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Can justice be embodied in sexist language? A challenge to the Confession of Belhar[1]

ABSTRACT

This article poses the question why the Confession of Belhar was not written in inclusive language, since it was accepted at the 1986 synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, which succeeded the 1982 synod where women were restored to the office of minister. It argues that the concept of justice is presented at an advanced level in the Confession of Belhar; however, it is regrettable that in this confession justice is embodied in sexist language. The article suggests certain changes in the language of the Confession of Belhar in order to include women. Furthermore, it explores possible ways in which a confession with healthy insights into justice, such as the Confession of Belhar, can enhance the political and social wellbeing of women by reflecting the interconnectedness of people in its use of inclusive language.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Belhar and the ordination of women

In 1986 the Confession of Belhar was formally accepted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (at the time) as an authority of faith. The political events which led to the formulation and acceptance of this confession are well known: the Confession of Belhar is one of several documents of faith which were formulated when ecclesiastical voices of protest burst into the open after the Sharpeville Massacre and the Cottesloe Church Conference of the 1960s (Jonker 1993:443). The Confession of Belhar confessed its belief in justice as opposed to the practice of apartheid, which was theologically supported by the white Dutch Reformed Church.

The Confession of Belhar, then, remained loyal to the ecumenical movement confessing opposition to apartheid that started in the 1960s. However, one may ask whether it remained loyal to the liberation of women, a "movement" started by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church itself in 1982. In that year, the DRMC was the first of the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa to restore women to the office of minister. What had begun at the 1982 synod does not seem to have been upheld by the next synod in 1986 when the Confession of Belhar, couched in sexist language, was accepted.

Since 1982, almost a quarter of a century ago, only four women have been ordained as ministers in the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa, as the Dutch Reformed Mission Church is now known after its amalgamation with the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. In fact,

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for ten years after the synodal decision on women's ordination, no woman was ordained at all. It was only in 1992 that Mary-Anne Plaatjies was ordained as minister in Robertson in the Cape Province (Landman 1998:126).

It seems as if the church was not really ready for the ordination of women in 1982 if one considers that, in 1986 a confession, which is formulated in language insensitive towards and exclusive of women, was formally accepted in the same church.

One cannot argue that inclusive language was unknown to the ecclesiastical sodality at that time. In Europe and the USA the issue of language was at the height of both academic and ecclesiastical discussion. A revised edition of *An inclusive-language lectionary* which was prepared by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA had already been published in 1986.

John de Gruchy (1991:174) points to the fact the Confession of Belhar is now to be accepted by all who are ordained in the URCSA, giving rise to the ironical situation that, at their ordination women candidates have to confess their faith in justice and equality in sexist language.

If the church was not ready to ordain women in practice in 1982, or to confess its faith in inclusive language in 1986, we are constrained to ask whether the church is ready now, and of what benefit the use of inclusive language will be to the spiritual wellbeing of women in the church.

This essay will argue that the Confession of Belhar is advanced in its vision of justice. It will put forward the ensuant argument that, to be true to its own insight into justice, the Confession of Belhar should embody justice in language which does justice to justice, i.e. in an inclusive language which embodies the interconnectedness between people.

1.2 The embodiment of justice in women's theologies

The call for a just language has been at the core of women's theologies for a long time. For the purpose of this essay, we shall start by dealing with women's call for justice, and then proceed to discuss their call for the embodiment of justice in a language of interconnectedness.

1.2.1 Justice

With the commencement of the modern feminist movement in the 1970s, the aims of women's liberation were set out clearly. According to the branch of feminism which concerns us here, theological feminism, justice will be done to women (see Meyer-Wilmes 1995) when

- the stereotyping of women has been shifted, and women have been empowered against their identities of failure (social justice)
- the political powerlessness of women has been overturned and women have been empowered as moral agents (political justice)
- the exploitation of women as workers has been converted into equal job opportunities (economic justice), and
- women have access to the symbols, the language and the confessions of the church (spiritual justice).

1.2.2 Embodiment

The embodiment of justice has been an insight of theological feminism since the commencement of its justice talk. "Embodiment" is used with two references in theological feminism:

- Women's physical bodies are the sites where justice is to be practised, that is, embodied. We experience (in)justice with our bodies when we are raped and assaulted, or treated with respect and care (Gilson 1996:82).
- Justice is also embodied in language, which constitutes our experiences. Language not only shows us how we are perceived; language not only enables us to hear each other speak;

language not only breaks the silence (Isherwood & McEwan 2001:118): language indeed creates us. Language makes us what we are. Language embodies us. Language is the flesh made word.

With the power of language thus established, the importance of a language of interconnectedness for expressions of faith, such as a confession, becomes apparent. Women need a religious language that not only reflects our process of becoming (Isherwoord & McEwan 2001:118), but also embodies a new way of life for women of faith. In short, we need a language that embodies the justice towards women that is still sorely lacking in the ecclesiastical arena.

