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South speaks to South: a New Zealand response to the *kerygma* of Belhar

ABSTRACT

This article explores possible responses to the Belhar Confession that are suggested by critical reflection upon the contemporary situation of the Church in New Zealand – in particular with respect to the Anglican and Methodist Churches. In order to do this the scene will, first of all, be briefly set by drawing attention to salient New Zealand historical and demographic factors; secondly, some key contemporary ecclesial issues will be identified, then, thirdly, the resonance and essence of Belhar as the authors see it – the *kerygma* that is Belhar – will be articulated so as to discuss a range of responses to this *kerygma* that pertain to the New Zealand ecclesial context and conclude by addressing the question of the possible reception of Belhar within the New Zealand.

INTRODUCTION

Apartheid in South Africa was a particular social condition born of the confluence and mutual support of a political programme and a theological perspective.² The struggle to overthrow the apartheid system was both a socio-ethical and a theological activity.³ Clearly, a defining moment within South Africa was the action taken by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church when, at its synod meeting of October 1982, it determined that,

Because the secular gospel of apartheid most fundamentally *threatens the reconciliation in Jesus Christ and the very essence of the unity of the Church* of Jesus Christ, the DR

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 - 2 Piet Naudé, *From Pluralism to Ideology: the roots of an apartheid theology*. Seminar Paper, University of Heidelberg, November 2002 (forthcoming). See, *inter alia*, Botman, Russel H 2000. Is blood thicker than justice? The legacy of Abraham Kuyper for Southern Africa, in Lugo, Luis E (ed). *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Strauss, PJ sa. Abraham Kuyper, apartheid and the Reformed Churches in South Africa in their support of apartheid. *Theological Forum*, XXIII/1, March, 4-7.
 - 3 See eg Boesak, Alan 1984. *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, liberation and the Calvinist tradition*. New York: Orbis; Bosch, David 1983. Nothing but a heresy, in De Gruchy, John & Villa-Vicencio, Charles (eds). *Apartheid is a heresy*. Cape Town: David Philip, 25-38.

Mission Church declares that it constitutes a *status confessionis* for the Church of Jesus Christ.⁴

Having thus defined the system of apartheid, including its supportive theological infrastructure, as constituting the particular crisis of *status confessionis*⁵, it went on to propose a confessional response comprising five articles. The first is a brief creedal affirmation of the triune God; the second, third and fourth comprise the corpus of the confession; the fifth article drives home the point and purpose of the confessional corpus *in toto* with a hortatory injunction, “the Church is called to *confess and do* all these things”,⁶ and it is followed by a succinct doxological postscript asserting the lordship of Christ and the glory of the triune God. A focused confession of faith and accompanying critical judgements and exhortation are set in the context of praise, and an awareness of divine grace.

The history of this Confession and both its local and international reception is adequately dealt with elsewhere.⁷ However, the Belhar Confession is little known, if at all, to Churches in New Zealand, and certainly not to those churches such as the Anglican and Methodist, which are not part of the Reformed family. However, with the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, these three Protestant churches account for the majority of Christians in this country, and all three churches were highly active in the ecumenical anti-apartheid movement. Insofar as these Churches, in the early 1980s, proposed their own statements of theological condemnation, or endorsed international and ecumenical statements of opposition to apartheid on theological grounds, the Belhar Confession ought to be of more than passing interest. But, while it would be acknowledged that South Africa today faces serious social issues, the general impression is that apartheid is now a thing of the past and that South Africa is, as a whole nation, in charge of its own destiny – and for that thanks be to God.

So, would a confession that arose out of, and was addressed primarily into, the situation of apartheid still have contemporary resonance both within South Africa and beyond? Clearly, if such confession were simply a time- and context-bound statement, then the answer would be probably negative. However if, as confession, Belhar articulates principles and perspectives that genuinely reflect the gospel in a universal sense, while yet addressing particular dimensions of Christian life and values that, having arose out of one socio-temporal context, can nonetheless be seen to have continuing application within and to other specific contexts, then the answer is potentially positive. The task in this paper is to explore possible responses to the Belhar Confession that are suggested by critical reflection upon the contemporary situation of the Church in New Zealand – in particular with respect to the Anglican and Methodist Churches. In order to do this I shall, first of all, briefly set the scene by drawing attention to salient New Zealand historical and demographic factors; secondly, I shall identify some key contemporary ecclesial issues, then, thirdly, articulate what I see as the resonance and essence of Belhar – the *kerygma* that is Belhar – so as to discuss a range of responses to this *kerygma* that pertain to the New Zealand ecclesial context and conclude by addressing the question of the possible reception of Belhar within the New Zealand.

