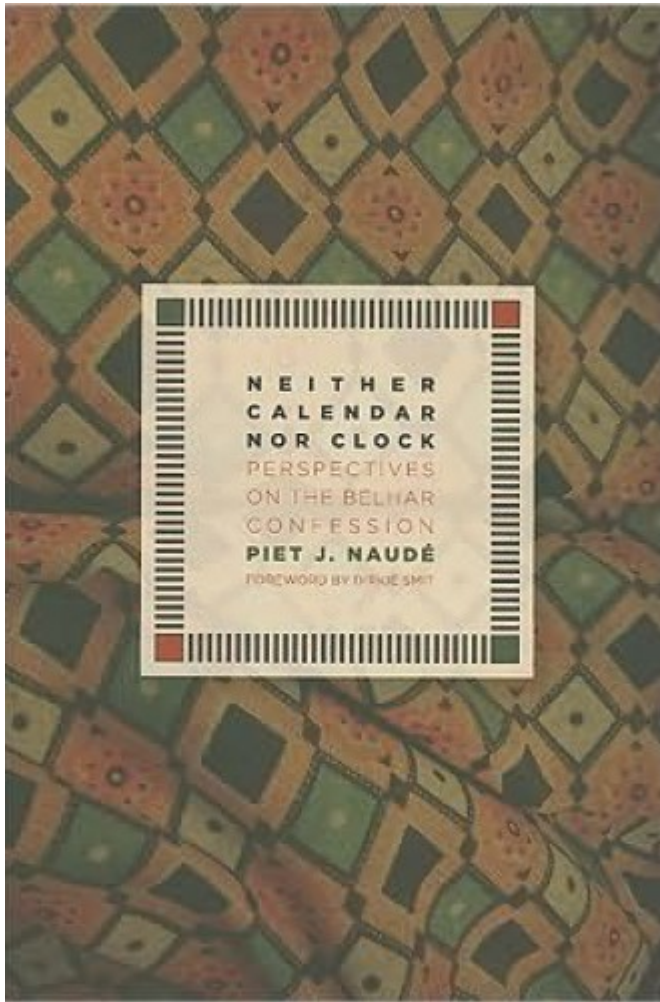


Neither Calendar nor Clock, by Piet J. Naudé

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [January 11, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Neither Calendar nor Clock

By Piet J. Naudé
Eerdmans

South Africa became a full democracy with the April 1994 vote to end apartheid. In the long struggle that brought about that transformative decision, parts of the church played a major role, even as other parts vigorously colluded with the apartheid regime.

Few actions in that struggle were more important or more dramatically compelling than the Belhar Confession, a historic statement that was first adopted in draft form in 1982 and was fully adopted as a normative confession by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church ("the so-called colored church") in 1986.

Like every serious confession, this one is located specifically. It was named for a "so-called colored suburb in Cape Town," a community formed as a result of the Group Act of 1950, which dispossessed "nonwhites" and relocated them in segregated townships. With the name Belhar, the confession clearly was intended to "speak from the margins and represented both political and ecclesial schism." The confession grew from and fully articulates the profound church struggle in South Africa, which was a microcosm of the political struggle.

Piet Naudé offers a full exposition of the confession, locating it in context and making clear why attention must still be paid to it. The confession and Naudé's exposition are deeply informed by Karl Barth, the author and moving spirit of the Nazi-era Barmen Declaration, which Belhar echoes in important ways. Indeed, the title of Naudé's book comes from Barth, who asserted that confession arises on no one's schedule: "Confession is a free action. How could it be otherwise? Like the holy day, it is related to God's free grace. . . . Confession is bound to neither calendar nor clock." God's freedom erupted in the Belhar Confession, which drew the church struggle—and the struggle in society—into the arena of God's will and God's freedom.

