



On knowing the time: Temporality, love and confession in Barth's *Der Römerbrief*

*Sobre o conhecimento do tempo: temporalidade, amor e
confissão no comentário de Barth a Romanos*

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Abstract

This essay will consider the theme of temporality in the second edition of Karl Barth's Romans commentary – a hundred years after it was first published. By offering a close reading of Barth's text, it will firstly indicate how – in the wake of the First World War – Barth argues for a categorical distinction between time and eternity, with the former standing under the judgement of the latter. Secondly, the essay will show how, for Barth, this radical divide between time and eternity should not prompt us to give up on time, to turn our backs on our temporal existence. For, Barth believes, exactly by acknowledging the crisis of time, the possibility also opens up for us to see – and come to know – time as something standing under grace, especially in moments where the act of love is performed towards the other. Thirdly, the essay will briefly examine how this idea of time that is 'known' lays the foundation for Barth's theology of confession (as seen in Barmen), which would, in turn, have a strong impact on the drafting of the Belhar Confession, six decades later.

Keywords: Karl Barth. Der Römerbrief. Temporality. Time and Eternity. Confession.

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Resumo

Este ensaio considera o tema da temporalidade na segunda edição do comentário de Karl Barth aos Romanos – cem anos após sua primeira publicação. Ao oferecer uma leitura atenta do texto de Barth, o texto indicará como – no despertar da primeira grande guerra – Barth argumenta a favor de uma distinção categórica entre tempo e eternidade, o primeiro sob o julgamento do segundo. Em segundo lugar, o ensaio demonstra que, para Barth, esta divisão radical entre tempo e eternidade não deveria nos incitar a abrir mão do tempo, virando nossas costas para nossa existência temporal. Pois, acredita Barth, que é justamente ao reconhecer a crise do tempo que se abre a possibilidade de ver – e conhecer – o tempo como algo que existe sob a graça, especialmente em momento em que um ato de amor é realizado em favor de outra pessoa. Em terceiro lugar, o ensaio faz um breve exame sobre como essa ideia de tempo que é “conhecida” fundamenta a teologia da confissão de Barth (como visto em Barmen), o que, a seu turno, sessenta anos mais tarde, tem um forte impacto na redação da Confissão de Belhar.

Palavras-chave: Karl Barth. Romanos. Temporalidade. Tempo e Eternidade. Confissão.

Time and eternity in *Der Römerbrief*

When Barth set out in his second commentary on the Epistle to the Romans to subvert and overcome the so-called ‘liberal’ theology espoused by his teachers, this would include their conception of time. For Barth one of the central problems with his predecessors’ thought, which would lead to their disastrous support of the Kaiser’s war policy, was that they confused time with eternity, or put differently, history with the kingdom of God. Whereas in his first Romans commentary, Barth still attempted to retain or accommodate some notion of a gradual unfolding of God’s kingdom in time,¹ the message of his second commentary was clear, namely, that a fundamental distinction

¹ In his first Romans commentary Barth would, for example, make remarks such as: “Eine neue Weltzeit ist angebrochen: das Ende aller Zeiten. Indem Gott nun sein letztes Wort, das Wort spricht – in dem Maß, als es nun gehört wird, wird die Zeit stillgestellt durch die Ewigkeit. Indem die Zeit in ihrem tiefsten Sinn erfüllt wurde und wird (vgl. Gal. 4,4), liegt sie dahinten.” [“A new age has dawned: the end of all times. As God now speaks his last word, the Word – to such an extent that it is now heard, eternity will bring time to a standstill. As time was and will be fulfilled in its deepest sense (see Gal. 4:4), it lies behind”] (BARTH, 1985, p. 86). See also Tietz (2021, p. 129).

ought to be drawn between our temporal existence and the eternal reality of God. Just as religious experience could not be mistaken for knowledge of God, and worldly occurrences for the working of God's Spirit, so time could not be mistaken for eternity. This conviction would already be emphasised in the commentary's preface, where Barth famously states: "[I]f I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity" (BARTH, 1968, p. 10).² From the beginning, Barth is thus adamant that, according to Paul, the difference between the world of time and the eternal reality of God is categorical in nature, with the former standing under the perpetual judgement of the latter.