4 Cited in Cloete, GD & Smit, DJ (eds) 1984. *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm B Eerdmans, 15-16.

5 See Smit, DJ. What Does *Status Confessionis* Mean?, in Cloete & Smit, *op cit*, 7-32.

6 Cloete & Smit, *op cit*, 4, my emphasis.

7 Cloete & Smit, *op cit*; Piet Naude, “A gift from heaven” – the reception of the Belhar Confession in the period 1982-2000 and its ecumenical significance today. *NGTT* 44 (3&4).

New Zealand is a relatively young nation. Around the 10th century a great sea journey involving a series of seven canoe (*waka*) fleets brought the Polynesian migrants who were to become the *tangata whenua* – the “people of the land”.⁸ From these canoe populations are derived the major Maori tribal (*iwi*) groups. By the 12th century settlements around the coastal regions, predominantly in the warmer North Island, were well established. The first confirmed European visit came some five hundred years later still, in the 17th century, with the Dutch navigator Abel Tasman, after whom the sea between Australia and New Zealand has been named. But European landfall, exploration, and first settlement did not occur until the 18th century, beginning with the arrival of the Englishman, Captain James Cook, in 1769.

A major 20th century Maori movement, with both political and religious dimensions⁹, makes the point that all who inhabit this island land have come from across the seas. To the names of the seven great Maori *waka* are added the two significant European “waka” – Tasman’s *Heemskerck* and Cook’s *Discovery*. Cook mapped the coastline, but it was the Dutchman who gave the land its new name, after a province in the Netherlands – “Nieuw Zeeland”. Maori, of course, already had names for the landmass. The North Island name – *Aotearoa* (Long White Cloud) – is today included in the oft-used nomenclature “Aotearoa-New Zealand”. Many churches, for example, now incorporate this into their official title.¹⁰

The Christian Church came to New Zealand in the early 19th century, beginning with two English Protestant Missions – the Church Missionary Society (Anglican) and the Wesleyan Missionary Society (Methodist). They came to a land that was not without religion, although the predominant assumption was that Maori were effectively bereft of religion.¹¹ They both began in the north of the country and worked their way southwards. By a kind of “gentleman’s agreement” the Anglicans took the East and the Methodists the West. However, they were soon joined by a newly formed French Catholic Mission, the Marists, lead by Bishop Jean Baptiste Pompallier. Religious rivalry – between Protestant and Catholic – was paralleled by political rivalry: English versus French. The British were reluctant, initially, to intervene but Protestant missionaries, among others, argued for the establishment of a colony in order to “keep out the papist French, control the agents of vice and facilitate mission work”.¹² Also, there were those who believed that the solution to Britain’s economic difficulties was to move people to new colonial settlements – for example Edward Wakefield,¹³ founder of the New Zealand Company.

8 See Davidson, Janet 1981. *The Polynesian Foundation*, in Oliver, WH & Williams, BR (eds). *The Oxford History of New Zealand*. Wellington: Oxford University Press.

9 The Ratana movement, named after its founder TW Ratana, formed a church in the 1920s and constituted a political bloc that has been traditionally allied to the Labour Party. In the 1930s, for example, the four Maori seats were held by Ratana, which gave the Labour Party its ruling majority at the time. See Love, Ralph 1977. *Policies of Frustration: The Growth of Maori Politics: The Ratana/Labour Era*. PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington.

10 Eg, the “Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa-New Zealand”; the “Methodist Church of Aotearoa-New Zealand”; “The Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Polynesia”.

11 See Pratt, Douglas 1987. *Pre-Christian Maori Religion: An Essay in Contextual Understanding*, in Douglas Pratt (ed). *Signposts: theological reflections in a New Zealand context*. Auckland: College Communications, 27-40.

