This paper wishes to go into the heart of a need for a public ecclesiology. Is it really necessary and important for Christians and the church to have an essential ever-present public witness in society? Is our Christian identity necessarily linked to the public square? Is a public ecclesiology essential for our Christian identity? In short, we are interested in the terms and conditions of our Christian identity in the public square.

These questions are of the utmost importance for the current theological debate in post-apartheid South Africa. The founding of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology (hereafter referred to as the BNC) in 2001 at the University of Stellenbosch illustrates how serious these questions are taken in the South African context. To stimulate further thought and discussion on the matter, we suggest, therefore, setting up a dialogue in this paper between the BNC and Karl Barth’s theological framework. For instance, we know that in the past Barth’s political theology was used by some of the anti-apartheid theologians in their struggle against apartheid,¹ which makes one wonder whether, and to what extent, Barth’s first decade of post-World War II theology might contribute to theology in the public domain of post-apartheid South African society.

Thus, we shall first start by looking closer into the particular nature and extent of Barth as a public theologian in that particular timeframe. Thereafter, we shall shift our reflection towards the theological framework of the BNC. Finally, after comparing these two theological frameworks to each other, we shall conclude our discussion with some critical

remarks on the current efforts towards a public ecclesiology for Christian identity in the public square of post-apartheid South Africa.

IN SEARCH OF KARL BARTH’S ‘PUBLIC’ THEOLOGY: READING BARTH IN THE POST-WORLD WAR II YEARS OF 1945–1956

There are several reasons why we specifically turn our attention towards Karl Barth’s first decade of post-World War II theology. We know that Barth had a lively interest in public life. He is known for the famous one-liner that one is suppose to read the Bible in tandem with the daily newspaper. Moreover, Barth’s influence was especially felt during the time of apartheid regarding the formation of most of the confessional theologians. As it was his earlier theology in the struggle and resistance context of the 1930s in Germany that was of potent relevancy for the South African context during the time of apartheid, we are curious about what significance Barth’s post-war theology might have as a possible impetus with regard to the future of the BNC in post-apartheid South Africa.

There is much that comes to the fore regarding the public intention of Barth’s theology in the post-war context. Looking into various, different, distinctive elements of his theology in this period, we see that all the main elements inherently have a driving force towards and into the public domain. Investigations with regard to elements concerning ‘Germany’s reconstruction’ and ‘The East–West Drama’ show Barth’s public interest towards political and socio-economic issues. Although he clearly distinguishes between the divine and secular realms, he does it in such a way that negates any stark separation between the two. In fact, he states the impossibility thereof because both spheres have at their core Jesus Christ. Characteristically, he often refers to the ‘joint responsibility’ the Christian community has towards the secular realm. More importantly is how subjacent it is in his more dogmatical writings with the particular assumption in the post-war context that if we

---

2 See, Villa-Vicencio (ed.), On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa.
4 Barth, Against the stream, 25. See also Barth’s “The Christian Message in Europe Today,” Against the Stream, 170, in which he realizes that the emergence of communism in the east was actually telling western Europe something essential about themselves.