1.3 The embodiment of justice in the Confession of Belhar

1.3.1 Secondary sources
Much has been written about the way in which the Confession of Belhar deals with justice, albeit lacking focus on justice towards women. The Confession of Belhar favours an image of God that honours God as the God of justice. Russel Botman (2000:210) sees in this an explicit call on the church to discipleship: "God is revealed in a special way as the God of justice ... and God calls the church to stand where God is standing". That, for Botman, is praxeology, which in Belhar has received confessional status within the church.

For Willie Jonker (1993:452 with reference to Dirkie Smit) the Belharian image of the just God not only calls the church, but the whole of society, to duty. During a time when almost no distinction was made between church and state, Jonker (and Smit) confessed in sympathy with the Confession of Belhar that political and social life should be critically tested against the Biblical and Belharian presentation of God as just, and God's world as one called to justice.

De Gruchy (1991:174) views this call to justice as a call for unity. The church is to unite in its commitment to the struggle against all forms of social injustice. As such, then, Belhar is an invitation to the white Dutch Reformed Church to join in this confession of justice, commitment and unity.

EE Meyer (2000:117) investigates the claims of the above authors that Belhar's image of God as a God of justice is a Biblical image. By means of an exciting reading of Luke, Meyer explores the dialogical spaces between the awesome God and the merciful God, and finds the Biblical God of justice to be the One in whom resistance against social injustice blends with compassion. In this lies the example for the church to follow.

Finally, Koos Vorster (1998:478) expresses his concern about the image of God as the God who sides with the destitute and the poor. According to Vorster, this image of God is not in accordance with the reformed confessional tradition, nor is it in line with the Bible. In the Bible Vorster finds God to be the God of all, the God who has chosen Abraham as the father of all the faithful, Abraham being a rich and affluent person.

Is the God of justice "in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged" as confessed in Belhar? And what should be the church's response to this? These are the questions posed by the commentators on Belhar as explained in the above. These are the questions I shall be dealing with in the next subsection, returning to the text of the Confession of Belhar.

1.3.2 Primary source
It is my conviction, as author of this article, that Belhar's confession of justice is much broader than just the image of God as a God of justice, and a call on the church to commit itself to opposing injustice. I shall briefly explore two concepts of justice in Belhar that I find to be specifically relevant to the issue of justice towards women.

(1) Belhar confesses *moral agency*. Moral agency entails more than commitment to resisting injustice. Moral agency includes initiating, planning and executing moral action in an unjust society and a divided church. Article 4 of the confession, which is replete with verbs, describes moral agency in Biblical terms. Moral agency is bringing justice, giving bread, setting free, supporting, protecting, helping, blocking.

However, since Belhar describes these powerful acts of justice in sexist language, one may indeed wonder whether women are included here as moral agents for justice, or whether they are simply seen as the victims of injustice. The very first sentence of Article 4 raises this concern: "We believe that God has revealed *Himself* as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among *men*". The only reference to women here is to the widows, who are destitute because they do not have men to care for them.

The danger of sexist language, then, becomes apparent. The use of sexist language here robs women of their status and potency as moral agents in the church and in society.

(2) Belhar, furthermore, confesses the *shifting of dualisms*. In confessing unity, Belhar in Article 2 explores the dialogical spaces between love and hate, friendship and enmity, my faith and your faith, my Spirit and your Spirit, my Lord and your Lord, my hope and your hope, my prayer and your prayer, my race and your race.

However, when again this unity is described in sexist terms, one needs to ask whether Belhar is not still upholding the dualism between male and female, that is, the hierarchy between men and women. Belhar confesses that we are one because we "have one God and Father", yet the urgent question arises as to whether the unity shared by men and women can be on an equal basis when it is presided over by the maleness of God. When the reconciliation between believers and God is taken as the basis for unity, but God is described as a man ("Father") and in male terms, one cannot help but suspect that, here, women are not confessed to be believers in equal terms.

So, in this instance too, the use of sexist language deprives women of their equal status as believers, and hijacks the just God to belong to a specific gender.

In short, whereas Belhar does justice to the concept of justice, its language does not. While Belhar confesses moral agency and unity of belief, sexist language itself undermines these concepts of justice and ultimately diminishes women's role as moral agents and equal believers in church and society.

2. SUGGESTIONS PROMOTING INCLUSIVITY AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS

To include women as moral agents and deconstruct the hierarchy of men over women based on the image of God as male, the Confession of Belhar, then, needs to strengthen itself through empowering language which embodies women's connectedness to justice.

Since the concepts of justice in Belhar are strong and healthy, only a few changes in language are necessary to achieve the aim of inclusivity.

