

# Karl Barth's definition of church in politics and culture: Growth points for the church in South Africa

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## Abstract

*The article describes briefly Karl Barth's views on church, its role in politics and how it relates to culture. This is done by identifying the way in which the church participates in the social realm through its relationship with the State. The historic religious question asks whether there is a natural mutual-determining relationship between church and State. The church may ask whether faith and politics should mix, while a secular state may question the authority which the church claims to speak from. To a large extent culture determines the bias in this relationship. History has shown that church-State dynamics is not an either/or relationship, whereby either the authority of the church or the authority of the State should function as the ruling norm. Karl Barth describes the dynamics of this relationship very well, within the context of culture, in the way his faith engages with the political status quo. Once the relationship is better understood, Barth's definition of the church will prove to be more effective in its evangelical voice, speaking to those who guide its citizens through political power.*

*"Fürchtet Gott, ehret den König!" (1 Pt 2:17)<sup>2</sup>*

## 1. BARTH'S POLITICAL ACTIVITY AND THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

On reading Karl Barth's theology and then looking at his engagement with the political world, one is left asking the question whether Barth struggled with the

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 2:17 is quoted as the substantive text of the fifth article of the Barmen Declaration.

question of church-State relationship, or whether he knew the answer and acted on it. I would like to briefly look at some important moments in Barth's life where his political awareness shaped the way he viewed Church-State relationship. This is not an exclusive list of events, but I am sure that it gives us a good idea of how serious Barth took political activity in his faith.

From an early age, Barth displayed a deep sense of social awareness and acted on it while fulfilling his pastoral role in *Safenwil*. It is here that Barth was an active lecturer in the Continuing Education programme of the *Safenwil Arbeiterverein* (Hood 1984:33). It was also no secret that Barth joined the Social Democrats, and even in this political role, he advanced with great strides through its ranks.

In 1916, Barth became the president of the Social Democrat's conference, a position that would give him great opportunities to speak boldly against socio-economic, as well as political injustices. Barth was known for the way he was able to speak honestly about issues, which he believed to concern not only the church, but also society at large.

A good example was Barth's open opposition to the institution of the office of the *Reichsbischof*. Barth was convinced that the church could never be a mouthpiece for the State, and that this office would undermine the independence and critical stance of the church in relation to the State. A year later, Barth participated in the formation of the Barmen declaration; a document that to this day is widely used to describe the responsibility of the State as seen through the eyes of the church.

Barth's outspokenness and refusal to pledge his allegiance to the Führer did not come without a price. In 1935, Barth was forbidden to speak in public and was subsequently relieved of his post at the University of Bonn. This nevertheless did not stop him from teaching as he immediately took up a post at the University of Basel.

The question that arises out of observing Barth's political interaction is: How does Barth understand the relationship between church and State that would drive him to act in the described manner? This question is open to debate. Many have also tried to answer this question from different angles. Jüngel attempts to answer this question from a purely doctrinal point of view, while authors like Marquardt maintain that Barth's political affiliation tended to colour the way in which he did his theology. Three documents are important in this critique – The Barmen Declaration, the first edition of *Der Römerbrief* and the second edition of *Der Römerbrief*. Let us look at both views:

### 1.1 A doctrinal argument

Jüngel presents a very interesting argument, using as his premise the fifth thesis of the Barmen Declaration.<sup>3</sup> From the start it has to be said that using the Barmen Declaration to prove something about Barth's theological stance is a very big risk. Barth was not the sole author of the Declaration, but was certainly one of the main contributors.

Jüngel is able to use Thesis 5 as he views this part of the Declaration to be word for word Barth's handiwork (1992:37). According to Jüngel, Barth – who is a staunch opponent of the Reformer's Two-Kingdom theory, here displays something of a contradiction by reworking this classic doctrine. Although subtle, the Thesis indeed creates the impression that church and State are two opposing forces who will never be able to speak from the same side. Hood comes to the same conclusion, but adds that the *telos* of Thesis 5 is different from that of the classic Two-Kingdom theory. Thesis 5 gives the impression that although different, church and State can operate in God's Kingdom on earth, given that the State recognises that its authority is not self-driven, but a God-given gift. If this is true, then the State should be subject to God and therefore accept the voice of the church as a testimony of what God is revealing (Hood 1984:168). Jüngel agrees with this point of view (1992:45), but continues to argue for a dualistic relationship between the two: "Barmen V does not speak of the state in the abstract and outside of its relations, but formulates the state's own original and particular function as opposed to the church's own original and particular function" (Jüngel 1992:40-41).

