TO STAND WHERE GOD STANDS: REFLECTIONS ON THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR AFTER 25 YEARS

Allan Boesak
Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Abstract

The Confession of Belhar was first adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1982, and then formally accepted as a fourth confession in 1986. Since then it has become the bedrock of theological reference and reflection as well as a salient point of theological identity within the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. It has not escaped controversy, and today has become quite the most visible point of conflagration in the tortuous process of reunification of the Dutch Reformed Church family. Over the past twenty-five years,, the Confession of Belhar has been accepted as the formal confession of a number of churches within the Reformed family world wide, is seriously being studied as an important theological contribution to the thinking of the ecumenical church and significantly informs such documents as the Accra Confession, adopted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches' General Council in Accra, Ghana, 2004. This article, first presented in a lecture series, offers historical and theological reflections on the confession. It endeavours to show the relevance of the confession in the different contexts into which it came into being and how those contexts are challenged by the confession. It looks at the theological understanding upon which the confession rests, and argues that it remains of great relevance to and theological importance for the churches in South Africa as well as world wide, and is an absolute necessity for the theological integrity of the church unification process.

1 A RARE AND PRECIOUS OCCURRENCE

Twenty-five years ago, the church in which I serve, the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (now the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa), adopted a new confession known as the Confession of Belhar, named after the "coloured" township where the synod was held. It was the first confession of faith to be formulated in almost 300 years within the Reformed family of churches and the first to come from a church in Africa in modern times.[1] It was a rare and precious occurrence, and one that has impacted significantly on the theological landscape in South Africa and elsewhere. It changed the life of especially the churches in the Reformed family, and increasingly, it emerges now, represents a parting of the ways. What follows is narrative analysis and theological reflection on the meaning of this document for the life of the church in South Africa and beyond.

Like all true confessions, Belhar was born out of the hearts of the faithful, and into a situation of deep despair and uncertainty, of trial and tribulation, of crisis and testing, a time in which the fundamental tenets of the gospel and the heart of our faith were under so severe a threat that no mere religious statement or even a theological declaration, no anxious repetition of doctrinal certitudes would suffice: the church could only turn to the rare and radical act of confession to proclaim the gospel anew. It was a moment of truth and of *kairos,* of being overpowered by the Word of God and being empowered by the Spirit of God. It arose in a specific situation, but like all true confessions, because of its rootedness in the Scriptures, it spoke of a universal reality. Its necessity was parochial, its application was ecumenical. The gospel was at stake, our very lives were at risk and the testimony of the church was in jeopardy. We could only call upon the One who is the source of it all. Hence the Confession spoke and still speaks to the human situation everywhere.

Like all true confessions, the Confession of Belhar seeks neither to attack nor to defend, but to uphold and affirm. It does not condemn or rationalise, but testifies and proclaims. Like all true confessions, it responds to heresy, that wilful and deliberate turning of the truth away from the light of the gospel into the shadow of human distortion and satisfaction. The rediscovery and recognition of that truth is not a moment of triumphalist gloating, but rather of profound and humble joy: the truth has found, recovered, and reclaimed *us*. We are not the light; the light illumines and leads us. Hence we do not *announce,* we

proclaim; we do not pontificate, we *confess.* For that reason, joy is the most visible, sustained and enduring trait of the confession.

That joy reverberates vibrantly throughout the Confession of Belhar. From the first sentence, "We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church by God's Word and Spirit, as God has done since the beginning of the world and will do so to the end" to the last, "To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be the honour and the glory for ever and ever!" Joyfully it claims with all the saints the affirmation of the unity of God's people as gift and obligation, the message of reconciliation God has entrusted to the church and the truth that through Jesus Christ we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, called to be peacemakers. It celebrates the good news that God is a God who brings true justice amongst humankind and that the church as the possession of God must stand where God stands, against all injustice and with the wronged and the powerless against the powerful. It sings joyfully that we are called to confess all these things not through earthly power, arrogance or recklessness, but in obedience to Jesus Christ, even though doing so may provoke the wrath of earthly authorities and human laws, because above all we know: Jesus is Lord.

Belhar, then as now, proclaims the victory of Christ, and through him ours, over the power of sin and death, fear and powerlessness. We shall no longer be afraid.

2 FROM AMONGST THE POOR AND THE DOWNTRODDEN

To understand the power of this confession and the reason for our joy, one must understand something of the situation into which the Confession of Belhar was born. Not unlike the crises that gave birth to some of the ancient Reformed confessions, the *Confessio Scotica* for instance, or the *Confessio Belgica,* the crisis which moved us to the moment of confession was both political and spiritual. South Africa was then in the grip of the apartheid system, a system of racial oppression, domination and economic exploitation that held sway over every area of our lives. It dehumanised black people while according an idolatrous status to whites. Skin colour determined everything: from education to employment, from the courts of law to the definition of human dignity. It caused immense suffering amongst millions. It was a system inherently violent and indescribably

destructive, and required ever more draconian laws and growing physical violence to keep it in place. The impact of these laws, the wide range of powers given to the police, security apparatus and the military, and sequential states of emergency proclaimed by the government arguably made the 1980s the darkest period of the apartheid era. However, at the same time it called forth the strongest and most persistent resistance to the system.[2]