12 Belich, James. *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders: From Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century*. Auckland: Penguin, 183.

13 Wakefield was an English entrepreneur who sought to make money by acquiring Maori land and then selling it to settlers and speculators. His intention was that New Zealand would become a colony replicated on English class and social structures.

In 1840 the British made their move. Aided by the Protestant Missioners, Maori chiefs for the most part were persuaded to sign a Treaty with the British Crown. This occurred in the picturesque Bay of Islands, at a location called Waitangi, in the north of the country. It was not far from where the missionary movements had begun their work, and the Treaty was named after the location of signing – hence “The Treaty of Waitangi”.¹⁴ It is, ostensibly, the document that established New Zealand as a modern nation state within the orbit of British rule – first as colony, then as a dominion of the Empire, and subsequently as an independent member of the Commonwealth.

While, in the Maori version, the Treaty appears to guarantee certain traditional rights, including self-determination over tribal land and control of Maori affairs within them, in return for British protection and favour, together with the allowance of ordered colonisation, the English version was more forthright: in return for British favour and protection, yet conceding some customary rights, henceforth Maori had ceded political governance and judicial determination to the British Crown, to be exercised by colonial government. The scene was set, of course, for colonial aggrandisement. Eventually a sense of betrayal was felt by many Maori toward the Church as an apparent colluding agent. There has been much ongoing debate within Maoridom throughout the years since the signing of the Treaty. It is only in relatively recent times – indeed in the closing decades of the 20th century – that serious debate has occurred within Pakeha (European) society around the meaning, application, and response to the Treaty.

The Treaty of Waitangi was important, at least on one level, because it represented a less hostile means of establishing sovereignty than occurred, for example, in Australia. At its best the Treaty signals the desire for a peaceable coexistence of two races, under one governance structure implying an ethic of independent yet mutual partnership between the two signatory partners. It is only in recent times that the partnership motif has come into clear focus and has been, since the 1980s, of particular concern to the mainline Churches – both Catholic and Protestant.¹⁵

With the notable exception of Chinese who immigrated to the South Island goldfields during the 19th century, up until the 20th century New Zealand was by and large a nation of two peoples – Maori and European. However, these singular terms belie deeper diversities. European migration in the 19th century was made up of mostly English, Scottish and Irish immigrants, with some also from Continental Europe. It is worth noting that until well into the 19th century the descendants of the first Polynesian settlers identified themselves solely by their genealogical affinity to tribal groups (*iwi*), and relevant divisions within (*hapu* – subtribe; *whanau* – extended family). There was no concept of a single Maori nation or Maori race as such. The use of the word to name a racial group arises from the Maori phrase *tangata maori* or “ordinary people” as a generic self-reference.

According to the 1996 Census results, European (or *Pakeha*) comprised 79,6% of the population with Maori at 14,5%. Polynesians numbered 5,6% with Chinese 2,2% and Indian 1,2%.¹⁶ The New Zealand Official Yearbook 2000 indicates a decline in religious affiliation so far as the major Christian denominations are concerned, but an increase of persons identifying with other religions overall. The 1996 Census figures, upon which the Yearbook information is based, show that an increased number of people claim no religious affiliation whatsoever. Indeed this

14 For a full discussion of the background to the Treaty of Waitangi see Orange, Claudia 1987. *The Treaty of Waitangi*. Wellington: Allen and Unwin, Port Nicholson Press.

15 See, eg, Pratt, Douglas 1993. From Missionary Paternalism to Bicultural Partnership: aspects of Anglican and Methodist experience in Aotearoa-New Zealand. *International Review of Mission*, Vol LXXXII No 327, July/Oct 1993, 305-315.

16 Source: Statistics New Zealand 1996 Census.

category rose by one third over the previous (1991) Census to a point where fully one quarter of the New Zealand population recorded themselves in 1996 as having no religion. During the same period the numbers of Buddhists and Muslims more than doubled, while Hindus increased by about 50%. However, each of these groups comprise less than one percent of the total population, and most of the increment would be due to immigration factors.