This diastasis between time and eternity, which is connected to and reflective of several other dialectical pairings in his commentary (of which the foundational one is, of course, the *Realdialektik* between God and the world itself), is continually mentioned and expounded on as Barth works through, remarks on, and adds to Paul's text. This is especially seen in Barth's commentary on the first eleven chapters of Romans, where, in Barth's reading, Paul announces and expounds on the "permanent KRISIS" of human existence in light of the revelation – and judgement – of the wholly other God who is beyond "time and things and men" (BARTH, 1968, pp. 10, 41).³ For instance, in his commentary on Romans 1:18 where Paul speaks of the "ungodliness and unrighteousness" of humanity, Barth remarks: "Our arrogance demands that, in addition to everything else, some super-world should also be known and accessible to us ... We confound time with eternity. That is our

² Regarding Kierkegaard's influence on his second commentary on Romans, Barth would write the following: "[Kierkegaard] only entered my thinking seriously, and more extensively, in 1919, at the critical turning-point between the first and second editions of my *Romans* ... What we found particularly attractive, delightful and instructive was his inexorable criticism, which went on snipping and snipping. We saw him using it to attack all speculation which wiped out the infinite qualitative difference between God and man. Thus in that second phase of our revolution he was one of the cocks whose voices seemed to proclaim to us from near and far the dawn of a really new day". Quoted in Busch (1976, p. 116).

³ For Barth, commenting on Romans 3:9–10, this "KRISIS" of human existence can be summed up as follows: "To us God is, and remains, unknown; we are, and remain, homeless in this world; sinners we are and sinners we remain. The word 'humanity' means unredeemed men and women; the word 'history' implies limitation and corruption; the pronoun 'I' spells judgement" (1968, p. 85).

unrighteousness” (BARTH, 1968, p. 44). And regarding Romans 3:27, where Paul proscribes the boasting in human achievements, Barth protests: “Incomprehensible and meaningless is the view that things – men and their experiences – are in themselves ... great and important, or are in themselves sufficient to be, or to desire to be, divine: incomprehensible and meaningless is all confusing of time and eternity” (BARTH, 1968, p. 108). Indeed, while we might have some “memory of eternity”,⁴ Barth suggests that our lives and actions are marked and determined by the “flux of time and history” (BARTH, 1968, p. 89). “Every concrete and tangible thing” does not only “belong within” but also “to the world of time” (BARTH, 1968, p. 56), an order which – in his words – is “nothing when measured by the standard of eternity” (BARTH, 1968, p. 43). In view of eternity, the realm of time is thus continually judged and dissolved (BARTH, 1968, p. 79). Commenting on Romans 3:21, Barth writes: “We stand here before an irresistible and all-embracing dissolution of the world of time and things and men, before a penetrating and ultimate KRISIS, before the supremacy of a negation by which all existence is rolled up” (BARTH, 1968, p. 91).

The stark distinction that Barth draws between eternity and the realm of “historical and time-enveloped things” (BARTH, 1968, p. 205) also has an impact on and is expressed through the Christology he presents. While Barth recognises that in the Christ-event “eternity meets time”, there is for him no “mixing or confusion” of the two realities (OAKES, 2011, p. 43). In fact, this moment of intersection between God and the “concrete world of history” in the life of Jesus accentuates something of the disjuncture between the eternal and the temporal (BARTH, 1968, p. 29). As a historical person, Jesus lives and acts within time, but what is revealed in and through him – as the Christ – does not belong to or transpire as a result of time. It is also, unlike all human thoughts and deeds, not conditioned by time’s advances (BARTH, 1968, pp. 29–30). This is above all true of the Resurrection, which according to Barth – commenting e.g. on Romans 5 – is a disclosure, in history, of what he comes to

⁴ Barth speaks of how – amidst the “meaningless powers of the world” – the “memory of eternity” breaks in “upon our minds and hearts”. See Barth (1968 p. 48) as well as, for example, pp. 92, 104, and 337 where similar comments are made.

term the “non-historical”, meaning, that which transcends and disturbs all historical developments and processes⁵. Just as death gives way to life in the moment of the Resurrection, so time also gives way to eternity and history to what he calls “non-history” – something Barth describes as an “impossible possibility” which can henceforth only be recognised through the “miracle of faith” (BARTH, 1968, pp. 115ff, 222). For Barth, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus does, therefore, not do away with Kierkegaard’s “qualitative distinction between time and eternity”. Time continues to stand apart from and under the judgement of God, with the redemption brought about by Christ occurring as a “Yes” disclosed within the “No” God utters within and towards the world of time. The “new world” touches the “old world”, Barth writes, but it “touches it as a tangent touches a circle, that is, without touching it” (BARTH, 1968, p. 30).