But South Africa was not the only place in the world where racist oppression, social discrimination and economic exploitation were the daily bread of the poor and defenceless. What made our situation unique was the role of the Christian church, not just in creating an openness to racial prejudice, or in justifying racial prejudice after the fact, but in the actual shaping of policy based on racial prejudice and oppression. The policy of apartheid was in its essence the legacy of English colonial rule, and although it gives none of us any comfort, it is only fair always to remind ourselves that the ideology and practises of racial superiority were not Afrikaner inventions. It was, however, also the logical political outcome of the so-called "mission policy" of the Dutch Reformed Church.[3] But it was more than that. It was presented to both white and black people as an all-embracing, soteriologically-loaded, God-given solution to what was seen as "the race problem". It was not just willy-nilly presented as God's will; there was a complete theological rationale, a comprehensive "apartheid theology" for its biblical, moral and theological justification. As such it became more than just a political ideology and system or a socio-economic construct. It became in fact a pseudo-gospel, challenging and replacing the truth and the authority of the true gospel in our personal lives, in the life of the church as well as in the corporate life of the nation.

The church of which I am now specifically speaking is the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa. That church was (and to a large extent still is) divided on the basis of race and skin colour. This is not to say that other churches did not, overtly or covertly, support apartheid.[4] That fact is hardly contested. But this is the church that came with the colonisation of South Africa, into which the first natives and the slaves who became Christians were baptised, and became members.

In time this church increasingly became the church of the colonist and slave owner, the church of the white, "European Christian" (as distinct from the "heathen Christian") whose superior

position in the political and socio-economic hierarchy of colonial society had to be reflected in the church. As society became more and more conscious of race, skin colour and social status, there was less and less room for those who were not white, and who were considered "heathen" even though they confessed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. As political and economic tensions arose, Christian fellowship withered. The strains of power and powerlessness, of enforced superiority and inferiority, of ownership and being owned, could no longer be hidden. As white Christians laid more and more claim to land, destroyed whole communities and people, slaves and native people reacted contradictorily, as can be expected under such circumstances. Some began to reassert ownership of their land and to demand recognition of their human dignity, other communities and individuals simply began to fall apart.

In the end, for those in the community of the church, the contradictions proved too much. The same Bible that proclaimed the childhood of God justified the subjugation and ownership of human souls. The bondage of slavery and the bonds of Christian love could not live side by side. The "slave-holding, the woman-whipping, the mind-darkening, the soul-destroying religion" in the words of Frederick Douglass,[5] could not share the same baptism, break the same bread and drink of the same cup at the Lord's table, nor make the same confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, with those who sought a religion which is "first pure, then peaceable, then gentle, without partiality and without hypocrisy …" Could one rape a woman on Friday, whip a man to death or lynch him on Saturday because he sought his freedom, and on Sunday be witness to the baptism of his child and celebrate a oneness in Christ? Could the oppressor listen to the psalms that sang of the God who will "protect the stranger and support the downtrodden, crush the oppressor" while standing next to the oppressed who are promised freedom, who lifted their heads high because they would be "lifted up from the dust of the earth"? Could the message of Jesus be heard while the cries from the slave lodge across the street could not be drowned out?

By the middle of the 19th century these contradictions, embodied as they were in the very bodies and voices of the slaves and former slaves, simply became unbearable. And since the church could not ignore them nor deny their existence, it sought to remove their presence. The church found it easier, even though it knew and acknowledged that what the gospel demanded was different, first to

opt for separate baptisms and a separated communion, then for separate worship services altogether, then finally for separate, race-based church formations. Now the justification for slavery or slave-like conditions could be preached without the accusing presence of those whose woundedness constituted society's wealth. Now communion could be served without the broken body of Christ reminding congregants of the broken bodies of "chastised" slaves. Now baptism would no longer be a reminder that all were, in equal measure, sinners before God, and that, through the redeeming grace of God, all belong to Christ. Now the "slave catechism" would be less embarrassing, and slaves could be taught that even though their lot was unjust, dismal and undeserved, and that the things that seemed unbearable to them were the will of God for their own good; and that indeed, if they had remained in their home countries they would never have heard of the saving grace of their Lord and on dying would have been lost forever.[6]

The rationalisations abound: racial separation was "preferred" by the "heathen Christians"; it would be better for the "mission" of the church, it was "the more practical way", and as formulated in an official decision of 1857, the church did it to accommodate "the weakness of some" (white members). This decision stands as the crucial moment in the history of the church in South Africa. Henceforth not faith in Jesus Christ alone, but race, culture and pigmentation would begin to define membership of the church. This moment is, in the words of church historian Chris Loff, "the birth of a heresy".[7] The painful consequences of that decision have been with us for 150 years now. But stripped of all pretence, this fateful decision essentially provided a haven for a conscience that would not bend to the will of Christ. I have dwelt somewhat longer on this particular historical context, for it is my belief that this history is indeed the birth of the heresy against which the Dutch Reformed Mission Church proclaimed its *status confessionis* more than a century later.