1   References to believers should be inclusive. In the English text only one case of exclusivity appears, that is in Article 4, which confesses that God wishes to bring peace "among men". In the Afrikaans text reference is here made to "mense" (people), the usage of which may solve the problem in the English.

2   References to the maleness of God should be excluded. Pronouns that make God male can be replaced by the repetition of "God". Although this may appear clumsy at first sight, it reflects a sound theology of interconnectedness. The first part of Article 4, then, may read as follows:

"We believe that God has revealed God self as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; 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 God's Church to follow God in this…"

3   Much more difficult will be to change the male images which refer to God in the Confession of Belhar. At the beginning and at the end of this confession, God is referred to as "Father, Son and Holy Spirit". Since women theologians argue that male images of God support an unhealthy hierarchy of men over women, the confession obviously needs to change this image to one of inclusivity and interconnectedness. Mary Grey (2001:9) points out that more than 30 years have elapsed since Mary Daly in 1973 wrote *Beyond God the Father*. Since then, women have struggled to include female imagery to describe the divine and, if one looks at Belhar, with little success. Grey (2001:53) is convinced that we cannot talk about God as a God of justice while describing God as a patriarchal lord and judge. God is not a patriarchal lord but power-in-relation. As power-in-relation, God empowers both men and women to make justice; as power-in-relation, God empowers both men and women with sensitivity, compassion, empathy, affiliation and bonding. God as power-in-relation, then, should be reflected in the images used for God, something in which Belhar fails.

Therefore, in Article 1 of the Confession of Belhar I would suggest that God be confessed not as "Father, Son", but as "Caretaker, Saviour", since that is how God is already described and confessed in the rest of the sentence. Article 1 will then read:

"We believe in the triune God, Caretaker, Saviour and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for God's Church by God's Word and God's Spirit, as God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end."[2]

Needless to say, the confession will then also end by confessing our belief in God as Caretaker and Saviour. I suppose the Afrikaans text may use the designations "Versorger" and "Verlosser" to refer to the Triune God. Again, it needs to be said that these are images that are not foreign to either the Reformed faith or the confession itself, both of which express their belief in God's care of the world and God's saving activity throughout.

3. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AN INCLUSIVE CONFESSION

One can indeed ask whether, in practice, women in the church will benefit from an inclusive language of interconnectedness. Is language that important and is it important at grass-roots level, or is inclusive language simply academics at play?

Throughout this essay, a social constructionist point of view has been maintained. According to this view, language constitutes people. Social construction theory believes that people's thinking and doing are controlled by social discourses. Discourses are grand narratives constructed as knowledge and truth by the powerful in society. Social construction theory, furthermore, believes that social construction itself takes place through language (Landman 2005:32). If language then is the instrument through which women have been socially constructed in the church, the issue of sexist language is indeed an important one. Sexist language constructs passive women who are

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2   On 5 January 2003 I read the Confession of Belhar as part of a church service over the radio, using inclusive language and images. No complaints were received about this. On the contrary, for many people it seemed simply natural.

powerless in the face of social injustices such as domestic violence, rape and the spreading of the HI virus.

At the beginning and ending of their book, *Introducing feminist theology*, Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (2001:9,151) describe the achievements of women theologians worldwide during the past 30 years. Using their insights I shall now ask, in the next ten points, whether women of faith in South Africa have made similar gains in the face of the historical injustices committed against them. Proposals will be made on how the Confession of Belhar can empower South African women of faith through its concepts of justice, when women are constituted through an inclusive language of interconnectedness.

1   Women's theologies worldwide empower women to become part of practical solutions to the ethical problem of injustice (Isherwood & McEwan 2001:9). Of course, in order to do this, women need a political voice from within the church. In South Africa, the political voice of women of faith is indeed soft, if not silent. In awarding a political role to the church, the Confession of Belhar can empower women of faith to voice themselves against injustice in dialogue between church and state.

2   Women's theologies worldwide empower women "to connect individual to societal demands", thus placing the private sphere on the agenda of the combating of injustice (Isherwood & McEwan 2001:9). While South African women do hold important positions in (secular) politics, women locally do not hold positions of equality in the private sphere of their intimate relationships, where domestic violence and HIV infection reign. However, the Confession of Belhar confesses to the church's obligation to combat injustice in private spheres, and is therefore excellently placed to empower women of faith in this regard.

3   Women's theologies worldwide empower women and men "to form relationships built on mutuality" (Isherwood & McEwan 2001:9) thereby making justice a relational issue in the workplace, friendships, intimacy and church. Having been moulded by patriarchal stereotyping, women of faith have had little opportunity up to now to give themselves new names. Using inclusive language the Confession of Belhar can assist in this by means of its insistence on people being equal before God. Belhar insists that people should be freed of human stereotyping in terms of race. Gender needs to be added to this insight.