Not only does the content of the fifth thesis imply this dualism, but so does its structure:

The first sentence formulates the task which belongs to the state according to divine ordering. The second sentence formulates the grateful affirmation by the church of the divine ordering in accordance with which the state exists and has to act. The third sentence formulates the particular task of the church with respect to the existence and task of the state. The fourth sentence once again

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<sup>3</sup> "'Fear God, honour the King!' (1 Pt 2:17). Scripture tells us that by divine appointment the State, in this still unredeemed world in which also the Church is situated, has the task of maintaining justice and peace, so far as human discernment and human ability make this possible, by means of the threat and use of force. The Church acknowledges with gratitude and reverence toward God the benefit of this, his appointment. It draws attention to God's Kingdom (Reich), *God's commandment and justice, and with these the responsibility of those who rule and those who are ruled, It trusts and obeys the power of the Word, by which God upholds all things*. We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the State should and could become the sole and total order of human life and so fulfil the vocation of the Church as well. We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the Church should and could take on the nature, task and dignity which belong to the State and thus become itself an organ of the State" (Jüngel 1992:xxvii).

### **Karl Barth's definition of church in politics and culture**

binds the insights of the fifth thesis back to the insight of the first thesis.

(Jüngel 1992:45)

It is interesting that Barth should describe both the church and State as necessary agents in the process of God's Kingdom becoming a reality in ordinary living, as we will describe later. At the same time, they should not see themselves as indispensable! The *telos* that Hood referred to is simply this: that in Barth's view, the consummated Kingdom of God on earth will render both these institutions meaningless. Their existence depends on the Kingdom of God not being a consummated reality. The State functions as a humanly defined – yet granted authority by God – structure that acts in a way that ensures the responsible co-habitation of human beings within specific borders. The State therefore has the responsibility to direct, take care of and maintain society. This is the meaning of social-order. "In the redeemed world, however, it would no longer be necessary for the life of the human community to be represented politically on the one hand and ecclesially on the other, or, secularly on the one hand and spiritually on the other. Neither the state as such nor the church as such are created for eternity" (Jüngel 1992:45-46).

So what then is the role of the church? This depends entirely on which of Barth's works one reads. In both editions of *Der Römerbrief*, church and State are part of a dualistic relationship. In the first edition, Barth places God and the church over and against the world and therefore also in opposition to the State. If this is the case, then the church can claim a moral high ground, and therefore can refuse to co-operate or negotiate with the State. The church therefore belongs to the Kingdom of God and the State belongs to the Kingdom of the World. The tension here is for the church to transform the State into something that would be nothing less than an ecclesiastic rule. Barth later saw the dangers of such a position and changed the stance completely in the second edition of *Der Römerbrief*.

In the second edition, Barth draws the dialectic line between the Creator and that which is created. This places God on the one side, and since both church and State comprise of human beings (the institutional church therefore being humanity's best attempt to respond to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, representing what should be the Church), will make them the other part of this relationship. A similar description of this relationship is given in Barth's "Ethics, Volume II" (Barth 1981:444).

It will be closer to the truth to describe the first edition as a reworking of the Two-Kingdom theory, whereas the second edition implies that although the world, including church and State, are fallen, it is not beyond salvation. It

is for this reason that one must believe that there is still some of the goodness of God hidden in both the church and State (Hood 1984:57). The premise of both church and State is to work for the well-being of humanity. This is both honourable and noble, but practice will define the morality and ethics within which both these bodies operate. Jüngel describes the different approaches of church and State well when he writes: "The church has the spiritual task of proclaiming the sin-forgiving justice of God and therefore to forgive the sin of the sinner in the Name of God, in order thus to urge one to a sinless life. The state, however, has to work in worldly ways against sin in its worldly forms, and that means: within the context of threat and, if necessary, also within the context of the use of force." (Jüngel 1992:50).

Before we draw any conclusions about Barth's theological approach to the relationship between church and State, let us look at how his political involvement seems to have shaped his theology.

## 1.2 A political argument

Barth hat gesagt, daß die Aufnahme marxistischer Elemente noch keinen Marxisten mache. So hüten wir uns, ihn gegen seine Selbstzeugnisse dazu zu stempeln. Unsere Arbeit heißt darum nicht »Theologie und Marxismus«, sondern »Theologie und Sozialismus«. Sozialismus mit unübersehbaren »marxistischen Elementen« ist die zutreffende Charakterisierung der hier vorgeführten politischen Position Barths.