But history is more than the record of events and facts. History is also about the living memory and the continuing story of the people. The people of whom British scientist Robert Knox asked, "What signify these races to us? Who cares particularly for the Negro, or the Hottentot, or the Kaffir? … Destined by the nature of their race to run, like animals, a certain limited course of existence, it matters little how their extinction is brought about",[8] were our ancestors. Bereft of land, dignity and everything they held dear, they sought and

found comfort and strength in the gospel even if, as the blind African poet and catechist John Ntsikana confessed in 1884, that gospel was a "fabulous ghost" they sought to embrace in vain.[9] Their struggles with the presence of evil and the absence of God are largely unknown. Neither have we, in contrast to African-Americans, much of a record of how they felt when they heard those slave-holding preachers tell them about the God of Jesus Christ or when they were told that they were no longer welcome in the church where they had learned to know their Lord.

But the gospel always asserts itself. It might be manipulated and distorted, but its truth cannot be denied. It might be perverted, but it cannot be buried. Crushed to earth, that truth shall rise again. Here and there, almost as lost echoes down the dongas and valleys of our history, and in the stories handed down through the generations, there is witness of those who found in the words of the prophets and the message of Jesus the power of the gospel, that Word of life that cannot be bound, that empowers and provides for justice and freedom, for dignity and peace. They spoke, and in their speech we, their children and their children's children, discovered the continuity with the prophets and Jesus of Nazareth. Carried and sustained by their faith, we walked the wilderness and drank the water from the angel's hand with Hagar; we climbed to the mountain top with Moses and slept under the broom tree with Elijah. We cried in the Temple with Hannah and wept with Elisha for the coming destruction. Our voices rose with that of the psalmist, "How long Lord?" and with Isaiah and Jeremiah we heard, and believed, the promise of salvation and restoration. With Mary we sang the Magnificat and with Jesus we suffered on a cross made by human hands. In prison, we learned to sing with Paul and Silas, and with the ancient church we discovered that there is no power in heaven or on earth, not even death, that can separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ: Jesus is Lord.

But we must consider further that the historical contexts of slavery and apartheid are not the only contexts within which the Confession of Belhar speaks powerfully. The confession lives by the affirmation that concludes Article One, which deals with the unity of the church, namely that "true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church". This affirmation, I believe, has much more radical consequences than might hitherto have been admitted to, perhaps because the confession is too readily read as a document

responding to a “racial” situation. Notice that the “forced separation of people on the grounds of race or colour” is mentioned for the first time and only in Article Three which speaks to the “enforced separation of people on a racial basis” and in the “rejection” which follows. The “true faith in Jesus Christ” affirmation is related first to the rejection of any absolutisation of “either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people” that “hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church”, and next to the kind of belief that professes that genuine spiritual unity is truly being maintained “in the bond of peace whilst believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation”.

This goes far beyond the issue of race. In my view this addresses quite profoundly the historical and actual contexts of oppression, rejection and exploitation of both gay persons and women. This begins with the recognition that Belhar’s understanding of the diversity mentioned above is a holistic, positive, enriching one, as opposed to ane understanding of “diversity” that is negative and therefore leads to “natural” separation that should be enforced by law and then sacralised by the church. Belhar rejects the sinful absolutisation which aims to separate, oppress and render some inferior, but expressly celebrates the diversity that affirms humanity and welcomes it as a gift from God for the life of the church. Belhar embraces that enriching diversity that unites and builds the church. In this regard, the rejection of gay persons or the degradation of women as if their “true faith in Jesus Christ” is not enough but is in reality subjected to some form of human approval and something “extra”, is part of the sinful “doctrine” Belhar rejects. Not only is their rejection a sin, but, according to the confession it is also a sin to refuse “earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a *priceless gift”.* This strong language is inclusive. All manifestations of the sinfulness that “breaks the visible unity”, “despairs of reconciliation”, causes “alienation from one another”, and blesses the “enforced separation of people” on whatever grounds are as applicable to gay persons and women as they are to the realities of racial oppression.

Moreover, the whole of Article Four, which deals with God as the “One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth”, speaks to the situation of gay persons and women. In their woundedness, their vulnerability, the enmity of many in society and the rejection of their true and full humanity, women and gay persons

have an unalienable right to call upon the God "who in a special way (is) the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged." Their suffering is no less than the suffering of widows and the orphans and it is in regard to their right to justice that God "wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right." Therefore, in the struggle for the recognition of the right of gay persons and women to full humanity, the church too must learn "to stand where God stands", and to witness and strive against "any form of injustice" perpetrated against these members of the body of Christ so that "justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream".

As the church seeks to follow Christ in the struggle for justice for the poor and those who are discriminated against, so the church must follow Christ in this matter. This not only means that the church ought to support, uphold and implement those rights afforded women and gay persons in the Constitution of South Africa in the public square, but it ought to seek actively to safeguard and promote those rights within its own structures, its preaching and living, its worship and witness. Rejecting, as Belhar enjoins us, "any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel", means by the same token, or better still, by the same conviction, rejection of any form of oppression of women, or any form of homophobia, blatant or subtle.

This is the way in which the inclusiveness of the Confession of Belhar reflects the inclusiveness of the embrace of God. "We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the church is called to confess and do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence. Jesus is Lord".