4   Women's theologies worldwide empower "women and men to grow into a mutual relationship with the divine" (Isherwood & McEwan 2001:9). Everybody is thus acknowledged as a moral agent for justice. In South Africa women are finding their voice and expanding their roles as moral agents vis-à-vis rape and domestic violence. The Confession of Belhar can enhance these roles by describing women's needs with more insights than only those of "widows".

5   Women's theologies worldwide empower women to develop hermeneutical principles to read the Bible from a justice point of view (Isherwood & McEwan 2001:151). In South Africa this has been set in action by women theologians such as Madipoane Masenya, and the women theologians who participated locally in the *Leefstyl-Bybel vir Vroue* (*Lifestyle Bible for Women*, Landman 2003). The Confession of Belhar uses the Bible as an intertext in its cry for justice and, as such, can empower women to do the same for the sake of women's liberation.

If the Confession of Belhar was to include women through inclusive language and symbols, and to start embodying women's experiences in confessional language, empowered women of faith might engage, in my opinion, in the following (again, see Isherwood & McEwan 2001:151):

6   Belhar, hopefully, will encourage women to rewrite their own histories as histories of moral agency and the distribution of justice in society.

7   Belhar will energise women to join other women in their just struggle for ordination.

8   Belhar will encourage inclusive liturgies and spiritualities.

9   Belhar will encourage women to become engaged in ecotheology and the fight for a mutual relationship between people and nature. On the agenda to be challenged are nuclear warfare, globalisation and sex tourism.

10   Belhar will help women of faith towards positive embodiment, that is, to come to a sense of the goodness of the body. South African women have been stylised by pietistic discourses on the sinfulness of the body, and especially the female body, which kept them from enjoying and celebrating their bodies as women of faith.

4. CONCLUSION

In 1984, at a conference held at the University of Washington in Seattle to celebrate half a century after the Barmen Declaration was issued against the injustices of the Nazi regime in Germany, the German woman theologian, Dorothee Sölle, delivered a paper entitled "Justice is the true name of peace, and resistance is the true name of faith" (Sölle 1986:303-334). In this paper she criticised neo-conservative readings of the Barmen Declaration, readings that propagate the complete separation of church and state. No, Sölle said, the church must remain radically, and with great resistance, involved in politics. The church should resist things like nuclear politics, and the way in which society blames everything from inflation to job losses to the disintegration of the "traditional family".

Sölle here identifies two tendencies in modern-day Germany, which are also prevalent in the South Africa of today, and which concern women and the formation of a confession of faith. The first is the separation between church and state, which effectively means in South Africa that the church may not intervene in state affairs, but that the state can regulate belief.

This is foreign to the cultures of the South African people, both black and white, which prefer an integrated worldview. It also robs women of faith of their political voice.

In the second place, Sölle refers to the backlash against empowered women, blaming them not only for the disintegration of the traditional family, but also for all societal evils as if the latter can be traced back to this disintegration. In South Africa too, a return to the traditional family is propagated from ecclesiastical platforms. This type of talk is strengthened by the HIV epidemic, which is blamed on the lack of traditional values in today's society – including women's liberation. However, local women theologians like me blame HIV, partly at least, on the patriarchal family itself and on male power in general, which forces women to have unsafe sex. These women theologians do think that the values of the family should be upheld but that, in families, men and women should have mutual power. Furthermore, research has shown that families are the happiest, and healthiest, when power is shared. It is not the family that should be undermined, but the patriarchal family. It is not the values of loyalty and faithfulness that should be resisted, but the patriarchal values of unequal power.

It was argued in the above that the Confession of Belhar can empower women against both these tendencies which are taking control of religious thinking in modern-day South Africa, that is, the tendency to rob people of faith of their political voice, and a second tendency to blame crimes of intimacy such as domestic violence, rape and HIV infection, on women's liberation. The Confession of Belhar is able to do this because it centralises justice in both human and sacral relationships, which calls for the church's voice in politics, as well as in intimate relationships. The Confession of Belhar confesses to the political voice of the church, which includes placing private

injustices on the public agenda. It was pointed out in the above that the Confession of Belhar is to be commended for accommodating this concept of justice in a rule of faith. What still needs to be done by this confession is to include women of faith in both the church's own politics and its political call for justice.

And this, it is argued, can only be done when the Confession of Belhar embodies justice towards all, men and women, in the inclusive language of interconnectedness. When women have access to the language, the images and symbols of the church, and are embodied in its authorities of faith, then women will be enabled to become, alongside men, moral agents for ordination, eco-issues, bodily wellbeing, safety in intimate relationships, and healthy political decision-making in general. Then the Confession of Belhar will have done justice to all its confessors.

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