justice of the Kingdom of God, and it speaks with a power the world may refuse to hear, but cannot deny.

Is it any wonder then, that there is such a symbiotic relationship between the Barmen Theological Declaration and the Confession of Belhar? Is it so surprising then, that in the continuity of Barmen to Belhar the continuity of the Reformed tradition and the biblical proclamation is so pronounced? Because of the continued proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Hence also the almost natural way in which Belhar finds expression in the ecumenical struggle with the world and the presence of the Kingdom of God in the world.

We shall return to the Confession of Belhar in a moment. Suffice it here to point out how much that theological continuity for most of these past twenty five years has become the distinguishing mark of the relationship between our churches.

### III

All this has to do with things such as political understanding, lessons from history, theological sensitivity. There is, however, something else which I should like to mention. From Dietrich Bonhoeffer I have learned that in our discipleship of Jesus of Nazareth we must allow ourselves to

be “caught up in the way of Jesus Christ”. It is not our religion, or our being religious, that makes us followers of Christ, but our participation in the sufferings of God, which is “the way of Christ”. As disciples of Jesus we are called to share the sufferings of God at the hands of a hostile world. That, Bonhoeffer maintains, is what distinguishes us from pagans, is what makes us Christians. Note: it distinguishes us not from people of other faiths, but from pagans. Bonhoeffer’s critique here is against the Christians who think that being merely religious is what constitutes our being Christian.

So the first lesson is that discipleship calls us to much more than just the feelings and formalities of mere religiosity. Formal worship and prayers and the superficial religious talk we so easily engage in becomes blasphemous prattle if they do not flow from the well spring of utter commitment to the way of Jesus Christ, which is the way of compassionate justice, the way of sacrificial love, the way of the cross. For us the battle lines were not to be drawn between ourselves and other faiths which we deemed “threatening” to our religion. The battle lines were to be drawn between our complacent and self-satisfied religiosity and our genuine discipleship of Jesus of Nazareth.

As such we came to understand that the struggle for liberation and justice, for human dignity and compassion was not something “added to” our discipleship, it was at the very heart of our discipleship. Calling upon the name of the Lord on Sunday but shunning the risk of struggle on Monday was avoiding to get caught up in the way of Christ; it was succumbing to paganism. One of the painful realities of my life was the stubborn inability of the white Dutch Reformed Church to even begin to understand that. After all, Jesus gave us fair warning: “It is not those who call Lord! Lord! who shall enter into the Kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father.”

But the second lesson is no less important. We are true disciples, Bonhoeffer says, when we “stand with God in the hour of his grieving”. Let Bonhoeffer speak for himself:

Menschen gehen zu Gott in ihrer Not,  
flehen um Hilfe, bitten um Glück und Brot,  
um Errettung aus Krankhiet, Schuld und Tod.  
So tun sie alle, Christen und Heiden.

Menschen gehen zu Gott in Seiner Not,  
finden ihn arm, geschmädt, ohne Obdach und Brot,  
sehnen ihn verschlingen von Sünde, Schwachheit und Tod.  
Christen stehen bei Gott in Seinen Leiden.

Gott geht zu allen Menschen in ihrer Not,  
 sättigt den Leib und die Seele mit Seinem Brot,  
 stirbt für Christen und Heiden den Kreuzestod,  
 und vergibt ihnen beiden. (**“Christen und Heiden” July 1944**)

Here the point is not only that the heart of Christ in his forgiving love is open to both Christians and those who do not believe in him, but that Christians distinguish themselves from others in that they “stand by God in his hour of grieving”. The grieving of God is not in the pain of God for God, but in the pain of God in the pain of suffering humanity. When Bonhoeffer speaks of the pain of God he does not look toward heaven imagining God in some cosmic, primordial struggle between good and evil, but he looks around him at the pain of humanity caused by human inhumanity.

The compassion of God does not begin in a manifestation of sympathy for human pain, it begins with God's grieving for the pain of God's people. Jeremiah understood the heart of Yahweh: “O my insides! My insides! I writhe in pain! Oh, the agony of my heart!” (Jer. 4:19) The pain of God for the pain of God's people is like a tearing of the bowels, the pain of a woman in child birth. This is what God feels wherever there is injustice, wherever there is inhumanity, or hunger, or humiliation, or oppression. That is the source of the grief of God. Standing up for those who suffer this pain is standing with God in the hour of his grieving. That is what Belhar confesses. That the church should stand where God stands and is always to be found: with those who suffer injustice and pain, inhumanity and dejection, exclusion and oppression. Standing with God and sharing that pain, rising up against that pain – *that* is discipleship.

At the same time it means something else as well. It means, says Bonhoeffer, “not in the first place thinking about one's own needs, problems, sins and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up in the way of Jesus Christ.” This is the incredible import of Jesus' words in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”. (Matt. 5:4) I once believed that Jesus is speaking of those who are able to mourn over their own sinfulness. But I have to deepen my understanding. They are blessed, not because *in the first place* they are mourning about themselves.