As mentioned, this explicit and, perhaps, unsettling distinction Barth draws between time and eternity in *Der Römerbrief* served as a response to his predecessors’ tendency to collapse the two realities into one another, leading them to view temporal occurrences in the world such as Germany’s involvement in the Great War as a manifestation of some divine reality. According to Barth, following the admonishments of Paul – especially in the first eleven chapters of Romans – this could not be, as our temporal existence is and remains part of a worldly reality which is radically different to God and – as part of God’s act of redemption – judged as such (BARTH, 1968, p. 178). It could, however, be asked – especially in light of this volume’s theme “Karl Barth and Public Theology” – what does this view of time and history, and its relation to eternity, mean for our lives on earth? Should it prompt us to give up

⁵ Barth writes with regards to Romans 5:18–19: “Christ is the ‘new’ subject, the EGO of the coming world. This EGO receives and bears and reveals the divine *justification* and election – *This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*. This qualification of man, this appointment as the Son of God, through the power of the Resurrection (i. 3, 4) of Him who was born of the seed of David, is also non-concrete, unobservable, and non-historical” (BARTH, 1968, p. 181). See also his comments on Romans 1:4 where he writes: “The Resurrection is therefore an occurrence in history which took place outside the gates of Jerusalem in the year A.D. 30, inasmuch as it there ‘came to pass’, was discovered and recognized. But inasmuch as the occurrence was conditioned by the Resurrection, in so far, that is, as it was not the ‘coming to pass’, or the discovery, or the recognition, which conditioned its necessity and appearance and revelation, the Resurrection is not an event in history at all” (ibid., p. 30).

on time, to turn our backs on or attempt some gnostic flight from our temporal existence? Is Barth asking us to pursue – in both theology and life – a timelessness of some sort? According to someone like Nietzsche, this is after all what Christianity has always demanded of humanity, to embrace eternity in lieu of the finite, temporal reality in which we find ourselves.⁶ When continuing to read Barth's text – especially as he turns to the “problem of ethics” from Romans 12 onwards – it is interesting to note that he insists on the exact opposite view.

Time and the act of love in *Der Römerbrief*

In one of *Der Römerbrief's* most memorable passages, found at the beginning of its commentary on Romans 12, Barth argues that – while there is an “infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity”, with the former standing under the perpetual judgement of the latter – the Christian life, with all its social and political implications, is not only lived in but also deeply concerned with the world of time. In fact, for him the “great disturbance” brought about by God's judgement of the “world of time and things and men”, serves as a call to fix our attention anew on our temporal existence – to develop what could be described as a sense for the temporal (BARTH, 1968, p. 424). Barth notes that when asking questions about how “we are to live” in response to the event of God's revelation – an event where time is judged by eternity – the discussion cannot be about some timeless reality existing above or beyond our world but should be about “concrete life” which is lived – as he writes – “from minute to minute” (BARTH, 1968, pp. 424, 427). Indeed, instead of pursuing timeless abstractions, our focus should be on the tensions of the “visible world” with its “criss-cross lines” and “kaleidoscopic movements” –

⁶ Nietzsche (2000, p. 9) would e.g. write: “[Regarding Christianity], I always sensed *hostility to life*, the wrathful and vengeful disgust at life itself ... Christianity was from the very beginning essentially and fundamentally the disgust and aversion felt by life towards itself, merely disguised, concealed, and masquerading under the belief in an 'other' or 'better' life ... [For Christianity] life *must* continually and inevitably be condemned, because life is something essentially amoral – life, crushed under the weight of contempt and of the eternal No, must finally be felt unworthy of desire, intrinsically without value.”

which is why, he suggests, a reading of “contemporary secular literature”, especially “newspapers!”, is essential to anyone interested in Paul’s text (BARTH, 1968, p. 425).⁷ Barth asserts: “If our thinking is not to be pseudo-thinking, we must think about life ... [a]nd if we are to think about life, we must penetrate its hidden corners” (BARTH, 1968, p. 425).