And so, from amongst the poor and oppressed, the despised and the voiceless, the dejected and downtrodden, came the Confession of Belhar, and this is, perhaps, it's most eminent, and to some, it's most offensive characteristic. In other words, and in the unguarded, heated moments of debate we see this emerging more and more, the real reason for the rejection of Belhar is the fact that it is the voice of those who had no voice, who, in fact, had no right to speak; the least of those whom God should have chosen to speak prophetically to the powerful. That those with no name in the streets could dare to name the Name of God in the sanctuary as well as in

the public square, not just to their "own people" in their ordained separated spaces, but to the world church – that seems to be too much. Its birthplace was not the palaces of the privileged or the high-steepled, stain glass-windowed sanctuaries of white power. It gave voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless. Nor was it the child of esoteric academic debate; it emerged from the struggles of ordinary people living in the presence of evil and with the promises of God and it spoke with the eloquence of faith. It was not commissioned by the powerful to legitimise earthly power. It places earthly power under the critique of heaven and earth: of the outraged God and the suffering people. In its words pulsates a life, lived not under the protection of the throne but in the shadow of the cross. In it one will not find the arrogance of certitude; it is the trembling steadfastness of those who walk by faith, not by sight. In essence, this is what those who embrace the Confession of Belhar embrace, and this is what they share with those who accept the confession as their own. The point I am making is not so much socio-economical or political – it is profoundly theological. In this sense Belhar is a unique representation of God's identification with the poor, the voiceless and the dispossessed. Embracing it both reveals and preserves the integrity of the process of re-unification with which the Dutch Reformed Church family is now engaged. In this embrace lies not so much correction as redemption.

3 BENDING OUR WILL TO THE MIND OF CHRIST

Belhar does not see the need to repeat the deep doctrinal truths inherited from the ancient church, and some use that to argue that Belhar is therefore not "a true confession". That, however, is a false argument. There are some revered confessions in the Christian tradition that are not at all solely concerned with doctrinal matters. Besides, the first known confession of the Christian church, "Jesus is Lord", was made not as a doctrinal statement, but as living testimony against an idolatrous state and the claims of divinity of the Roman Caesars. The commitment of those at Belhar to these truths has never wavered. That Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God was not the issue; rather the question was: how seriously do we take God's incarnate presence in Jesus Christ? We were called to revisit, for our time again and anew, the question Jesus had asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29), so well understood and asked

again by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a time likewise filled with pain, suffering and vexing contradictions: “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?”[10] That is the question with which we grappled. For what value does it have formally to confess Jesus as the Christ when the church loses its way on the moral, socio-economic and political consequences of the gospel, and even while confessing Christ the church makes common cause with the destructive powers of the world? So, too, what does it mean when the doctrine is piously repeated, but the life of the church, even as it affirms the doctrine, denies the message and the very life of Jesus?

We struggled with our Christian identity: what did it mean to be Christian when one of the most systematically exploitative and oppressive systems of the twentieth century, was being proudly claimed by the Christian church as its own?[11] What did it mean when, in blind and sinful submission to a race-obsessed society, race and skin colour, rather than faith in Jesus Christ alone, was made the criterion of membership of the church? The response was a confession that “true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of (the) church”.

This was a time when the divinity of Jesus was not denied, but the humanity of the poor was, and hence the good news for the poor that Jesus brought. The continued impoverishment of the poor was the result of deliberate policy and the church, rather than seeking the justice that rolls down like waters, and the righteousness that flows like a mighty stream, chose to benefit from the exploitation of the poor and justified their plight as God’s will. In such a situation we are called to confess, boldly and publicly, “that God has revealed Godself as the One who brings justice and true peace amongst humankind, that in a word full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the poor, the destitute and the wronged; that the church must therefore stand where God stands: with the wronged and against any and all forms of injustice”.

The church affirmed Christ as mediator, but preached the irreconcilability of people on the basis of race and culture and skin colour. The church administered the sacraments, but allowed racist prejudices to disempower the efficacy of the sacraments. The church affirmed the unity of the church, but insisted on its division on the basis of race. The church supported missions, but rejected the reciprocity of all-transcending love that should characterise the life of the followers of Jesus. So, we are called to confess that

> we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name …"

The church confessed the sinfulness of all humankind, but in effect made an idolatry of racial identity and denied the equality of all before God that that same confession expressed. It rebuilt the walls of enmity that Christ has broken down with a deliberate political and theological purposefulness that belied the affirmation of that central biblical truth. When this happened we were called to confess that

> Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another, that that unity is therefore both gift and obligation for the church of Jesus Christ … and that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, hatred and enmity between people and groups is a sin which Christ has already conquered.

The church professed its dependence upon the triune God, but in reality relied on, and made common cause with worldly power, political privileges, economic exploitation and military might so that the church itself became a powerful force in the justification and safeguarding of the system and of its own power, privilege and survival. Hence we could not but confess that in standing where God stands, "the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others".

Should some seek to hide behind the sinfulness of humankind and the brokenness of the world, Belhar in turn reminds them that "God's life-giving Word and Spirit have conquered the powers of sin and death" and so made us all conquerors through Jesus Christ, and that God's life-giving Word and Spirit "enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world". And should we be reminded of the wrath of the state, the relentlessness of its violence, the wide range of its powers and the reach of its security apparatus, we in turn remind ourselves that "we believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the

church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering may be the consequence." In this Belhar does no more, but no less than echo the *Confessio Scotica* which calls upon Reformed Christians to "save the lives of the innocent, to repress tyranny, to defend the oppressed". And then we said: "Jesus is Lord."