Of the Christian denominations, Pentecostals, were the only group to experience significant growth – 55% - in the census period 1991-1996. In the mid 1990s Anglicans, comprising about 18% of the total population, were the single largest religious group, followed by the Roman Catholics on about 13%; Presbyterians on 12,5%; Methodists at 3,4% and Baptists on 1,5%. The Mormon religion, which has attracted a significant Maori constituency, accounted for a little over 1,1% of the total population of New Zealand. The major indigenous Maori Christian Church – Ratana – was fractionally over 1%. Although some details will have changed,¹⁷ the overall religious demography would today be much the same.

The year 1990 marked the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. During the 1970s young articulate and well-educated Maori were at the forefront of advocating a new consciousness of things Maori, both in terms of language and culture. By the 1980s a wider debate about the contemporary significance and application of the Treaty of Waitangi and, *inter alia*, the social relationships and institutional arrangements that held between the dominant white culture and the relatively impoverished and disadvantaged Maori population was underway. By the late 1980s there was a widespread resurgence of the teaching and use of Maori language. Today it is an official language (eg of the Courts and in Education – with prior notification University dissertations may be submitted in Maori) and a national Maori Language Commission had been established. Another commission – the Waitangi Tribunal – had been established in 1975 to hear and advise the Government on Maori grievances and settlement claims on the basis of the Treaty provisions. In 1985 the powers of this Tribunal were widened to take account of issues as far back as 1840, as a consequence of which the significance and purview of the Tribunal for Maori was considerably enhanced. The socio-political place of Maori in New Zealand society has now improved irrevocably, even though there are still issues of historical grievance and contemporary equity to be addressed and resolved. But, by and large, institutional mechanisms, as well as a requisite political consciousness, are in place to effect that.

SOME CONTEMPORARY ECCLESIAL ISSUES FOR NEW ZEALAND

In broad terms the 1980s was a major turning period in New Zealand social and political history. But it was also a turning point in terms of ecclesiastical history. The Protest Movement resisting and disrupting the 1981 Springbok Tour of New Zealand saw many Church people and their leaders at the forefront. This event of civil resistance both traumatically divided the country and was the catalyst for effecting a new communal consciousness in respect of institutionalised racism on the home front and, for the Churches, applying the principles of their long-standing anti-South African Apartheid stance to their own context vis-à-vis Maori. In the preceding two decades much of the focus of mainstream Protestant life had been on ecumenical endeavours. It was the relatively golden era of National and local Councils of Churches and the formation of both Union and Co-operating Parishes (mainly Methodist & Presbyterian).

17 At the time of writing (Jan 2003) the results of the 2001 Census were not yet published on the Statistics New Zealand Website.

In respect of the Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Methodists, together with two small denominations (Congregationalist and Churches of Christ) this period was dominated by negotiating, and seeking to implement, a Plan for Union – a 1960s conceived document aimed at conjoining these Churches into the United Church of New Zealand. The various vote-taking steps showed Methodists as having the highest degree of commitment (ca 95%) with the implication that, as a Church, it viewed itself as undergoing a process of ecclesial *kenosis*: it was prepared to give itself away for the sake of greater Church unity. Much the same attitude prevailed for the Congregationalists and Churches of Christ groups. The picture was somewhat more varied for the Presbyterians – some Presbyteries showed high levels of resistance and were inclined toward the denominational reactionary Westminster Fellowship perspective.¹⁸ Similar variations were to be found in the Anglican Church. A dissenting voice was given by the Selwyn Society, but, by and large, the voting percentages were sufficiently high to assume the Union would in due course proceed. In the end, however, the critical final Anglican vote round undertaken in the early 1980s failed to produce the anticipated outcome. Although the option of the remaining four Churches choosing to proceed without the Anglicans was raised, there was no real enthusiasm for an Australian-like Uniting Church. Decades of ecumenical commitment seemed, in the end, to have led nowhere, at least in respect to the goal of organic Church Union.