For Barth, the reason for this heightened focus on our temporal existence, even as it is judged and dissolved by God’s eternity, is twofold. In the first place, there “is for us no alternative”; this is all that we can do (BARTH, 1968, p. 434). Regardless of any pious intentions or promethean aspirations, our thoughts, words, and actions remain embedded in and conditioned by the world of time. With reference to Romans 12:2, Barth writes that “[o]ur whole behaviour, always and to the word’s end, bears stamped upon it the form of this world” – a form tied to and shaped by our temporal reality (BARTH, 1968, p. 434). We cannot, therefore, delude ourselves in thinking that we can somehow escape the realm of history or claim for ourselves eternity within time, as everything we think and do and say, also about eternity, by its very nature belongs to and is expressive of the world of time. The temporal, it could be said, is inevitable and therefore asks for our intentional engagement; to do otherwise, would involve a flight of fancy. For Barth, this is, however, not the only – or even the main – reason to take time and history seriously. He

⁷ The *bon mot* that is often ascribed to Barth, that the preacher should have the “Bible in the one hand and the newspaper in the other”, probably has its origins in these early remarks in *Der Römerbrief*. Throughout his life, Barth would continue to make similar comments. In a conversation with the journalist Freddy Klopfenstein in 1966, the following would e.g. be said: “Klopfenstein: You mentioned nontheological reading. Do you think the church knows too little of the world? Barth: The pastor and the believers shouldn’t think of themselves as a religious society, which deals with certain themes, but they live in the world. We do indeed need, just like my old formula, the Bible and the newspaper. Klopfenstein: Then tell us, in what ways does the Bible illuminate the newspaper, and in what ways does the newspaper illuminate the Bible? Barth: The Bible teaches us to see human things in their center, in their height, in their depth; the newspaper is the daily coverage of that which happens with humankind. And the Bible teaches us that this very humankind is loved by God. The other part of your question: one needs to know humanity, including the mistakes of the journalists. Klopfenstein: I’ll pay attention to it. Barth: The journalist has one of the most important roles in the world. For quite some time, it has been my custom to make the point, when I have the opportunity to preach, to include in the intercessions not only the political authorities but also the journalists, for they are, in their own way, also a kind of authority.” (BARTH, 2019, pp. 161-162)

contends that, exactly by acknowledging and engaging with “the full ambiguity” and “KRISIS” of our temporal reality, and offering our concrete, historical existence marked by “EROS” and “EGO” as a “living sacrifice” unto God (an act Paul calls “veritable worship” in Romans 12:1) the “impossible possibility” arises that, even now, certain moments in time may – on account of God’s grace – “witness” to, serve as “parables” of, and provide the “occasion” to act in accordance with that which transcends time (BARTH, 1968, pp. 424–38). Indeed, by upholding the “infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity” (with the former standing under the judgement of the latter), and – as “primary ethical act” – surrendering our temporally-conditioned lives to God, Barth believes that the temporal can begin to signify the eternal (BARTH, 1968, p. 432). Time under judgement can thus become time under grace – moments which speak of and point towards the wholly other God in and amidst our temporal reality.

From Romans 12 onwards, much of Barth’s commentary is then concerned with how various positive and negative ethical possibilities express and transpire as a result of this “impossible possibility” mentioned above. By speaking of “positive possibilities” Barth refers to “demonstrative” actions mentioned in Paul’s letter which, in its limited, temporal state, and while continuing to be marked “by the form of the world”, possess a “parabolic capacity, a tendency towards protest, an inclination to enmity against EROS”; thus actions which – already now – point towards God’s kingdom within the realm of time (BARTH, 1968, p. 450–1). Such behaviour includes, for example, to “[r]ejoice in hope”, to be “patient in tribulation”, to “[c]ontinue instant in prayer” and to “be given to hospitality”, as Paul states in Romans 12:9–15 (BARTH, 1968, p. 450–1). It also includes – Barth notes – the act of serving “the time” itself, as he translates Romans 12:11, thereby keeping with the Luther Bible while going against leading Biblical scholars of his time such as his former teacher at Marburg, Adolf Jülicher (BARTH, 1968, p. 450).⁸ The fact that Barth

