

The history of Belhar¹

ABSTRACT

This article tells the story of the Confession of Belhar. It traces its origin and describes the events that lead up to the confession. In this regard reference is made to the important role played by students, various church leaders, church communities and church meetings. The way in which the apartheid policy in South Africa constituted a *status confessionis* for the churches is also described. Furthermore, the article chronicles the development of the concept-confession and the final acceptance of the Confession of Belhar in 1986. The story of the Confession of Belhar is also placed within the context of the broader challenge of church unity and unification. The last section outlines the current status of the Confession of Belhar within the family of Dutch Reformed Churches. Throughout the article there is an emphasis on the fact that Belhar challenges Christians and churches to live out that which they believe and confess.

1. INTRODUCTION

Allow me to thank the organisers of this event to thank them for the invitation to deliver a presentation on the above topic. I wish then to speak on the origin and the meaning of Belhar for the churches that have adopted it over the years. I am aware of the fact that the Barmen Declaration of Germany will also be discussed during this conference. However, my responsibility is to briefly tell the story of Belhar. For me, Belhar has continually challenged us to also live out that which we believe and confess and, when I say “we” I do not mean only the family of Dutch Reformed churches. If I understand the message of Belhar correctly, then I am thinking of the church in its broadest sense, as well as of our society and the world in which we live. What Christians in the church confess in the words of Belhar indeed has meaning for the world in which we live. As far as I am concerned, Barmen and Belhar have much in common with one another and both have over the years inspired many Christians.

2. THE ORIGINS OF BELHAR

The origins of Belhar are in a certain sense very closely connected to the apartheid policy of the National Party. Already in 1950 the former Presbytery of Wynberg of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa (DRMC) became directly involved with the policies of apartheid (Loff, 1998: 248). By then the National Party of Dr Malan had already won its political victory and implement its apartheid policy. Already in the *Kerkbode* of 22 September 1948 the policy of apartheid was called a “church policy” (*ibid*, 233).

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In 1950 a certain Mr J Abrahamse sent a letter on behalf of 116 church members belonging to 27 congregations of the former D R Mission Church to its moderamen in which it was declared that the apartheid policy was unchristian and therefore, it must be rejected and not be applied in the church nor in rest of the country. The leadership of both the DR Church and DR Mission Church did not deem fit to support these members. At their 1950 synod the former DRMC had already decided that they would neither reject nor approve a political policy. It appears therefore, as if this decision of the DRMC synod was not consistently followed.

In the course of time the former DRMC would condemn more and more aspects of the apartheid policy. In the 1970's it was requested to evaluate it theologically. This request came from the Theological School of the DRMC, which already was at the time a Faculty of the University of the Western Cape. Prof JJF Durand and the theology students played an important role in this theological evaluation of the apartheid. The students came to the conclusion that the forced separation of people contradicts the gospel of reconciliation. They expressed the wish that the DR Mission Church should officially endorse this position (*ibid*, 251). Three ministers, Revs JJF Mettler, IJ Mentor and RJ Stevens (*ibid*, 252), presented this position to the synod of the DRMC. The central aspect of this position was that the apartheid policy of the government was contradictory to the gospel of Jesus Christ (*ibid*, 252). This position was discussed by the synod and, after several amendments, it was accepted. This decision was an important milestone for the synod since the policy of apartheid was seen as contradicting the gospel and therefore it should be rejected. At the same time the mission policy of the DR Church was also rejected. With its rejection of the policy of apartheid the DRMC made a very clear decision in favour of the (re-) unification of the family of D R Churches. The decision that the policy of apartheid is contrary to the gospel also strengthened the desire for structural church unification (*ibid*, 253).

2. THE STATUS CONFSSIONIS

In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) held its General Assembly in Ottawa, Canada. The member churches of the family of DR Churches were all members of the World Alliance. Dr Allan Boesak of the DRMC was elected president of the WARC at this meeting (*ibid*, 261). The World Alliance also discussed the political situation in South Africa and came to the conclusion that “[t]he promises of God for this world and for his church are in direct contradiction to apartheid ideals and practices” (*ibid*). This statement by the WARC is in fact a restatement of the 1978 declaration by DRMC that “the apartheid policy is in contradiction to the gospel” (*ibid*). The WARC also went further and stated that the churches who accepted and defended apartheid “contradict in doctrine and in action the promise which they profess to believe” (*ibid*). The two member churches that were guilty of this charge were the DRC and the *Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk*. Finally, the World Alliance concluded “that this situation constitutes a *status confessionis* for our churches, which means that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardizing the integrity of our common confession as Reformed churches” (*ibid*, 151).

The WARC also declared that the political policy of apartheid was considered a sin and that its moral and theological justification was “a travesty of the gospel, and its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy” (*ibid*, 261). The result of all of this was that the World Alliance took action against the two offending South African churches by deciding to suspend their membership of the organization until they distance themselves from the ideology and policy of apartheid.

The action by the World Alliance against the two reformed churches came before the DR Mission Church Synod in 1982 via its Commission for Ecumenical Matters (*Acta Synodi*, 1982).