The key consequence of this failure was the resurgence of denominational identity. Anglicans, Methodists, and Presbyterians have, in the twenty or so years since the collapse of the Plan for Union, remained ecumenically engaged in many respects. But they have both redrawn their own Church identities and withdrawn from each other to a significant degree. This is largely because the focus of mainstream Protestant Church life in New Zealand switched, during the 1980s, from ecumenicity to biculturalism. The Churches picked up on the dominant political agenda and re-examined their own institutional arrangements in respect to Maori. But they each evolved a distinct response, which became integrated into the redrawn denominational identities. Anglicans and Methodists had, since the early 19th century, a strong missionary outreach to Maori, which had become institutionally structured as subsections within their respective ecclesial bodies. However, by the late 20th century missionary paternalism was rapidly giving way to the partnership in mission motif.¹⁹ The Presbyterian Church, which had arrived later in the 19th century, initially as a ministry to Scottish settlers mainly in the South Island, had later evolved a Maori Mission with some significant impact in a few select areas, especially in the North Island. For these, and other, churches the question of right contemporary relationship to, and perception of, their Maori constituency became urgent during the 1980s.

The Methodists, for example, as quickly as 1983, determined that they would, within ten years, become quite intentionally a “bicultural Church”, albeit ostensibly on the way to becoming a “multicultural” Church. However, it is clear that the model of ecclesial biculturalism adopted by the Methodists has contributed to some severe difficulties.²⁰ For, since the mid-1980s there has been effectively only two “partners” – Maori and *Tauīwi* (that is, all who are not Maori) – who, configured as institutional entities, together comprise the Church as an institution. All other ethnic and cultural identities have been subsumed within this bifurcation, and all formal decisions of the

18 Note: when the Methodists and Presbyterians in Australia joined to form the Uniting Church dissenting Presbyterians withdrew to form a continuing Presbyterian Church. The Methodists went in fully.

19 See Pratt, *From Missionary Paternalism to Bicultural Partnership*, *op cit*.

20 See Pratt, Douglas 1998. *Methodist Conference and Advent Hope: the Inclusive Christ. The Methodist Theological Review New Series*: No 1, 35-40; *Engendered danger and endangered gender: the Church and homosexual clergy – a case study* (forthcoming).

Church are effected by a process of “consensus” in respect to obtaining agreement between the two partner entities. Thus the Church, as a whole, can decide and do nothing that does not have the mutual agreement of the two cultural “partners”. While this appears a just structural resolution, the reality is that the way is open to new forms of ecclesial power play. Maori remain a small numerical minority within Methodism, but with an almost all-determining voice so far as the directions taken by the Church as a whole are concerned. And now other Polynesian groups, who are numerically much larger than Maori, but minority groupings nonetheless, have no parallel determining voice – their place is subsumed within that of the “Tauitiwi” cultural entity.

The Presbyterian Church has adopted a more cautious, some might say realistic, model by giving Maori a particular Synodal voice (*Te Hinota Maori*) within the structure of the Church, but this is one voice alongside other equal voices: none have the de facto power of veto that has been the case yielded by the Methodist model. Indeed, the Presbyterian General Assembly, which normally meets annually, “remains a body in which all votes are made by elders from parishes without any block voting by ethnic groups”.²¹

Anglicans have pursued a yet different model – a three-way institutional arrangement of ecclesial autonomy within a form of federal relationship. The Church today is, constitutionally, The Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. Using the Maori term “tikanga” (meaning “path” or “way” and referring to the diversity of customs and practices), the Anglican Church in 1990 created three semi-autonomous independent entities to embrace, respectively, Maori, Polynesian and European (or “Pakeha”, which would be inclusive of all other ethnicities who simply belong to that branch of the Church). By way of explanation, one bishop has remarked:

The idea of a several tikanga church seemed to the General Synod at the time to be a concrete expression of the gospel principles of unity in diversity and partnership between cultures, rather than an ecclesial arrangement that was simply driven by ethnic issues alone. The development was initiated by ethnic issues, but we discovered that we were dealing with an Acts 15 dynamic where we needed to discover what freedom of cultural expression and cultural vision meant, without the inevitable smothering effects of simple democracy, where, in our case, the white majority could and often did pursue a mono-cultural vision. The Book of Revelation speaks of the gathering of many tribes and languages around the throne of grace, implying eschatological realities where cultural identity and cultural self-determination were intrinsic to the goal of the Christian vision. Some would say that the tikanga-based church is therefore an anticipation of the vision and cannot be judged by a confessional or doctrinal statement that did not take this vision into account as being at the heart and the future of the gospel.²²