⁸ Jülicher served as Professor of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Marburg at the time Barth concluded his studies there. Also here, Barth is thus directly challenging the views of his teachers (even when it comes to exegetical matters). Jülicher would in turn write a highly critical review of Barth’s commentary, noting the supposed arbitrariness of his exegetical method (See TIETZ, 2021, pp. 37, 91).

opts for the *kairos* instead of the perhaps more credible *kurios* variant of the text is significant, especially in light of *Der Römerbrief*'s extensive time-eternity dialectic.⁹ By doing so he affirms that by standing apart from and under the judgement of eternity, time can come to bear witness to and even be “conditioned by” what Barth calls the moment of “divine disturbance”, which in its “No” also contains and opens up to the “Yes” of grace (BARTH, 1968, p. 457). This, he thinks, prompts us not only to recognise but to “plunge into the KRISIS of” our temporal reality, to “press onwards through its ebb and flow”, indeed, to “serve the time” in anticipation of moments that are “conditioned by the Spirit”, moments “filled with meaning”, moments asking for “decision” – *kairos* moments which, like the Christ-event, interrupts, judges, yet also brings forth the possibility of grace within the world of time.

After his commentary on the various positive ethical possibilities Paul mentions, Barth turns to what he describes as Paul's list of negative ethical possibilities, that is, “non-actions” which – within the realm of time – “are pregnant with parabolic significance, powerful in bearing witness, capable of concentrating attention upon the ‘Beyond’” (BARTH, 1968, p. 461). Examples of such “non-actions” include to not set our minds on “high things”, to not “be wise” in our own conceits, to not render “evil for evil”, and to not “avenge” ourselves (BARTH, 1968, p. 460–75). This is followed by a discussion of what he describes as the “great negative possibility” expressed in Romans 12:21, namely, to not be “overcome of evil, but [to] overcome evil with good” (BARTH, 1968, p. 475–92).¹⁰ He then finally turns to what he calls the “great positive possibility” expressed in Romans 13:8–14. This possibility, Barth shows, is “to love one another”, as Paul states in verse 8 (BARTH, 1968, p. 492). He writes: “We define love as the ‘Great POSITIVE Possibility’, because in it

⁹ As is often noted, Dietrich Bonhoeffer would follow Barth in this regard and also use this translation – with its various implications – in e.g. an early sermon he preached on Romans 12:11 in Barcelona in 1928. In this sermon, Bonhoeffer would say, “If you want to find eternity, then serve the time. If you want what is eternal, focus on what is temporal. If you want God, focus on the world”, thereby articulating ideas which would come to fruition in his later theology (BONHOEFFER, 2008, p. 528; VOSLOO, 2008, pp. 337–49).

¹⁰ With regards to this “great negative possibility”, Barth writes: “What more radical action can [humanity] perform than the action of turning back to the original root of ‘not-doing’ – and NOT be angry, NOT engage in an assault, NOT demolish?” (BARTH, 1968, p. 481).

there is brought to light the revolutionary aspect of all ethical behaviour ... [B]y love we do the ‘new’ by which the ‘old’ is overthrown” (BARTH, 1968, p. 493). For Barth, the “incomprehensible action of love” directed towards the neighbour (even in their “strange, irritating, distinct createdness and constitution”) is a “denial and demolition of the existing order which no revolt can bring about”, an “inversion of” and “protest against” the violent course of the world (BARTH, 1968, pp. 493, 496–7). As such, it is an action which – above all – asks for and brings forth a moment in time that points towards, expresses something of, and can therefore be seen to be qualified by the “eternal Moment” of God (BARTH, 1968, p. 497). “An unparalleled occasion” must, after all, “correspond with the unparalleled significance of the action of love”, Barth writes (BARTH, 1968, p. 497). For the “impossible possibility” of love to occur, there must be “a place, a time, an occasion” for such an act – exactly within our temporal reality. For “if we do not love within a succession of moments, we love not at all” (BARTH, 1968, p. 498). And this is why – Barth continues to say – Paul speaks in Romans 13:11 of “knowing the time”, again by making use of the word *kairos* (BARTH, 1968, p. 497). With this expression, he notes, Paul points to a recognition in faith of how certain moments – in being qualified by the “Moment” of divine disturbance – provide an occasion for the act of love to occur within the world of time. Barth (1968, p. 497–8) writes:

This is what is meant by – *knowing the time* ... Every moment in time bears within it the unborn secret of revelation, and every moment can thus be qualified ... [T]he known time – apprehended and comprehended in its transcendental significance – provides the occasion for the incomprehensible action of love. Wherever a moment in the past or in the future has been qualified by the *Now* of revelation that lies in the midst between the two, there is the opportunity for the occurrence of love – for its “living regiment” (Kierkegaard). And faith which sees the revelation is the fulfilling of the law ... When, therefore, we say that love, as the great positive possibility, has become a command, we presume this last and central relating of time to eternity – in fact, we presume that love is a miracle.

The overarching theme of *Der Römerbrief* is that God is God, and that the world is the world. This means that we continue to be bound to time,¹¹ a

¹¹ Barth highlights this reality with the following words: “Men are sold under time, its property. They lie like pebbles in the ‘stream of time’, and backwards and foreword the

reality qualitatively different to and judged by God's eternity, as Kierkegaard's maxim states. This is something Barth repeatedly affirms, also towards the end of his commentary on Romans 13, where he writes: "It is not time but Eternity that lies 'beyond'. Standing on the boundary of time, men are confronted by the overhanging, precipitous wall of God, by which all time and everything that is in time are dissolved" (BARTH, 1968, p. 500). Yet, in commenting on the "incomprehensible action of love", as seen in the quotation above, Barth shows that there are indeed also – amidst and because of this divine judgement on time – temporal moments which, in being disturbed by the "Now of revelation", begins to bear witness to and provide the occasion to act in accordance with that which lies beyond time; thus, moments marked by grace which ask for and find expression in love. For Barth, our calling is exactly then to discern, in faith, such moments, to come to "know" the times that are qualified by God's revelation and are, therefore, pregnant with the possibility to act in and embody something of God's love towards us. As he states: "To act knowing the 'Moment' in the moment ... to love, because we have been loved in Christ – this is the establishing of the great positive possibility in its totality; and in this all other ethical possibilities are comprehended" (BARTH, 1968, p. 501).

While Barth's views on time and temporality, as described above, would undergo various developments in the following years, especially as his mature Christology took shape,¹² this idea of "knowing the time", which in *Der Römerbrief* is explicitly linked to the act of love, would remain significant in and for his thought. One place where this is evident is in his theology of confession which would emerge in the decade after the second edition of his Romans commentary first appeared. Here, again, it would become important for Barth

ripples hurry over them. They do what they ought not; what they ought they do not" (BARTH, 1968, p. 499).

¹² Whereas Barth's focus in *Der Römerbrief* would principally be on the negative relation between time and eternity, it would gradually move to the positive relation between our time and God's time *in Christ*. See, for example, sections in the Church Dogmatics such as I/2 §14 The Time of Revelation; II/1 §31.3 The Eternity and Glory of God; and III/2 §47 Man in his time. For more on Barth's understanding of time in his later theology see CASSIDY, 2016; LANGDON, 2012; and – for a popular treatment of the topic – EDWARDS, 2022.

to “know the time” or then, to “discern the moment” – not only to act in love as is the case in *Der Römerbrief*, but also to speak in love, that is, to confess.

Time and the act of confession in view of *Der Römerbrief*

Directly upon finishing his second Romans commentary, Barth moved to Göttingen to take up a professorship in Reformed Theology, which would eventually be followed by a similar posting in Münster. This would lead him over the next few years, while continuing to pursue and develop the dialectical theology presented in *Der Römerbrief* (among other places in the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten*, which he founded with Edward Thurneysen and Friedrich Gogarten), to immerse himself in the theology of the Reformed tradition, also as espoused in its confessional documents. Barth would not only teach on these documents, but also write and deliver public lectures on them, especially focusing on their nature and function – which would frequently bring questions of time and temporality to the fore (see McCORMACK, 2003, pp. 54–9; SMIT, 2000, p. 68).