This crucial matter was discussed at great length on Friday 1 October 1982 by the synod. The fact that the synod spent the whole day and the morning session of the Saturday (2 October) discussing the report was an indication of its significance for the synod (Loff, 1998: 262).

The Synod firstly had to decide on the following:

“because the secular gospel of Apartheid profoundly endangers the confession of reconciliation in Jesus Christ and the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ in its very essence, the DR Mission Church declares that it presents a *status confessionis* for the Church of Jesus Christ” (*ibid*, transl.)

The synod accepted this proposal. However, there were 29 ministers and 12 elders who gave notice that they did not support this decision.

The second proposal that the synod had to consider read as follows:

“We declare that apartheid (separate development) is a sin, that its moral and theological justification makes a travesty of the gospel and that its continued disobedience to the Word of God is a theological heresy” (*ibid*, transl.).

This second proposal was also accepted by the synod.

2.1 The implications of the *status confessionis*

When the synod finally brought the entire proposal of the Commission for Ecumenical Matters to the vote it was accepted by the majority of the synod. The question that now arose was: what were the implications of this *status confessionis* for the church? Prof Gustav Bam, professor in practical theology at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), then delivered an important address at the synod. In it he particularly emphasised the implications of the announcement of the *status confessionis* for the church and said, amongst others:

“The faith is clearly confessed and the false teaching that is in contradiction with this is clearly rejected” (*ibid*, 162).

Following this he kindly requested the synod, in light of the preceding events, to name an ad hoc committee who would write a confession to present to the synod for its approval (*ibid*, 263, fn. 163).

However, 51 members of the synod pointed out that they had voted against the declaration of a *status confessionis* (*ibid*, 263). After this, two ministers, Revs Jaco Coetzee and AB van Wyk, proposed that the synod names an ad hoc commission to prepare a confession following the *status confessionis* against apartheid and to present it to this same synod (*ibid*, 264, fn. 165). This proposal was accepted without opposition and the moderator appointed the ad hoc commission consisting of Rev IJ Mentor (moderator), Dr AA Boesak (assessor), Prof Dr DJ Smit, Prof Dr JJF Durand and Prof Dr G Bam (chairperson).

The synod was also requested to respond to a report by the Commission for Ecumenical Matters on the following matter:

“It is the conviction of the synod that the Dutch Reformed Church believes in the gospel of apartheid, which is in direct contradiction to the Gospel message of reconciliation and the visible unity of the church. For this reason the Mission Church brings the decision of 1978 on that it cannot but with the greatest regret accuse the DR Church of theological heresy and idolatry, given her theologically formulated position and the implementation thereof in practice. The DR Mission Church makes this call in deep humility and introspection so that we not, “while preaching for others, be rejectable ourselves” 1 Cor. 9:27” (*ibid*, 264, fn. 168).

This proposal was somewhat amended and was approved by the synod. Eighty-five members voted against the inclusion of the word “idolatry” in the proposal (*ibid*, 264 fn. 170). The synod

then made it very clear that despite its decisions against the DR Church, it wishes to retain its ties with the DRC. It was furthermore decided that the decision on the *status confessionis* and the 1978 decisions on apartheid would be presented to the General Synod of the DRC (*ibid*, fn.171). This was to be handed ‘personally’ to the General Synod that would meet later that year. The intention for taking this course of action was to persuade the DRC and to give it the opportunity to distance itself from the apartheid policy. The synod of the DRMC also expressed its appreciation to those members within the DRC who delivered a prophetic witness with regard to apartheid and church unity (*ibid*, 265, fn. 173). Finally, the synod expressed its gratitude and great appreciation for the work of the Temporary Commission for Ecumenical Matters for their work in this regard (*ibid*, fn. 174).

3. THE DRAFT-CONFESSION OF BELHAR

The commission that had the task of drawing up a confession promptly reported to the synod. The synod had suggested a procedure that would assign the status of confession to the draft-confession (*ibid*. 265, fn. 175). It was also decided that lesser church bodies would also be given the opportunity to evaluate the confession. After this preceding process was completed, the draft-confession was accepted by the synod. The draft-confession was also sent to the congregations and presbyteries of the church with the intention that these lesser bodies also express their opinion on the matter. Dr Loff mentions in his outstanding study that by 26 November 1985 only 161 of the 267 congregations had not yet reported back. Of the 32 presbyteries only 11 did not respond (*ibid*, p. 265). During the synod of 1986 it was clear that since 1982 there were no objections against or amendments suggested to the proposed confession, except an objection against the formulation in paragraph 4 of the draft-confession, namely that God is “in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged” (*ibid*, 266, fn. 183).

4. THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR IN 1986

During the synod of the DRMC on 26 September 1986 the moment arrived when the new confession would be accepted. These events took place amidst great public interest. The report on the draft-confession was discussed. Professors Bam and Smit strongly argued for the approval of the confession. It was a remarkable moment when 400 delegates gave their approval of the confession while 71 gave note that they could not accept it (*ibid*, fn. 185). Thus the Confession of Belhar was accepted with great joy and gratitude by the majority of delegates. One day after its acceptance great interest was taken in the fact that various delegates, who originally opposed the confession, afterwards did sign it. After this the synod took a number of decisions to help people in the practical implementation of the Confession of Belhar. Pastoral measures were undertaken to provide for the needs of ministers who had originally not seen their way open to sign the confession. This also applied to lesser church bodies that still had objections against specific aspects of the confession. The synod continually emphasised that the motive of unity in the confession ought to receive priority. This idea became a very important objective in the period that followed.

5. THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH AND CHURCH UNIFICATION

It is interesting to note that church unification within the family of DR Churches was already discussed at a much earlier stage. However, it is also true that not everyone within the family of DR Churches felt the *same* about the matter. The former DRMC had already in 1978 decided to

structurally unite with other churches in the family. In 1986 the DRMC took note of the fact that very little progress had been made on this important matter.

The discussion on unity with the DRC mostly dealt with the declaration of the *status confessionis* and the acceptance of the draft-confession by the former DRMC in 1982. (*Acta Synodi* NGSK 1986:15-19; Loff, 1998:268).

After the acceptance of the Confession of Belhar the DRMC once again continued the discussion about church unification with the other members of the family of DR Churches. The RCA and the DRC were for various reasons, not very optimistic about this. However, the DR Church in Africa did indicate its willingness to begin discussions on unification with the DRMC. Thus it happened that these two churches formed a discussion commission that negotiated this important matter from 9 September 1987. The DRC and the RCA were continually and openly invited to these discussions. However, the RCA never responded to the invitations and the type of discussions between the DRC and the DRMC did not produce the hoped for results in the course of time – even after the intervention of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod in March 1989. The discussions on church unification between the DRCA and the DRMC were more successful. A convent was held in 1990 by the DRCA and the DRMC in Belhar (Cape Town) that would eventually result in church unification between the two churches in 1994. The original aim was for the two churches unite in 1990. However, this could not take place yet since the DRCA had not yet accepted the Confession of Belhar. The alternative was that the DRMC give up the confession which, however, did not happen as the DRCA finally accepted the Belhar Confession. The church unification that was to take place in 1990 was finally celebrated with great joy and excitement on 14 April 1994. This important event took place in the same church building where the Confession of Belhar was officially accepted in 1986. At the synod of the DRMC of 1994 a “unification clause” was drawn up to ensure that the unification process would take place well and justly. There were about 45 ministers in the former DRMC who gave the impression that they were a ‘pressure group against church unification’ (*ibid*, 273). The synod of the DRMC appointed an “ad hoc commission for pastoral discussions” to openly assist persons in congregations in their “problems, fears, doubts and uncertainties” regarding the issue. This commission also proposed that such members be treated as members of the DRMC and after unification as members of the URCSA.

In Bloemfontein in 1997 the Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa joined the URCSA. The ERCA was a reformed church that was also established in Namibia by the DRC in 1975 (*Acta Synodi* VGKSA, 1997:427-428).

6. WHAT IS THE POSITION OF THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR WITHIN THE FAMILY OF DR CHURCHES?

The DRMC and the DRCA accepted the Confession of Belhar as their confession in 1994 when they united to form the URCSA. No other reformed church in this family has done the same. With the formation of the URCSA in 1994 part of the DRCA (Free State and Phororo Synods) did not see their way open to accept the Confession of Belhar.

The General Synod of the DRC in 1998 accepted, as it stated in *Die Kerkbode* of 8 October 2004, the essential content (“wesenslike inhoud”) of the Confession of Belhar for the sake of the unification process, but wished to “not at the moment recommend it as a fourth confession”.

The General Synod of the DRC in 2002 stated that provision must be made for the acceptance of the Confession of Belhar as confession for the new church, but in such a way that it serves the unification process in a positive way. This last phrase wanted to ensure that the confession not be enforced on its members. Even if accepted as confession, no church member or congregation must be forced to sign it.

The decision of the General Synod of the DRC in 2004 with regards to church unity reads as follows:

“The DRC re-affirms its serious and clear commitment to the restoration of one church denomination with the other three churches in the DRC family, namely the URC, RCA and DRCA. The DRC decides that:

- The Confession of Belhar be included in a restored church denomination.
- The decision be left to members, church councils and ministers to decide whether they want to accept the confession of Belhar.

We are convinced that the differences on the confession of Belhar have to do with historical, emotional and symbolic factors.

The synod proposes that the following will occur:

- A process of consultation with regional synods and church councils be started to talk about the unification process.
- The process of consultation must be finalised by January 2006.
- The result of the process of consultation be processed by a task team and used in the discussion with the DR Church family” (General Synod of the DRC, Information brochure October 2004).

7. CONCLUSION

Since the 1970's the synods of the former DRMC continually discussed the policy of apartheid or aspects thereof. Originally the DRMC only condemned aspects of the policy that it saw as contrary to Scripture. In 1982 the DRMC again came to the conclusion that the theological justification of apartheid is contrary to the gospel and formulated the Confession of Belhar in reaction to it. On the basis of this new confession the DRCM entered into discussions with the DRCA and the ERCA with a view on the unification of the three churches. While the latter discussions were successful, similar discussions with other members of the same church family continues till today and its success is eagerly hoped for and greatly anticipated.

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