(Marquardt 1972:33-34)

Was Karl Barth a Christian first, finding the practice of his faith through what can be described as Marxist- or Socialist ideologies or was Barth a Socialist who believed that God demands this socio-political orientation of the human race whom God had created? This question cannot be answered as an either/or, but reflects the different dynamics at work in both Barth's political- and religious life. Barth was human after-all, and cannot be defined as belonging solely to either of these worlds. As we see in the quote above, there may well be a great political influence on Barth's theology, but it does not make him exclusively a Marxist. The following anecdote illustrates this: In 1911 Barth delivered a speech addressing the *Arbeiterverein* in *Safenwil* entitled "Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung",. In this address, he said the following: "Jesus *is* the movement for social justice and the movement for social justice *is* Jesus in the present ..." (Hunsinger 1976:19). Considering the context, it is easy to label Barth as a Christian Socialist, or a Socialist Christian. We already noted that Barth became a member of the Social

Democrats, but what I am portraying here is the fine line between Barth's political- and religious convictions. How far did Barth go in making these two worlds meet and how did they meet considering his Dialectic method?

Brouwer (1988:18) comments on Dannemann's (1977) detailed explanation of Marquardt's (1972) description of Marxist tendencies in Barth's writings, especially *Der Römerbrief*. Brouwer agrees with Dannemann when he correctly states that Marquardt is overemphasising the point of this political influence. Barth indeed uses words that are generally associated with Marxism, but when Barth speaks of "revolution", for instance, Barth is not using the same definition and ideological constructs as Marxist philosophy. What Barth refers to is social revolution, but is not uniquely Marxist. We will explore Barth's definition of "revolution" a bit later. To describe Barth as a pure Marxist is to misunderstand Barth completely and to do an injustice to what Barth was trying to achieve in his emphasis on social religious participation in the political realm.

Brouwer (1988:18) describes Barth's perspective on the political significance of the Gospel well by saying that the Gospel of Jesus Christ tended towards a socialism that was democratised or democracy that was socialized. To pin Barth's strong Biblical theology to one political stance is impossible as it is equally unjust to describe it as democratic, theocratic, anthropocentric, or legalistic! Neither of the systems that Brouwer mentioned could manufacture a society that would be the equal of God's Kingdom on earth on their own. For all practical purposes, Barth displays the thinking of a social democrat. The young Barth, as we saw in the description of the first edition of *Der Römerbrief*, would have put the church above the influence of this movement. Later on, as in the second edition of this book, he would realise that the church is indeed influenced by its political *Sitz im Leben*.

This path leads us back to the place where both the church and the political authority of the day are instruments, necessary for what politicians would call tranquillity and what Christians would call "The Kingdom of God". It can however be debated that such a Christian perspective, equating God's Kingdom with human tranquillity would result in nothing less than a post-millenarianist Christendom.

Barth is aware of this dilemma and draws a very sharp distinction between church and State by reflecting on the motive of each in its "mission". The State, for instance will address issues either out of a sincere desire to act on needs within society that present themselves, or will act for the sake of obtaining more power within society. These two motives in the State are not mutually exclusive. When the Church declares its confession as an act of addressing certain issues present in society, Barth states that the Church

does not do so for the sake of meeting needs or answering questions, but for the sake of bearing witness to Jesus Christ in the world at that particular moment (Barth 1939:15).

An excellent book describing the growth in Barth's theology and political stance is Robert E Hood's "Contemporary political orders and Christ: Karl Barth's Christology and political praxis." I do not wish to summarise its contents, as it is largely a biographical description of Barth's theological and political involvement. I nevertheless want to draw from some ideas that are presented in this book in order to substantiate the claim of the delicate balance between Barth's political- and theological views.

The first point that comes to mind is the question of absolute truth. Is it possible for both the church and the State to form part of and present an absolute truth for its people? We already know the answer from Barth's Dialectic method being "No!" "the Christian cannot identify any nation or party of the existing structures with absolute truth for the state" (Hood 1984:48). This does not mean that no truth exists within these structures. The church acts as the witness of the Divine Truth. It is the witness of Christ, the risen Christ, that brings significance to the way we live. The resurrection of Christ brings into being a new form of society that has authority over any humanly created order, whether economical or political. This is called the Church.<sup>4</sup> The institutional church can and should be representative of the Church, but it cannot be equated to the Church as it consists of fallen human beings, who claim for themselves – whether by ordination or by election – positions of power within this structure.