They are blessed because they are grieving for the suffering of others. And in *that* grieving, they are grieving with God. It is a grieving that is redemptive, because it is not a grieving to succour our own needs: not even the need *to be found in the right place*; not our own fears: *even the fear that my life would be at risk when I stand where God stands*; not my own problems: *that I might not find the courage to stand with*

God; not my own sins: *that my failure to do so will condemn me*, hence my grief and my need for repentance and forgiveness and salvation. What is at stake is the grief of others because of whom God is grieving. And it is *that* grieving that our salvation lies. That is the spirituality of politics that inspired, corrected and nurtured us then, and it is the spirituality without which we cannot live now.

#### IV

The challenges we are facing today are as daunting as they were twenty-five years ago, and the possibilities today are as exciting as they were then.

Things have changed; sometimes dramatically so. The Berlin Wall has come down and with it the edifice of a whole world wide political and philosophical system that pretended not only world domination but also salvation for the world. The innate corruption of an oppressive and dehumanizing system, however protected by violence and the control of the people, had to give way to the inherent longing for freedom in the hearts of human beings, a God-given gift which cannot, in the long run, be denied.

By the same token, however, the collapse of Communism, in marking the end of the Cold war, has for many affirmed the destiny of the United States as the true leader of the world. This is a leadership that manifests itself as the driving force behind what is called globalization, the only remaining super-power that is now able to drive through its will at global forums such as the United Nations, without regard for world consensus or international law. Capitalism has overcome Communism, for "democracy" to be recognized as such it has to be "market democracy" and the shift in power from national states to international capital as represented by transnational companies and international monetary organizations has dire and ongoing consequences for especially the poor nations of the world.

But the imbalances of globalization do not just strike at the poor nations of the south. The bitter truth is that people in the rich countries have to come to terms with the fact that what is happening globally is also happening within nations: the third world is everywhere. The "third world" is no longer primarily a designation of geography, but of class; it describes economic realities rather than political boundaries. It is no longer mainly the powerless, underdeveloped and dependent cluster of nations outside the influential circle of the Northern wealthy nations. It now points also to the under classes in the rich nations, the poor of Europe and the United States, to the simmering anger under the

surface of prosperity and carelessness of those who think they rule the world. Globally, says a report of the United Nations Research Institute, "the new law is the law of the jungle. Only the fittest can survive."

In South Africa change has come too, even though transformation of our society is proving to be a long and painful process. While we rejoice in our new democracy and our new-found freedoms, and there is much to be thankful for, we know that our task is far from over. Apartheid is gone, but apartheid is everywhere. The reconciliation we seek is not yet a reality. Our efforts are foundering, mainly because we have succumbed to the temptation Dietrich Bonhoeffer has warned the church against: cheap grace.

We have divorced reconciliation from justice and repentance from forgiveness and we have exacted from the powerless that which we dared not ask of the powerful. We refuse to speak about the truths we have not uncovered and we because we dare not speak of restitution we cannot bring human restoration. Because we constantly deny our racism we cannot really deal with it. The growing gap between the rich and the poor is a time bomb, and our lack of spiritual values stifles our growth as a nation and manifests itself in corruption and selfishness in government and business circles, in the careless neglect of Aids sufferers, in the abandonment of respect for each other in the expression of our freedoms, and in the heart-stopping violence in the abuse of women and children.

As with you, our unity as a nation is built on shaky ground, and we are desperately looking for the miracle we thought we had found. Like Germany after the Second World War, what Karl Jaspers called "the discovery of our soul" is a journey we have not yet truly begun. Like you, globalization has dislocated us, leaving us wondering whether we can make a difference in a world everybody calls a village but yet seems too vast for our acts of hesitant and half-hearted obedience. Hence what we do has scarcely any transformational meaning. Even as our people have won for themselves the vote, the church has become to believe we no longer have a voice.

As the walls of apartheid were broken down, the walls of disobedience continue to be built amongst the churches of the Reformed tradition. Since we are faced with a militant secularism, we think we can meet that with a casual surrendering of the fundamental truths from which we live, and so become more acceptable. Our loss of power since the loss of the relationship with the "Christian state" that never was, has given rise to new fundamentalisms rooted in fear: fear of the other, fear of loss of identity, fear of the loss of certitude, fear of being merely modern in a postmodern world. But it certainly is not the fear of the Lord.

## V

I have spoken of daunting challenges. But I have also spoken of exciting possibilities. And I am excited at what the church is called to do in these days. I find this excitement not in a newly created triumphalism that is the offspring of the new Constantinianism which has married itself to the empire of the new world order. I find it in the hope which is grounded in our faith in Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the grieving God who lived among us, but outside the camp, who died for us, not in shame and failure but in glory, and who rose to empower us with the life-giving presence of his Spirit.