I should make one or two more important remarks in this regard. As we made this confession, *even as we spoke,* many of us had been imprisoned without charge; many under false charges. Lives had been threatened, lost and otherwise destroyed. Many had disappeared. Our youth were on the streets of the nation in flaming protest, risking their lives every day in clashes with police and the army. The casualties numbered in the thousands. Under the most draconian of laws security police had free reign to harass and torture hundreds of those who resisted. Parents saw their children flee without hope of ever seeing them again. Years later the Truth and Reconciliation Commission would uncover small parts of the realities we lived with then. We lived in daily fear of our lives. Trust in each other was destroyed: many were bought, or coerced into becoming spies for the police. Enmity, hatred, distrust and fear were the most natural of responses. Our country was becoming less and less our mother and more and more our grave.

Yet in the midst of all this, the Confession of Belhar, constantly giving account of the hope that is within us, and having grounded itself in the Word, the tradition and faith of the ancient church, calls first and foremost upon Christ's work of reconciliation, proclaiming to those who suffer oppression not to be tempted by hatred, enmity and self-justifying revenge but to remember "that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another, (since) we share the one faith …" In South Africa at the time, whites and blacks were fearsome and fearful enemies. In politics, talk of reconciliation was considered premature, if not traitorous. Hatred was natural, enmity was a virtue. And even though most of our members were crucially engaged in the struggle for liberation, it was not the call of politics that dictated our conduct, but the call of the gospel. The reality of our oneness in Christ overrode the political necessity to see the other as an enemy, even if there was blood on the streets. Here popularity with our struggling masses was not the issue, our obligation to Christ was.

Note as well that despite all this, the confession never once mentions the word “apartheid”, for the issue never was apartheid, but justice, unity, reconciliation, the integrity of the gospel, the faith of the church and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Focusing on apartheid would have fatally moved the focus from Christ and would, both spatially and historically, have parochialised the confession beyond redemption. It is important to remember that those who stood up that day in solemn acceptance of the confession included whites as well as blacks, and conversely, those who did not also included both white and black. Those whites who stood up that day did not just come from nowhere. They stood there because that is where they had been standing all along, namely, where God stands. It never really was about race and pigmentation; it was always about faith and commitment and conviction. In the cauldron of white/black polarisation this was and still is an amazing testimony to true non-racialism, but it was more: it was a testimony to reconciliation and the oneness of the church so central to Belhar. Then, as now, those who were there were not driven by political correctness. They were, as they still are, driven by the love of Christ and their passion for unity, reconciliation and justice. For that reason it is utterly facetious, if not disingenuous in the extreme to argue that the rejection of Belhar by some black people is an invalidation of the confession.

But note something else: the obligation of worship, reconciliation, unity and standing with the poor is firstly directed at those who confess, and only in second instance at those who might listen. The faith Belhar espouses is not a self-justifying faith; it is a self-critical faith. Furthermore, those who are called to confess are also called to obedience. The act of confession is an act of commitment: it allows for no arrogance, disengagement or sense of spiritual superiority. And it is this humble submission to the Word of God, this bending of our mind and will to the obedience of Christ that strengthens and emboldens us to say what follows next: “Therefore, we reject …”

That act of rejection does not mean the spiritual elimination of a person or group; far from it. The rejection does not stand on its own; it is embedded in the obligation to love, forgive and reconcile. Without this obligation it is invalidated. We must have, said John Calvin in his *Institutes*, the humility to realise that we stand and are upheld by God alone, that “naked and empty-handed we flee to his mercy, repose entirely in it, hide deep within it, and seize upon it alone for

righteousness and merit".[12] In Jesus Christ, he goes on, God's face shines in perfect grace and gentleness, even upon those who profane God's name, betray God's trust, and dishonour our baptism.

It is in that spirit that Belhar was written, discussed, and finally adopted as a fourth confession in our church. For that reason we have asked that the accompanying letter should be read before one reads the Confession. And it is in that spirit that we have offered it to the ecumenical church. And once offered thus, it is no longer owned by the Uniting Reformed Church. It cannot be used to judge, humiliate or annihilate the other. It cannot ever be the measure of *our* spiritual superiority, neither can it be cross upon which the other is nailed, and kept hanging. In doing that we would crucify Christ all over again. It is not a weapon to brandish, it is a staff on which to lean. Belhar symbolises, indisputably and sublimely, the inclusive, merciful and loving embrace of Jesus the Messiah. All notions of exclusivity, in whatever shape or form, are alien to it.

There are encouraging signs that a significant number from within the DRC are ready to fully embrace the Confession of Belhar, and that they are even ready to move beyond the decision made by the 2004 General Synod that Belhar should be part of the confessional basis of a re-united church. They intend not to be accidental, but purposeful inheritors of the confession. The impact on the unification process within the Dutch Reformed church family could be profound. Even more profound would be if that meant the emergence of a new community of faith, based upon renewed theological convictions and convergence of understanding, a different understanding and interpretation of Scripture and the Reformed tradition. This would be a community beyond the boundaries of race and culture, beyond the resurgent but fatally flawed "identity politics" which is threatening to drag South Africans back to the vagaries of ethnic mobilisation and the dangerous undercurrents of racial stagnation. It does not matter if the whole of the church throughout South Africa does not immediately follow this course of action. The church shall be known, and judged, not by the reticence of the many but by the faithfulness of the few, not by the hesitations of its legions, but by the courage of its prophets.

4 STANDING WHERE GOD STANDS

The Confession of Belhar helped us then, and it helps us now, as we face the new challenges of the 21st century.