When the church speaks to the State or society, the best it can do is testify about her experience with her Lord, and her interpretation of her Lord's will. The church, in the same breath, must not be reduced to a toothless dog, for the church is the best human attempt to respond to God's self-revelation. The Church – a creation of the Spirit – may indeed find opportunities and words to speak through the church, but that depends on the obedience and interpretation of the church.

Barth (CD I.2:704-705) places a greater emphasis on the existence of the Church in the life of the individual Christian. It is in the individual that Church happens, but it is not an individualistic movement. The Church finds expression and authority in the community of saints, which is not necessarily the church. This creates an inverse reaction from what is normally expected by modern Christians concerning the church's involvement in the political realm. Christians seem to wait for the church to respond to a particular ethical-, social-, or political situation. Christians then evaluate the response,

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<sup>4</sup> This is different to "church".

and then either join in with the church in its response, or often move to a denomination where their particular views are supported. Barth's theology does not allow the Christian individual to wait for the church in order to act in faith. Such pathos implies that the church is something more than what it is and that the individual is not able to hear God for themselves, but who depends on the church in order to find God. "Because of his freedom which is grounded in this Word, a member of the Church cannot retain a passive, indifferent and merely waiting role in face of this will of the divine Word, as though anyway, in its own time what has to happen will happen" (Barth, CD I.2:711).

The Church, through the Community of Saints, becomes the voice of authority for the Christian. The church is where these people worship together under the guidance of specific denominational emphases, liturgy and doctrine. So, if the Church is the voice, speaking about God to and in the individual, does this mean that Christians should take it upon themselves to overthrow all governments, only to replace them with what is perceived to be a theocratic rule? The answer to this is "No". Christians need to support the State, but not necessarily agree with it. Where there are good policies, the church needs to show support, but be open to the idea of being prophetic when political policies go against what Christians deem to be the "Word of God". This certainly has some ethical and practical limitations. One such limitation is determining which strain of the Christian belief system determines or most accurately reflects the true Word of God. The modern church, or should we say denominations, are faced with this dilemma, not only in the political sphere, but concerning social moral issues. Abortion, euthanasia, people with homosexual orientation and/or practice wanting recognition as members and leaders in the church – these are all issues which enjoy a great variety of opinions and beliefs.

How can the church speak to the State with authority when there are such great differences in opinion between different denominations? Is this a weakness in Barth's ecclesiology? No. It is proof of the true Church at work. If the church maintains that it has the final and undisputed truth about any subject, it ceases to be the church. The church in discussion with itself represents a body searching for the truth. When the situation arises where the church is convinced of a certain truth and stands by it, it does so with the knowledge that the truth it maintains may only be the truth for that moment, subject to change through the Word of God or contextual changes. It may appear that this plunges Barth's theology into the mainstream of religious relativism. Perhaps not, as in Barth's theology the only thing that is relative is that which is created as well as creation's perception of something that is



eternal and beyond its control. God is not relative and neither is God's Word or God's truth.

The second point asks the same question of absolute truth, but of the State. Barth cautioned people not to fall into the trap of believing that politics is able to produce a society that is equal to that of the Kingdom of God, especially when that political power hints at being able to function without the church. After the war, Barth did not oppose communism in eastern-Europe with the same tenacity as he did with National Socialism in Germany. After being criticized, he warned his critics not to embrace western democracy as a kind of Kingdom of God on earth (Hood 1984:30).

It may be argued that National Socialism indeed had the support of the church, even though communism was blatant in its position on church-state relationships and democracy cheapened the influence of religious input by diluting its voice in its attempt to give all perspectives, whether faith-based or not, an equal standing in society. To the church-State relationship in Nazi-Germany, Barth had the following to say:

From Romans 13 it is quite clear that love is not one of the duties which we owe to the State. When the State begins to claim "love", it is in the process of becoming a Church, the Church of a false God, and thus an unjust State. The State requires, not love, but a simple, resolute, and responsible attitude on the part of its citizens. It is this attitude which the Church, based on justification, commends to its members.

(Barth 1960:144)

In Barth's theology, we find different ethical roles, those practiced by the church and that by the State. In further exploration of this dynamic relationship, let us have a closer look at these expressions.