I have this excitement because I do not believe that the triumph of capitalism and the “global marketing of all things and liberal democracy” as Francis Fukuyama joyfully exclaimed, is indeed “the end of history”. Why should Christians believe that the end of one oppressive system and the rise of yet another oppressive system is “the end of history”? For above and beyond the history the powers that be proclaim is the history of the living, liberating God with his people. For us history is not determined by the rise or demise of destructive powers, but by the coming of the kingdom of God, in whose fulfillment Jesus has invited us to participate as he taught us to pray, “Let Your kingdom come”. For this reason the church shall not be misled by a new modern messianism but rather we shall remain engaged in the messianic politics of the kingdom of God. For this reason also we shall resist the myths of power, and seek the truth in the reality of the life, sufferings and hopes of God’s people in the world.

Perhaps it is here where the Confession of Belhar can once again help us, as we have found help in the Kingdom perspective of the Barmen Declaration. In Article Four *Belhar* proclaims God as “the One who brings justice and true peace, and that in a world filled with injustice and enmity God in a special way is the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged... that the church as God’s possession is called to stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged.”

*Belhar* helps us to find our voice and place globally, as we face the momentous changes and struggle with new idolatries in our world today. It also helps us ecumenically, as we seek to witness with others

in the Reformed family and wider, as that challenge comes to us in the Accra Confession for instance.

*Belhar* helps us firstly, because it affirms that biblical truth that the God of Jesus Christ is in a special way the God of the poor, the weak, the oppressed and the destitute. This is the claim of the exodus, of the prophets and the song writers of the Hebrew Bible, and this is the affirmation of Jesus of Nazareth. Second, it helps us to understand that the poor are not poor because of some historical accident, genetic traits or because it is the will of God. The poor are poor because they are *wronged*. They are poor because of injustice. They are victims not of an act of God, but of deliberate historical, political and economic decisions in which injustice was done to them. These decisions are made by people in positions of power who fully understand the consequences of these. In other words, the decision that some should be enriched has its corollary that others should be impoverished.

*Belhar* helps us, thirdly, to understand that “to stand where God stands”, or in Bonhoeffer’s words, to “stand with God in the hour of his grieving”, means to *stand up* and be counted for the poor and the destitute. To stand where God stands, not just in front of, in protection, but alongside, in solidarity of struggle. Not just in mere sympathy with, but in identification with them. That the church must do, *Belhar* further teaches us, not because we are obsessed with the poor, driven by some ideological fervour, or by our own needs, problems desires or sins, not out of feelings of guilt or longing for recognition, but as the *possession* of God, and therefore driven by his love and his compassion.

In our globalized world with its powers and myths of power, its distortion of reality and neglect of truth, *Belhar* helps us to discern the difference between gospel and ideology, between genuine good news and propaganda, between truth-telling and myth-making, between the dictates of political “realism” and the reality of the Kingdom of God. Between half-hearted vacillation and commitment and obedience and Christian solidarity. In the Bible, and as Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself discovered, “standing where God stands” was the guarantee for the prophets to distinguish between the myths of the idols, the demands from the palace, and the “whispers” of the Lord. And as we ourselves have discovered, it is by no means the safest place to stand, but it is without doubt the *right* place to stand. It is the only place from where we can make the affirmation with which the Confession of *Belhar* ends: “Jesus is Lord”.

I have discovered that Barmen and *Belhar*, standing as they do in that stream of the Reformed tradition that has allowed itself to be claimed by the Gospel, are amazingly relevant in our changed world today.

They help us to reclaim a spirituality without which I believe we cannot face the challenges before us, not bring about the transformation that reaches out for justice, human dignity and freedom and the responsibility for the Earth, the very things most necessary in our global reality.

It is a spirituality that I call "the tenderness of conscience". It is not a religion confined to the closet, locked up in a desire to escape the realities of this world. It is not a privatized, inner experience of God which brings us to the brink of that heathenism against which Bonhoeffer has warned us. It is, so we have learned from Abraham Kuyper, the "trembling of the soul before God" so that we are sent out to seek the glory of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of life. It is a tenderness that leaves us open to the woundedness of others, that makes us take the risk of vulnerability ourselves. It is an unholy impatience with injustice and its consequences. It is not just knowing about right and wrong, it is being moved by the hunger for justice. It is the consciousness of the closeness of God and of the other, not just sharing the pain of the other and therefore sharing the pain of God, but also sharing the rage of God against injustice and inhumanity.

What I pray for is this spirituality, that it may infuse our faith and our lives. What I pray for is the passion to feel what God feels as He stands with the wronged and the outcasts outside the camp. As we discovered so many years ago, we cannot do this alone, in isolation, for the sake of our self-preservation. Only if we do this together, our horizons established by the Kingdom of God, our strength renewed by the hopes of the poor, our faith rooted in the reality of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, shall we rediscover our voice, reestablish our belief that the world can be changed, that God's Kingdom will come, and that his will shall be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

I thank you very much.

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