Thus each of Tikanga Maori, Polynesia, and Pakeha functions as an Anglican Episcopal unit, rather like a province, each with their own bishops and institutional arrangements such as dioceses. Each Tikanga may shape its own life and work, but within general parameters laid down by General Synod, “which remains the governing body of the whole and has powers to overrule any other episcopal unit”.²³ Every two years they come together in a General Synod to make

21 I am indebted to Rev Dr Ken Booth for this comment. Personal correspondence.

22 David Moxon, Bishop of Waikato, private correspondence to the author, Feb 2003.

23 Ken Booth, *ibid*.

determinations in respect of all three being members one of another comprising a single Church identity within the worldwide Anglican Communion, and to advance the question of the interrelationship between the three Tikanga. Anglicans, in other words, are pursuing an internal ecumenicity across an ethnically subdivided partnership which itself was effected to shift ethnic relations from a context of mission to that of ecclesial co-equality.

While there are strengths and weaknesses with each of the different models applied by these (and other) churches, all have addressed the fundamental question of their own institutional racism and arrived at a mode of overcoming that, arguably with greater or lesser degrees of success, and with varying implications for their own ecclesiology.

It is with this contextual overview in mind that the confessional *kerygma* of Belhar may be seen as speaking also to the New Zealand context, for the primary concerns of Belhar – the unity, mission and integrity of the Church – articulated in the context of addressing an ethnically determined ecclesiology, may yet have a message for another Church context wherein ethnic determinants seemingly predominate. But how do we go about identifying whether or not a confessional statement produced in one context may have relevance for another context? Even where a time- and place-specific confession of faith occurs, if it is truly *confessing faith*, as opposed to being a statement *about* faith, then we can reasonably look to its structure, form and essential content as having the resonance of a confession of the universal church.²⁴ Commenting on the resonance of Belhar is therefore the starting point to delineating a response beyond the particularity of Belhar. Articulating an overview analysis of the essence of Belhar is also required before turning finally to the question: does Belhar provide a *kerygma* for the New Zealand context?

THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR: RESONANCE AND ESSENCE

The general tenor and enduring applicability of Belhar is clear: it is no passive statement of confession “about” faith, rather it is an active confession *to* faith – it is an assertion of faith in action. So, Belhar confesses *to the work* of God, *to the unity and mission* of the Church, and *to the challenge* to the Church *to live out its life and witness* with integrity and theological congruency. In its content the Belhar Confession is grounded in Scripture and it is amply cognisant of the tradition of the Church universal. In other words, in its own theological methodology it reflects the primacy of Scripture and Tradition. But it also applies theological reasoning in the context of reflecting on experience that is both unique in its South African apartheid specificity on the one hand, and yet universal in its applicability as an exemplar of theo-cultural critique on the other. For Belhar, as a confession of faith, is no sanctimonious piece of religious solipsism: it confronts cultural constructs head-on. It situates cultural justice in the context of ecclesial unity.

Article 2 addresses the *unity of the Church*. It commences with a governing clause, which asserts the Church is One. But this is not simply an assertion of metaphysical universality: it makes the point that the Church embraces a comprehensive constituency – nothing less than the entire human family. The governing clause leads to a sequence of subsequent clauses: *we believe therefore* that reconciliation is not just a nice idea, it is a visible reality and, concomitantly, that there is an obligation laid upon the Church to enact unity. Furthermore, this unity is linked to

24 See Naudé, Piet 2003. *Confessing the one faith: Theological Coherence between the Creed of Nicea (325 AD) and the Confession of Belhar (1982 AD)*. Paper delivered to the Fifth Ecumenical Forum, Ecumenical Institute, University of Heidelberg, Jan 11, 2003.

witness – whatever threatens unity detracts from witness and so must be resisted. But unity is no imposed uniformity: ecclesial unity may be diversely expressed in terms of vibrant community. The Church, in other words, is not the collective of Christian clones. It is rather a family of diverse composition in equality of membership; a body whose unity is the interconnectedness of its distinctive parts. So, ecclesial unity occurs in the context of freedom, grace, acceptance and mutuality of *diakonia* –the free interplay of gifts, ability and service.