## **2. POLITICS, ETHICS AND THEOLOGY**

To sum up in a few words, Barth views both the church and the State as divine instruments, but summoned for different purposes. The church is "... summoned to repentance before God" (Barth 1981:442) while the State is "... summoned to serve our neighbour" (Barth 1981:445). This does not mean that the church has no business in serving its neighbour, nor that the State should not come before God in repentance.

I believe that Palma (1983) finds a helpful tool to link the church to the State in the life of the community: This is called "culture". Does Barth have a theology of culture? The answer is "Yes". To Barth, culture is the highest form of human achievement that sets us apart from the rest of creation (Palma

1983:9). Palma (1983:12) is also quick to add that all culture is theologically determined and conditioned. Culture, then predisposes the individual to very specific political orientations. Cultures that are community-centred tend to implement, community-based political structures, while individualistic cultures opt for political structures that cater better for the individual.

If culture were the stepping-stone between faith and politics, church and State, then we would need to find a culture that is Christ-centred. Palma (1983:31) describes Barth's Christology as presenting Jesus Christ as the prime example of living in free culture. Free culture does not mean that Jesus was free from cultural influence. Jesus was, in his culture, free to express the revelation of God without fearing that culture would hinder or distort His message. As Christians, we are called to bear testimony to the Word, which means that although we cannot be the revelation of the Word, the church is charged with the mission of bearing witness to the Word without culture and tradition distorting the message. It is a goal and not an existential reality.

The church's goal is to grow towards free culture as revealed in Jesus Christ. How does Jesus' free culture interact with politics? Perhaps the best description is found in Jesus' response to Pilate as found in John 19:11. Jesus acknowledges the authority of the State, but sees it in the context of the State being nothing more than an institution, permitted to exercise power and not having divine authority. Although the State is granted power by God, it does not mean that the State is beyond error or that the State cannot become corrupted by the power which it claims.

Is there a form of State that best illustrates free culture and the ability to become the most righteous form of governance? To Barth this freedom and obedience was best illustrated in democracy and in socialism. For this reason, he affiliated himself with the Social Democrats (Palma 1983:38) and opposed communism (Palma 1983:39).

Dannemann (1977:184) puts it as follows: "Wie Jesus Christus die Krisis und Hoffnung des Menschen ist, so ist er auch die Krisis und Hoffnung der Gesellschaft". Dannemann marks the delicate tension between God as the "Crisis"<sup>5</sup> and as the Hope of humanity, not only of individuals, but as the quote marks, also of society.<sup>6</sup> If God confronts humanity, including the State, effecting not only a religious, but also a social transformation, then God is also introducing a set of ethics that directs society, including its culture.

Hood (1984:xiv) sums up Barth's description of ethics in CD II(2), which introduces divine ethics even in the political sphere:

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<sup>5</sup> For lack of a better translation for the German word "Krisis". "Crisis" is quite apt, because it captures the deep sense in which humanity is challenged when God confronts it. No other word describes the dialectic tension between Creator and creation better.

<sup>6</sup> See also Rostagno (1985:347) about the radical portrayal of Jesus being the only true revelation of Divine Truth and so influencing a "revolution" in society.

- First, ethical action means that we confess an ignorance of being able to apprehend or decide about God's command without the aid of God's grace ...
- Secondly, ethical action means that man's obedience is to a command, which transcends his actions ...
- Thirdly, ethical action means that it is communal, not individualistic ...
- Fourthly, ethical action means that it is concrete, not abstract ...

Political ethics and Christian ethics, at the best of times, are not the same. It is therefore the church's duty, more than that, its mission, to act when ethics existing in the political realm are inconsistent with that of the Gospel-message (Dijkstra 1986:21). The church has an added responsibility to speak against state-ethics when the State professes to act from a Christian standpoint, as was the case in Nazi-Germany.

A good example of the church's response in such a situation is in the Barmen-declaration. Although the Barmen Declaration cannot be credited as Barth's work alone, it could not have come into being in its exiting form if it were not for Barth. The Barmen declaration has not been without criticism: It said nothing about the fate of the Jews after the announcement of the Aryan-paragraph of 7 April 1933. This legislation stated that Aryans, not Jews, were able to be leaders in the German Evangelical Church. All Jews were subsequently relieved of their posts and debarred from citizenship (Barth 1965:16).