A hotly debated topic in these years was, for example, whether there can and should be a universal Reformed confession with continued authority across time and space. This was, after all, the case in the Lutheran Church whose Formula of Concord of 1577 claimed that the Augsburg Confession provided the correct interpretation of Scripture “for all posterity” (See LAUBER, 2020, p. 112). In an address to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1925 – a mere three years after his Romans Commentary appeared – Barth expressed some caution about such a confession. One of his reasons for this caution is that it could, in principle, elevate the said confession above time, that is, ascribe a certain timelessness to it. In accordance with the dialectics of *Der Römerbrief* (with its “infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity”), it is important for Barth to affirm that, even when our words attempt to speak about eternity, they continue to be bound to and conditioned by the world of time – they cannot hover above it. Reformed confessions are therefore documents which take shape in and are limited by

specific temporal moments, documents that should be viewed and considered in relation to their “earthly, historical actuality” (BARTH, 1962, p. 115). Barth notes that one implication of this is that, in the Reformed tradition, a confession is always provisional and fragmentary, something that might ask for revision – words that are spoken “until further action” (BARTH, 1962, p. 112; SMIT, 2000, p. 72). Or to use the language and logic of *Der Römerbrief*, it is something which, by being bound to and conditioned by time, continues to stand under eternity’s judgement. For Barth, it is important to recognise that the moment of confession is and remains a moment of *Krisis*, a moment where judgement takes place, a moment asking for repentance where the self with all its misdirected desires should firstly be offered as a “living sacrifice” unto God, to use Paul’s words in Romans 12.

However, as is clear from his 1925 address as well as from various later writings on confessions,¹³ Barth also believes – again following the logic and language of *Der Römerbrief* – that exactly by sensing and acknowledging how our temporal reality and the words it evokes stand under the judgement of God, moments in time can and do arise which provide the occasion not only to act, but also to speak in accordance with that which transcends time.¹⁴ Indeed, as our world of time is disturbed by God’s revelation, moments appear which – in being judged and qualified by “the eternal Moment” of God – compel us to “spontaneously” express and attest to God’s love and truth in the here and now, to offer a specific insight “for the moment” on account of, relative to, and “qualified by” the authority of God’s Word, especially amidst “theological lies and half-truths” (BARTH, 1962, pp. 112, 113, 114, 129; see NAUDÉ, 2010, p. 91). These moments, Barth believes, which give expression to something “essential for living and for living in the immediate situation” (BARTH, 1962, p. 132), cannot be premeditated or manufactured. While they may be preceded

¹³ See e.g. Barth, CD I/2, §20, “Authority under the Word” and CD III/4 §53 “Freedom Before God”.

¹⁴ As Barth (1962, p. 129) writes: “[I]f the Confession be genuine, it must come from the boundaries. It must be the Creed of those who are forsaken by God and who, as the forsaken, are visited by God; of those who are lost and who, as the lost, are rescued. It must be the Creed of those shipwrecked on the will of God who in the wreck are clinging to his will”.

by “long [and] earnest theological discussions” (BARTH, 1962, p. 130), they are ultimately freely presented – by the Spirit – to the Church as a moment of grace. When their hour strikes, the Church can only but recognise and heed their call, that is receive and respond in faith to this moment that is “given” (BARTH, 1962, p. 114). And this is then why, also when it comes to the matter of confession, it is important for Barth to “discern the moment”, or to “know the time”, to use Paul’s expression. As he would write in his *Church Dogmatics*: “[T]he confession demanded of us occurs in a particular situation [or then, moment] not created by us but to be perceived by us ... it occurs when it is given us to confess” (BARTH, 1961, p. 80).