- First, Belhar helps us to see the value of the tradition within which we stand. In an age of amazing arrogance, when a new Christian fundamentalism disengages itself completely from the heritage of the early church, finds refuge and legitimacy in alliances with worldly powers and measures itself and its success by its acceptance by those powers, Belhar reminds us of the true meaning of the confession that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is Lord. This does not mean Jesus and our struggle, nor Jesus and our national pride, nor Jesus and our economic prosperity, nor Jesus and our patriotic fervour. That is the very first confession of the Christian church and it stood against the imperial claims of absolute power, against the claims of divinity by the Caesar, and against the belief that true power lies in military might and that military might may be a handmaiden of the Cross exercised in the name of Jesus. It binds us to the early church which understood that true power lies in the powerlessness of the Cross, in the willingness to give one's life for the sake of others, and in the love that overcomes evil.
- Second, Belhar refocuses us on our inescapable bond of and call to unity – its source is the triune God; its reality the one, visible body of Christ; its life: sharing and receiving the gifts of the Spirit; its driving force the love of Christ; its goal: "so that the world may believe". It destroys our sense of self-sufficient, opinionated, self-deluding isolation. It seeks to engrave upon the faces of the brothers and sisters the face of Christ, so that, to speak again with John Calvin, "none (of them) can be injured, despised, rejected, abused or in any way be offended by us, without at the same time inuring, despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do … that we cannot love Christ without loving him in the brothers (and sisters) … for they are members of our (own) body …"[13]
- Third, Belhar helps us to understand that in standing where God stands, the church in a particular situation, however pressed or isolated, never stands alone. We are ensconced in the womb of the church universal, bound together by the Spirit of the Lord in a solidarity and love that knows no borders – cultural, political, socio-economic or physical. In rediscovering the heart of the

gospel, we discovered the communion of the saints and found ourselves opened to their correction, support and love. There were few things in those dark and dismal days that strengthened us more than the knowledge of ecumenical solidarity. And there were few things more humbling than the realisation that our words, spoken in our suffering, pain, hope and faith, were words spoken into the heart of the universal church. In our powerlessness we empowered the church to respond and do bold things in the name of the Lord.

- Fourth, Belhar helps us to find our voice and place globally, as we face the momentous changes and challenges globalisation is forcing upon countries and peoples, as we struggle with new idolatries and with the immense temptations of imperial alliances confronting us today. In our globalising world with its powers and myths of power, its distortions of reality and neglect of truth, Belhar helps us to discern the difference between gospel and ideology, between genuine good news and propaganda, between truth-telling and myth-making, between the dictates of so-called "political realism" and the reality of the kingdom of God. It helps us to distinguish between half-hearted vacillation and commitment, between obedience and Christian solidarity. In the Bible, "standing where God stands" was the guarantee for the prophets to distinguish between the myths of the idols, the demands of the palace, and the "whispers" of the LORD. And as we ourselves have discovered, while it is by no means the safest place to stand, it is without doubt the *right* place to stand. It is the only place from where we can make the affirmation to which the Confession of Belhar clings: "Jesus is Lord".
- Fifth, Belhar helps us because it affirms that unalterable biblical truth that the God of Jesus Christ is in a special way the God of the poor, the weak, the destitute and the wronged. This is the claim of the exodus, of the Commandments, of the prophets and the song writers of the Hebrew Bible; and this is the song of Hannah, of Mary in the Magnificat, and the message and life of Jesus of Nazareth. Next, it helps us to understand that the poor are not poor because of some historical accident, genetic traits or because it is the will of God. The poor are poor because they are *wronged.* They are poor because of injustice. They are victims, not of an act of God, but of deliberate historical, political

and economic decisions through which injustice was done to them, in a systematised and systemic fashion. These decisions were and are still made by human beings in positions of power who fully understand the consequences of their actions. In recognising that the poor are "the wronged", Belhar also recognises that the struggle for the poor is the struggle for the *rights* of the poor. The poor are not just deprived of livelihood and dignity; they are deprived of rights.[14]

- In the first place, to stand with the poor means to stand up and be counted. To stand not just *where*, but *as* God stands: not just in front of the poor in protection of them; but alongside in solidarity with their struggle. Not just in sympathy with, but in empathetic identification with them. In Matthew 25, Jesus *becomes* the poor, the prisoner, the naked and the hungry. What we have done to them, is done to him. In not doing what is right we wrong God. What we do for and with the poor is done for and with him. With the cry "how long, Lord", John Calvin again reminds us as it emanates from amongst the poor and the downtrodden that it, actually comes from the heart of God. "It is", Calvin asserts, "the same as though God heard Himself when he hears the cries and groaning of those who cannot bear injustice".[15]
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer has taught us yet another truth which illustrates how intimately Belhar reflects our understanding of John Calvin on this point. To stand where God stands does not only mean to stand with the poor and the destitute. It means, Bonhoeffer says, to "stand with God in the hour of God's grieving".[16] We must be "caught up in the way of Christ". It is not our religion that makes of us believers and followers of Christ, but our participation in the sufferings of God. We are called to share the sufferings of God at the hands of a hostile world. That, Bonhoeffer maintains, is what distinguishes not from people of other faiths but from pagans. But here Bonhoeffer does not criticise pagans, but Christians whose religiosity, symbols and rituals have become the hallmark of their life. They are those who think that it is more important to be religious than to be followers of Christ.
- We are disciples of Christ when we stand by God in the hour of God's grieving. Gods' grieving is not in the pain of God for God, but in the pain of God at the suffering of humanity. That pain