Barth's Ethics "thus seeks, not to translate the will of God into the situation of the believer, but rather to translate or move the person and community of faith into a position to hear and to be able to obey the commandment of God as it is concretely spoken" (Osborn 1983:320). Osborn, learning from Polanyi, sees Barth's definition of Ethics as a tool that is used to understand and implement the will of God, very much like a tennis racquet is a tool to hit a ball (Osborn 1983:321). All parts of a situational reality need to meet at a certain point in order for truth to become a reality. The player, the extension of his arm, the racquet, the ball, all need to be in the right place at the right time, meeting together and only then can a proper and deliberate action be performed. In Barth, ethics, context, God, civil community, and Christian community need to meet at a specific point in order for God's deliberate will to find realisation. Therefore, to speak of a specific will of God, real for all situations and all times manifest in a world that is constantly in flux, would therefore be speaking into nothingness. The only specific will of God,

manifest in human time and space, is the proclamation of God's Divine "Yes" through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ therefore becomes the proclamation, not only of the existence of God, but also God's Ethics.

Bonhoeffer criticized Barth that he could not see how Barth could come to any political decision from his theological speech (Osborn 1983:313). Perhaps Barth is too vague, idealistic, and imprecise (Osborn 1983:313). Barth works from the premise that our relationship with God is a relationship with a living God. If God were a mere concept, then his approach could well be described as vague and idealistic. But seeing that God lives, and is able to meet with different people in different times, places and contexts, means that God's Ethics must be broader than the legalistic definitions that limited human beings can produce. Does this justify his vagueness nevertheless? Osborn (1983:316) comes to the following conclusion:

Barth's so-called "idealism" is a means of talking about the Lordship of God in Jesus Christ and recognizing that Christian ethics is a matter of obedient acknowledgement of this lordship, "from above" of the living God incarnate in Jesus Christ. His "actualism" is a way of speaking about the personal dimension of this lordship as it bears upon human existence in the only way it can and yet remain in any meaningful fashion an event of true lordship-namely, as it actually, concretely determines particular and ever free human decisions.

God's ethics, in other words, are too great to be formulated in a human code of ethics, or even Christian ethics. Ethics is an important part of theology, but it cannot be named as 'the Ethic'.

The Ethics that form the relationship between God and humanity is not one founded on the principle of metaphysics. Yes, Dannemann (1977:97) correctly states that in essence, the dialectic relationship that exists between God and creation in Barth's theology, indeed bodes well for a metaphysical approach. If this were the case, then we could assume that there should be two different states of ethics, as the two dimensions of existence would require two different guidelines to determine and separate that which is fundamentally correct or righteous, and that which is in essence evil or corrupt. Dannemann (1977:98) puts it as follows: "Als Aufhebung der Negativität der menschlichen Existenz wartet die in Gott selbst ursprüngliche und vorausgesetzte und dann in der Auferstehung Jesu Christi von den Toten neu angekündigte »Synthese« von Gott und Mensch, neuer und alter Welt." From this intervention, the negative aspect of the dialectic existence between God and humanity is transformed into something positive and unifying. Divine ethics therefore becomes a possibility, something to be practiced by humanity.

It is interesting that Barth does not refer to the State as something that needs redemption. Society needs to be redeemed (Godsey 1963:75). Only when society is redeemed will the State be able to execute its responsibility with a firm ethic and divine responsibility. The State is made by society; it is not ontologically independent, even if it thinks so. The outcome of such thinking would result in revolution. A sign of a society that is in the process of redemption is the society which views even “work” as communal. Nothing exists solely to meet the individual’s needs. Individual independence, according to Barth (CD III.4:537-538), gives rise to capitalism and alienates community. Redeemed society must be community-based.

The church has as a central responsibility, the task of praying for the state (Barth 1960:135). Praying for the State also means being an agent of God, communicating what it believes God to be saying to the authorities. The church does so, being constantly reminded of the chaos that threatens the world’s existence as manifest in the signs of war, oppression and lawlessness (Hood 1984:74). And so, the church becomes the vehicle of giving testimony to Divine ethics as found in the Person of Jesus Christ in the political realm.

### **3. STATE-FOCUSSED MISSION IN SOUTH AFRICA ACCORDING TO BARTH**

Barth did not write an ecclesiology specifically for the South African context. Instead, being a South African Methodist, I would like to interpret what Barth had to say and then to place it in this context. How does the Church witness concerning the Word in a political world?

To me, Barth’s ecclesiology and understanding of the relationship between church and State finds specific expression in something like the Kairos document. It may be argued that there is a similarity between the Barmen declaration and the Kairos document, but I believe that the different approaches used in the formation of these declarations provide for more differences than similarities. I would like to suggest that there is a greater correlation between Barth’s view of church-State relationship and the thoughts that are conveyed in the Kairos Document.