This notion of “knowing the time” not only to act in love but also to speak in love, that is, to confess – which arguably has its foundations in the ideas Barth first presents in *Der Römerbrief* – would become highly significant in and for the church struggle in Germany. Following Hitler’s rise to power (which, among other things, led to the introduction of the so-called Aryan paragraph into the church), it was realised by Barth and others that the time for confession had arrived – that a *status confessionis* was at hand (see SMIT, 1984, p. 24; VOSLOO, 2020, p. 68). In recognising how time stood apart from and under the judgement of God (something the German Christians supporting Hitler seemingly failed to see), it could also be recognised how – in the here and now – it asked for and occasioned words which conveyed and witnessed to the Lordship of Christ, the Yes spoken in God’s No. Hence, by “knowing the time” and “discerning the moment” the Barmen Declaration of 1934 was born. This view of confession – and the way it gave rise to the Barmen Declaration – would also, then, directly influence and help shape the drafting of the Belhar Confessions in 1982 at the height of apartheid (a moment when time was again confused with eternity, and history with the kingdom of God).

This is clearly seen when reading the Confession’s Accompanying Letter which, already in its opening lines, declares: “We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation” (BELHAR CONFESSION AND ACCOMPANYING LETTER, p. 1; see also NAUDÉ, 2010, p. 2). In accordance with Barth’s theology of confession – as well as with ideas espoused in *Der Römerbrief*, as shown throughout this essay – the Confession

of Belhar also, therefore, emerges out of a realisation that a “moment of truth” had arrived (see CLOETE; SMIT, 1984). Because time stands apart from and under the judgement of God (a reality which also pertains to those making the confession, as seen throughout the Accompanying Letter),¹⁵ time can – in this moment – ask for and occasion words which convey and witness to the unity, justice, and reconciliation which belong to and are bestowed on us by God in Christ. In “knowing the time”, true confession can thus take place, which for Belhar would indeed involve a speaking in – and for the sake of – love.¹⁶

As we commemorate the centenary of the second edition of Barth's Romans commentary, it becomes clear that it too is a text which came into being in – and therefore belongs to – a specific moment in time. Barth himself was fully cognisant of this fact as seen, for example, in the preface to the English translation of the commentary which appeared in 1932, where he had the following to say: “I beg my English readers to remember that this book was written eleven ... years ago. When I first wrote it ... it required only a little imagination for me to hear the sound of the guns booming away in the north ... [When] I look back at the book, it seems to have been written by another man to meet a situation belonging to a past epoch” (BARTH, 1968, pp. v–vi). Yet, as Barth also then continues to say, what *Der Römerbrief* did do – in its specific situatedness – is lay the foundation for much of his own and others' theological work that would follow. It was the “*beginning* of a development”

¹⁵ The following words and formulations from the Accompanying Letter are especially illuminating in this regard: “Along with many, we confess our guilt ...”; “Being fully aware of the risks in taking this step ...”; “[W]e are aware that no other motives or convictions, however valid they may be, may give us the right to confess in this way”; “[W]e know that our deepest intentions may be judged at their true value only by him before whom all is revealed”; “Our earnest desire is to lay no false stumbling blocks in the way ...”; “[T]his confession must be seen as a call to a continuous process of soul-searching together, a joint wrestling with the issues, and a readiness to repent in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world”; “It is certainly not intended as an act of self-justification ...”. See BELHAR CONFESSIO AND ACCOMPANYING LETTER, pp. 1–2.

¹⁶ Dirkie Smit (1984, p. 45) writes: “The acceptance of the draft confession was therefore simultaneously a deed of love and of obedience. For the sake of love and the invitation to everyone concerned, the DR Mission Church did not want to bring any confusion, unilateralism, break down any potential conversation, cause ‘short-circuits’ and false divisions’ (accompanying letter), or erect ‘false boundaries’”.

(BARTH, 1968, p. vi). This essay has shown that this is especially true when it comes to Barth's view of temporality in *Der Römerbrief*. By newly asserting Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity", Barth could show how – because time stands apart from and under the judgement of eternity – it can also, by God's grace, present us with the opportunity to act and speak in love. This asks of us – while living within the realm of time – to "know the time", to "discern the moment", an idea which would be of vital importance for the Barmen Declaration and the Belhar Confession, and can arguably also be seen to be of vital importance for us today, giving the crises marking our time.

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