inflicted by people on people, is inflicted upon God. When Bonhoeffer speaks of the pain of God, he does not look toward heaven, but around him, at the pain of people created in God's image. When we fail to stand with them, we fail to stand with God. We do not ask whether their pain is the pain of heathen or pagans or enemies. It is the pagan within us who asks that. We stand by them because their pain is the pain of a grieving God. That is discipleship, because it is being caught up in the way of Jesus Christ. It is for that reason that the Confession of Belhar is embraced by Palestinian Christians as well as North American Christians who are marginalised, poor and voiceless, and by those who hear their voice. It will give comfort to the suffering people of Iraq as it will to those brave fighters for democracy in Burma, as to us still. It empowers women, gay and lesbian persons and all those who are relegated to the sidelines of society. And in their struggles we stand with them, because we are disciples of Christ, caught up into the way of Christ.

- We are the possession of God, says Belhar, and therefore driven by God's love and compassionate justice. Belhar helps us to continue to remember this, to continue to remember who we are and what we are called for; to reclaim in our life and work that spirituality without which we cannot face the challenges before us, to bring about the transformation that reaches out for justice, human dignity and freedom; for the responsibility for the earth, for the very things most necessary in our global reality.[17] It is a spirituality that is not captive to triumphalism, not dependent upon earthly powers to gain acceptance in the world. It is not locked up in a desire to escape the realities of this world, a privatised, inner experience of God while shutting out the voices of pain. It is the trembling of the soul before God, so that we are sent out to seek the glory of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of life. It leaves us open to the woundedness of others and makes us take the risk of vulnerability ourselves. It is sharing the pain of God in the pain of humanity, but it is also sharing the rage of God against injustice and all forms of inhumanity.

Two years before the Confession of Belhar was written, at an intensely personal level, I realised something that is truer today than

even then. It was a dismal and difficult time − our struggle seemed in vain − death and terror was all around. It was as if all humanity had fled. I discovered then in the ancient Reformed confessions something that provided me with prophetic faith and pastoral comfort. It came from the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day One, in answer to that most crucial question, "What is your only comfort in life and death? The Catechism answers:

> That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for my sins and delivered me from all the power of the devil, and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, wherefore by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth, to live unto him.

I said then that this is a revolutionary spirituality without which our being Christian in the world is not complete, and without which the temptations that are part and parcel of the liberation struggle will prove too much for us. I believe this is how Belhar blesses us at this time. The "authoritarian audacity" I ascribed then to the powers in South Africa is once again seen in the destructive powers that are rampant today. "The market" is spoken of as if it were a god − human life seems to be easily expendable. People do not matter but profits do. These destructive powers claim with totalitarian arrogance a place in our lives that only God can. Then, as now, it is of vital importance that we never forget to whom our ultimate allegiance and obedience are due. I said then and I believe it now, that our lives have meaning only when they are in the hands of the One who has given his life for the sake of others. And although he is the Lamb who is slaughtered, for those who call him Lord, he is also "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth".

It is to this Jesus that Belhar testifies. It is this Spirit who empowers us. It is this God whom it calls us to worship. As the confession ends, "To this God be glory and honour and praise for ever and ever".

The Confession of Belhar (1986)

1 We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who through Word and Spirit gathers, protects and cares for the church from the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

2 We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family. We believe

- that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;

- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought, one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;

- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe; that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;

- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new

humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ; that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against everything that may threaten or hinder this unity;

- that this unity can take form only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the diversity of languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;

- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church;

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- *which absolutises either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutisation hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;*

- *which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace whilst believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;*

- *which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;*

- *which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the Church.{Author: "church" is lower cased everywhere else]*

3 We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ;

- that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells;

- that God's life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity;

- that God's life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;

- that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;

- that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine which, in such a situation 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 thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

4 We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God

calls the church to follow in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoners and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the strangers, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that God wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right;

- that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;

- that the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

5 We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, it's only Head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever.

The Accompanying Letter

1 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. We are

aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is so threatened as to be at stake. In our judgement, the present church and political situation in our country and particularly within the Dutch Reformed Church family calls for such a decision. Accordingly, we make this confession not as a contribution to a theological debate nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand. Along with many, we confess our guilt, in that we have not always witnessed clearly enough in our situation and so are jointly responsible for the way in which those things which were experienced as sin and confessed to be so or should have been experienced as and confessed to be sin have grown in time to seem self-evidently right and to be ideologies foreign to the scriptures. As a result many have been given the impression that the gospel was not really at stake. We make this confession because we are convinced that all sorts of theological arguments have contributed to so disproportionate an emphasis on some aspects of the truth that it has in effect become a lie.