First, a short description of the Kairos document. As a response to the political situation in South Africa under the Apartheid regime, theologians from various Christian denominations gathered in 1985 to discern the Will of God. The meeting realized that the church was not so much opposed to a diabolic State, as it was opposing several church-State relationship perspectives existing at the time. The church found itself being deeply divided (Kairos 1985:4).

Three different church-State relationships were identified. The first two were descriptions of existing definitions, while the third was a goal. The first perspective was called "State Theology". This theology described the perspective where the State was a direct instrument of God and could define its actions as ordained by God (Kairos 1985:6-10). The second, "Church theology", described a theology that drew a distinct difference between the roles of the State and that of the church. It, by definition, implied that the church had no political voice and should concern itself with the facilitation of liturgical worship for its members (Kairos 1985:11-17).

The third, "Prophetic theology" could be seen as a compromise position between the two previous perspectives, but it is not. What it offers, is a theology which clearly indicates that the State cannot act as if it were the church, nor that the church finds itself completely isolated from the social affairs of its context. What does this imply? This theology does not ask the church to become an opposition-party. If the church were to respond to political views, using political tools, then an opposition-party stance would be inevitable. "Prophetic theology" asked the church to respond to issues concerning the Kingdom of God. Instead of directly attacking the existing government, it sought to attack the issue of oppression. No Christian, irrespective of political conviction, could agree that oppression is part of God's divine will for humanity. This only causes a division, creating a social order where there are those who oppress and those who are oppressed.

I understand Barth to be calling for, what in Kairos-terms, is called the church engaged in Prophetic theology. The Confessing Church, which Barth was part of, is proof of this. It is interesting that the Kairos Document does not deny the importance or place of a theology of (belonging to) State. It does carry issue with "State theology" which questions the independent role of the church. It also sees the place of Church theology, but does object to it being disengaged with society. It therefore does not discredit either of these institutions as something that God is unable to use. Instead, it calls for a church, which is neither bound by political alliance, nor ecclesiastical tradition, but which is able to speak what it interprets to be the Truth, in love and in real terms. In the same breath, it calls for a State which sees itself as an instrument of God, but not the exclusive voice of God in society.

An important action by the church to ensure the distinct difference between itself and the State. This can be done by constituting a *Status Confessionis*. There are similarities between what the church has done in South Africa and what the church did in Germany during the Nazi-era. Constituting a *Status Confessionis* was important in both contexts. In Germany, we find the Confessing Church, under great influence from Barth,

drawing up the Barmen Declaration. In South Africa, the church compiled several documents, the most prominent speaking to the local context being the Belhar Confession and the Kairos document.

A new Confession is highly contextual and seldom has the ability to serve the church beyond its specific *Sitz im Leben*. A Confession, therefore needs to be formulated with a very specific theological focus. Barmen, for instance, carried a very Barthian perspective in its approach, denouncing natural theology and so defining the different roles of church and State. The Kairos document, on the other hand, used as its premise the following: “first task of a prophetic theology for our times would be an attempt at social analysis or what Jesus would call ‘reading the signs of the time’ (Mt 16:3) or ‘interpreting this Kairos’ (Lk 12:56)” (Kairos 1985:18).<sup>7</sup> This is clearly leaning towards interpreting revelation in what Barth would perceive as natural theology.

Such a Confession cannot be done only from the perspective of one Christian denomination, but truly needs the co-operation of as many denominations as possible. An ecumenical work, in this instance, does two things. Firstly, it becomes a united witness and speaks with greater authority.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, it breaks the State’s illusion that it operates either as a Divinely authorised entity, or even that it is able to be just without being a Divine instrument. Ecumenical prophecy exposes the State’s true nature when it chooses to function outside its relationship with both God and the church (Barth 1981:447).

This radical act by the church, to state its own individual role in society, will at the same time counter the great disillusionment which people have with the church when all they hear is the State speaking on behalf of the church. A good example is the criticism that Steve Biko levies at the church. Biko states that it is not difficult to believe or become deeply passionate about the teachings of Christ. What discredited the Christian movement was firstly a Christian condoning of State injustice, and secondly the broader church’s (initial) apathy in condemning this heresy (1978:217-218).