Belhar confesses to a powerful perception of Church as comprehensive dynamic community under God. It then goes on to articulate significant consequent determinations: *we therefore reject* all false absolutisms – in other words, any and all contemporary doctrinaire forms of “political correctness” that detract from the essential nature of the Church as a dynamic unity. And in relation to a clear stance against misleading absolutes goes the rejection of allied inauthentic spiritualities, inauthentic theologies and, importantly, all false (that is, arbitrary, non-faith based) criteria for membership within the Church. Belhar confesses to an open and inclusive Church under God.

Article 3 addresses the *mission of the Church* understood in terms of the salvific reconciliatory work of God. There is a two-part governing clause: the divine message of reconciliation is entrusted as both mark and task of the Church on the one hand and, on the other hand, reconciliation between peoples as well as between the individual and God, as both prospect and reality, is seen as the direct salvific work of the triune God. Two subsequent confessional clauses are given. First, that the divine message and work of reconciliation is contaminated by particular societal anomalies (here, of course, the contemporaneous social conditions of South Africa are in the foreground, but the confession is not restricted to that context). Second, any underlying doctrinal stance in support of such anomaly is false. So, this article of the confession leads to the consequent determination of what must necessarily be rejected: all teaching or doctrine that is supportive of unjust and gospel-denying social structures is antithetical to God’s salvific work of reconciliation in Christ.

Article 4 addresses the challenge to the Church to *act justly*. The governing clause asserts the incontrovertible premises that God seeks justice necessarily and calls the Church to act justly. In subsequent clauses Belhar confesses to belief that it is incumbent upon the Church to engage in the justice of God, and that this engagement requires the Church to stand against injustice. And it consequently determines that any ideology that legitimises injustice, together with any theology unable or unwilling to enact the resistance of the gospel (the salvific task of reconciliation) to unjust ideologies must of necessity be rejected.

RESPONSE TO BELHAR: A KERGYMA FOR THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT?

In what sense, if at all, can a confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa speak to the context of New Zealand, in particular to Churches – such as the Anglican and Methodist, about which I am in a position to speak – that do not have an intentional confessional tradition as do members of the Reformed family of Churches? They do, of course, incorporate the historic creeds – Nicea and the Apostolicum in particular – and have their founding documents with doctrinal standards embedded therein: the *Thirty-nine Articles* and the *Book of Common Prayer* for the Anglicans, for example, and the *Standard Sermons* and the *Notes on the New Testament* of John Wesley for the Methodists. And they also have their distinctive theological methodologies – the Lambeth Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Sacraments and Reason for the Anglicans, and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience for the Methodists. Also, these churches have within the New Zealand context evolved contextually appropriate liturgies that are nonetheless consonant with the traditions of the worldwide Church – the New Zealand Prayer Book of the Anglicans and the revisions to sacramental liturgies that has

been a hallmark of New Zealand Methodism to identify but two examples. The quest for apposite liturgy would seem to be an obvious touchstone for detecting evidence of contemporary theology. But it is by no means the only avenue of scoping significant theological positions.

Another very obvious dimension is, of course, the institutional arrangements that reflect ecclesiological priorities and so theological emphases. And in this regard it is clear that, to varying degrees, what in New Zealand is referred to as the “bicultural imperative” governing approaches to Church life and structures has become, in effect, identified as the gospel imperative appropriate to this context. But the quest for a relevant contextualisation of faith runs the risk of subsuming universal theological veracity to local agendas and perceptions. Belhar acts as a reminder to New Zealand as to the gravity of the risk and the cost, theologically and spiritually, when the trap of subsuming the gospel of Christ to the particularities of cultural ideology is sprung. A New Zealand response to the gospel kerygma contained within the Belhar confession might be delineated by way of identifying a set of challenges that the confession raises for the Church in the New Zealand context.