2 We are aware that the only authority for such a confession and the only grounds on which it may be made are the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. Being fully aware of the risks involved in taking this step, we are nevertheless convinced that we have no alternative. Furthermore, we are aware that no other motives or convictions, however valid they may be, would give us the right to confess in this way. An act of confession may only be made by the church for the sake of its purity and credibility and that of its message. As solemnly as we are able, we hereby declare before everyone that our only motive lies in our fear that the truth and power of the gospel itself is threatened in this situation. We do not wish to serve any group interests, advance the cause of any factions, promote any theologies or achieve any ulterior purposes. Yet, having said this, we know that our deepest intentions may only be judged at their true value by God before whom all is revealed. We do not make this confession from God's throne and from on high, but before God's throne and before other human beings. We plead

therefore, that this Confession should not be misused by anyone with ulterior motives and also that it should not be resisted to serve such motives. Our earnest desire is to lay no false stumbling blocks in the way, but to point to the true stumbling block Jesus Christ the rock.

3 This confession is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches. We proclaim it against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion that threatens the gospel itself in our church and our country. Our heartfelt longing is that no-one will identify themselves with this objectionable doctrine and that all who have been wholly or partially blinded by it will turn themselves away from it. We are deeply aware of the deceiving nature of such a false doctrine and know that many who have been conditioned by it have to a greater or lesser extent learnt to take a half-truth for the whole. For this reason we do not doubt the Christian faith of many such people, their sincerity, honour, integrity and good intentions, and their in many ways estimable practice and conduct. However, it is precisely because we know the power of deception that we know we are not liberated by the seriousness, sincerity or intensity of our certainties, but only by the truth in the Son. Our church and our land have an intense need of such liberation. Therefore it is that we speak pleadingly rather than accusingly. We plead for reconciliation, that true reconciliation which follows on conversion and change of attitudes and structures. And while we do so we are aware that an act of confession is a two-edged sword, that none of us can throw the first stone, and none is without a beam in their own eye. We know that the attitudes and conduct that work against the gospel are present in all of us and will continue to be so. Therefore this 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 our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world. It is certainly not intended as an act of self-justification and intolerance, for that would disqualify us in the very act of preaching to others.

4 Our prayer is that this act of confession will not place false stumbling-blocks in the way and thereby cause and foster false divisions, but rather that it will be reconciling and uniting. We

know that such an act of confession and process of reconciliation will necessarily involve much pain and sadness. It demands the pain of repentance, remorse and confession; the pain of individual and collective renewal and a changed way of life. It places us on a road whose end we can neither foresee nor manipulate to our own desire. On this road we shall unavoidably suffer intense growing pains while we struggle to conquer alienation, bitterness, irreconciliation and fear. We shall have to come to know and encounter both ourselves and others in new ways. We are only too well aware that this confession calls for the dismantling of structures of thought, of church, and of society that have developed over many years. However, we confess that for the sake of the gospel, we have no other choice. We pray that our brothers and sisters throughout the Dutch Reformed Church family, but also outside it, will want to make this new beginning with us, so that we can be free together, and together may walk the road of reconciliation and justice. Accordingly, our prayer is that the pain and sadness we speak of will be pain and sadness that lead to salvation. We believe that this is possible in the power of our Lord and by God's Spirit. We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope, liberation, salvation and true peace to our country.

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ENDNOTES

1 The last official confessions from within the churches of the Reformation are the Westminster Confession of the Church of Scotland (1647), and the Formulae Concordiae (1657). The Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church in Germany followed in 1934, but the church itself saw this as a theological "declaration" and not a "confession" as traditionally understood. The Barmen Declaration was, however, in the decades following, accepted by many churches as a confession of faith – since in their particular

situations − it spoke so much to the heart of their faith. The Confession of Belhar was the conclusion of a process of *status confessionis* announced by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and adopted by the synod as an official fourth confession on a par with the traditional confessions from the churches of the Dutch Reformed tradition, viz the Confessio Belgica, The Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt. See Botha Johan & Naudé Piet, (1998).

2 See e.g. Seekings, Jeremy, 2000; Marx, Anthony W, 1992.

3 See Botha, DP 1982, 264. Botha makes the point that the ideology of apartheid represents a "revolution" in the thinking and life of Afrikaner nationalism and argues strongly that no other institution in the Afrikaner community, including the Afrikaner Broederbond, did as much as the Dutch Reformed Church to prepare the Afrikaner for the acceptance of apartheid and its radical consequences for politics, society as well as the church.

4 See e.g. Villa-Vicencio, C, (1994), which explores the dilemmas of English speaking churches in South Africa during apartheid.

5 See Boesak Allan (1984)[1977], 38.

6 Rev M C Vos, 19th century Dutch Reformed Minister and missionary, see Boesak, Allan (1984, [1977]), 104-105.

7 C Loff, 1983, 17-20. Loff calls this a "sinful disposition" nurtured by a "deluded theology".

8 Robert Knox in Magubane (1999), 26.

9 See for Ntsikana's poem and the relevant discussion, Boesak Allan (2005), 136-137.

10 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke,* Eberhard Bethge et al (eds.), 1986-1998, 8, 402.

11 See as just one example among many over many years, *Die Kerkbode,* official organ of the Dutch Reformed Church, September 22, 1948.

12 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536),* English translation Ford Lewis Battles (1975), 2.7.8.

13 Calvin, *Institutes,* 4.17.38.

14 I owe this insight to Nicholas Wolterstorff whose continued developments of these thoughts I find entirely convincing. See Wolterstorff, in Barnes Lampman (1999) 107-130; also Boesak (2005), 204-205.

15 Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets,* Vol 4, on Habakkuk 2:6.

16 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke,* 8, 515-516.

17 I have worked out my understanding of spirituality in Boesak (2005), chapter seven.