The confession consists of five articles, together with extended scriptural support. The first article affirms in crisp fashion faith in the triune God, who cares for the church by word and by Spirit. The fifth article affirms, in doxological formulation, that "Jesus is Lord," with praise for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Sandwiched between these two affirmations, the second, third and fourth articles focus specifically on the church struggle that is at issue. They do not name adversaries but simply tell the evangelical truth about the nature and mission of the church. Article 2 insists that God wills the visible unity of the church, a unity that is

given in God's freedom. Article 3 affirms that the church's task is societal reconciliation, and article 4 attests to God's resolve for justice, in which the church has a major role to play. The accents on unity, reconciliation and justice join issue with the realities of South African apartheid society.

Naudé accents the fact that in the middle articles each affirmation is accompanied by a specific rejection: "Therefore, we reject . . ." He shows that these negative counterpoints can be framed and understood according to Barth's insistence that every yes of a confession must correspond with a no:

With the Yes expressed in it, i.e., the scriptural exegesis and doctrine positively stated in it, a definite No is also said to the counter-doctrine which is its cause, the latter being rejected as an expression of the Church's unity and its churchly status denied. If this was not its intention, what intention could it have? Without the No the Yes would obviously not be a Yes, but a Yes and No.

Belhar rejects "any doctrine which absolutizes either natural diversity [race] or the sinful separation of people" and that thus breaks the visible and active unity of the church. It rejects "any doctrine which . . . sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour," and it rejects "any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice."

Naudé's commentary is enormously helpful for considering the theological homework that generated apartheid's false doctrinal practices and for highlighting the continuing contemporaneity of the confession, even beyond the specific issues of South Africa.

The preparatory work that eventuated in and justified a segregated church is found in the writings of theologians a century earlier that confused ecclesial and ethnic matters so that the church could be organized as a *Volk*. This is especially seen in the important work of Abraham Kuyper. This ethnic perspective could accept a unified church in theory as long as the church was not visibly unified; thus the church could easily be organized along ethnic lines.

In a greatly different situation—the high days of the church growth movement—the compelling argument was that churches would grow when people could be with "their own kind" in homogeneous congregations. The principle can apply to class and ideology as well as race. Even now the church is busy sorting itself out into red and blue in a way that does not require visible engagement with each other. Over a long

period, such patterns could overcome the inclusive requirement of a faithful church. The confession challenges and calls out these easy and obvious ways to organize church reality.

In discussing the contemporary significance of the Belhar Confession, Naudé probes the way in which it continues to address "slavery, colonialism, political misrule, and globalization" on a continent that has "a deadly combination of dehumanization and marginalization" in the service of "rampant individualism and crass materialism." As concerns church unity, he writes that the faithful church is "saturated with otherness" and can never be arranged according to "natural diversity." Concerning reconciliation, Naudé mentions the issue of "gender bias" and the reality of "gendered truth," with reference to the status of women and especially of gays and lesbians. Although some Calvinists are dismayed that gays should appeal to Belhar, Naudé shows how that appeal is legitimate and faithful to the confession. Concerning justice, Naudé draws inferences regarding economic issues and the poor. Thus the confession engages with the most disputatious issues and insists that gospel faith has a vigorous say on such matters, precisely because they are at the center of the missional vocation of the visible church.

It may well be that writing confessions is a peculiarly Calvinist enterprise. I submit, however, that others well beyond the Calvinist tradition must be attentive to this document, and therefore this book. It is hard to imagine, in our compromised, therapeutic church in the West (and especially in the U.S.), that there could be a moment of truth that would place the church actively in a situation of *status confessionis*. Such a development is difficult to imagine because such an act of confessing is the drawing of a life-or-death line for the church. But one never knows. Barth wrote of confession: "When its hour comes, it may and must occur." It requires little imagination to see that the pathologies of greed and violence that pervade society and that divide the church might evoke such demanding work on the church's part. Clearly it will not do to settle for the commonplace of treating the church as a voluntary association when it is in truth the missional body of Christ in the world.

Flabby, careless ecclesial thinking is risky because it permits the church to use its energy and its resources for casual civil wars that greatly endanger it. Insofar as the church is mandated to seek unity, reconciliation and justice, such indifference is a grave matter for us all. I find that Naudé's exposition requires me to think again, and yet again. I have no doubt that many readers will find in this statement much to

ponder and eventually much to decide.