So, how does the church perform its Divine mission to the State, besides seeking ecumenical relationships and drawing up confessions? The church’s mission to the State is essentially, in Barthian terms, a question of reconciliation. In this instance, reconciliation between God and humanity in the structures of the State and church. On commenting on the work of reconciliation in South Africa, Graf proposes in the first of 9 propositions that when we speak of reconciliation between God and humanity and the reconciliation between human beings, we must make use of two different

<sup>7</sup> Also quoted in Horn (1988:119).

<sup>8</sup> Jn 17:23.

logical structures. The one presumes that humanity approaches a merciful and gracious God, and so, can depend on a consistent response from God when it approaches God in repentance. Secondly, we find that reconciliation between human beings has no guarantee of mercy or grace (Graf 2005:378) and so has to trust in a communicative process, which is nothing more but brokering for reconciliation.

The message of the church offers a third dimension of reconciliation: that of humanity being reconciled both to itself and to God, through the Person of Jesus Christ. By this definition, it is therefore implied that a new community comes into being under this form of reconciliation. This is called the Church. The church is therefore, together with the State, but above the State, the human voice, bearing witness to the Word of God in the world. The church needs to recognise the difference between itself and the State, and as we stated earlier, is able to do this through Confessions. The State is still a human work. It needs to be monitored and guided. It is not the final authority, nor is it the saviour of humanity. The constant proclamation of these facts is the task of the church.

An interesting way in which one denomination (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa) has ensured for itself to be independent from the State is to prevent its ministers from practicing as members of any political party. "A Minister (see par 4.1) who takes up a party-political post or any other appointment which Conference or the Connexional Executive considers will compromise the necessary independence of the Church in its witness to the Gospel in society, shall resign from the ministry failing which shall be deemed to have resigned" (L&D 2000:4.91).

It would be interesting to see how Barth would respond to such an approach. If the church spoke to the State in South Africa today, what would it say? Although the church has been vocal on these issues on many occasions, I would like to highlight some of the most important issues which the church is pressuring the State to respond to.

The biggest issue is undoubtedly that of HIV/AIDS. The South African government's slow, and sometimes, bizarre approaches to this issue has drawn criticism from across the world. The question may be asked: Why should the church add its voice when the international community is already placing pressure on the South African government? The simple answer is that this problem is not only a political problem – it is a people-problem. As long as the church believes that humanity is created in the image of God, it has a duty to bear witness to the Word and expose how government policies are in violation of treating people with the dignity God intended when God created humanity *Imago Dei*.



- It will speak about the abuse of creation and the exploitation of natural resources, because this is God's creation and humanity has been mandated as stewards of it. This is not just an environmental-political problem, but a theological and social problem.
- It will speak to the authorities about the dangers of power-seeking, status-symbols, justice to the poor. It will speak about capitalist exploitation, materialism and individualism.
- It will speak about poverty. Because poor people matter.
- It will speak about community-building, because community is God's gift to creation.
- It will speak more about community-participation than personal salvation. "Belonging" in South Africa is a theological problem. It speaks of harmony, humane-ness, tolerance and acceptance.
- It will speak against the danger of democracy becoming a god. God is God.
- It will speak about the owning of land (De Gruchy 2004a:231). On this issue Barth was quite adamant in his opposition to a capitalist system which linked the idea of human freedom to the private ownership of property (Petersen 1988:61), but I believe that in this context, private- and communal landownership is fundamental to the harmony of South African society.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Barth's church-State relationship creates within the church the awareness that it is not the sole community of God. It forms part of a dynamic relationship with the State in order to realise the vision of the Church in any form of society.

The State is taught that its secular authority does not derive its power from its own "goodness", but has to exercise that role in full recognition that all authority is "permitted" by God. The church's mission is to remind the State of this and to evaluate whether the State is exercising its power in accordance with what the church believes to be "the Will of God".

The church is therefore not powerless, but becomes the best way through which humanity can respond to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

## ***Karl Barth's definition of church in politics and culture***

This makes its mission vitally powerful, once again a power, which is constantly under the scrutiny of the Spirit.

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<sup>9</sup> The following abbreviations are used:

CD	Barth, K 1956-1975. <i>Church Dogmatics</i> . Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
KD	Barth, K 1932-1967. <i>Die Kirchliche Dogmatik</i> . Zürich: TVZ Verlag.
Kairos	The Kairos Theologians. 1985. <i>Challenge to the church: A theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa (The Kairos Document)</i> . Braamfontein: The Kairos Theologians.
L&D	The Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2000. <i>Laws and discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa</i> . 10th edition. Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House.

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