Challenge 1. In the first instance Belhar is a challenge to *theological structure and method*: it echoes the theological methodology of the Methodists in particular and, to a lesser degree, the Anglicans also. But, more to the point, Belhar is a reminder that the Church everywhere is required to proceed with theological intentionality and integrity in whatever it does and that, in fact, within each tradition of the Christian churches there lie resources of method and structure which are not to be ignored. Belhar is faithful to the confessional emphasis of the Reformed Tradition: can the Churches in New Zealand show similar faithfulness to their own traditions when confronted with significant ecclesiological and theological issues? In at least one situation this appears to be not the case.²⁵

Challenge 2. In the second instance Belhar is a challenge to the general propensity of Churches in New Zealand – in particular both the Anglican and Methodist Churches – of *adopting an uncritical stance of “politically correct” biculturalism*. That there can be proper affirmation of cultural diversity is certainly upheld by Belhar. However, that cultural ideals and ideologies should take priority over the *euangelion* is utterly rejected. To be the Church in any given place is to be the family of God and the agency of God’s mission in Christ²⁶ in such a way as to be in harmony with the Church Universal. Belhar challenges the particularity, insularity, and cultural hegemonies of the New Zealand context, hegemonies that risk dividing the Churches in New Zealand from their own wider familial fellowships. This is particularly a risk currently for Methodism; it is less so for the Anglicans, although they have been subject to the criticism that in adopting an ethnically structured constitution they have become an apartheid church of sorts.²⁷

The great risk in New Zealand is that in the attempt to rectify one set of cultural injustices, another set may be forged. In this context a curious confusion of cultural values can lead to the imposition of an apparent egalitarian ideal as, for example, in the assumption that to overthrow a process of clear debate and structured decision-making – as have the Methodists at their annual Conference, for example – in favour of engineering consensus outcomes is to honour the indigenous culture and allow it to participate on an equal footing with the dominant culture. This is not necessarily the case. Consensus decision-making is a widespread practice in New Zealand

25 See Pratt, Douglas. Engendered danger ... (forthcoming).

26 See eg, Pratt, Douglas 1993. Christ and Culture in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Pacific Journal of Theology*, Series II, No 10, 17-29.

27 I understand such critical comments have been articulated – privately rather than publicly – at international forums of the Anglican Communion such as the Lambeth Conference of Bishops.

Church and Society, which is highly contentious in its grounding assumption, even if it is of demonstrably practical benefit in some situations.

Challenge 3. In the third instance Belhar stands as a challenge to the Church in New Zealand – as elsewhere – to *beware confusing cultural integrity with the seductive appeal of autonomy*. The need for a Belhar confession arose out of a context wherein the apparent positive values of cultural independence, and a value placed on cultural self-determination, was structured into a particular form of imposed separate development with accompanying assumptions concerning the merits of racial group relative self-sufficiency. But all these reflect value sets that emerged from out of the mentality of European modernity. As values, they may indeed be themselves quite impositional so far as another culture is concerned – with paradoxical, if not tragic, consequences. However, it needs to be said that the enforced and structured separatism of apartheid is not the same as the chosen affirmative action of separate parallel structuralism of the New Zealand ecclesial context. Nonetheless, all forms of separatism, however positively framed, are challenged by Belhar's rightful insistence on the priority of the unity of the Church for the sake of the integrity of mission and the gospel call to enact God's justice.

There is a danger inherent in contemporary theological apologia within the New Zealand context. It is the danger of identifying the enacting of divine justice, in reference to socio-cultural realities, by way of promoting separateness and cultural autonomy. The warning signs are given in the outcome for Methodism, for example, wherein, since giving to the Maori section full self-determination since around 1970 in respect of ministry to its own, there has been a complete collapse of theological education for indigenous ordained ministry. There has been no Maori trained for ordained ministry within the Church since the late 1960s. This situation has been fuelled by an ideological perspective that held that normative theological education was a Western construct inappropriately suited to Maori culture. In this context, general theological education for ministry that has taken place (in respect to a non-ordained variant of ministry) has been necessarily culturally constrained. So, in consequence, when that Church today makes a determination in accord with its bicultural partnership model, the Maori partner is comprised virtually entirely of lay people. By contrast, the Polynesian subsections of the Taiuiwi partner value and attract ordained clergy. The Pakeha section itself – still the majority – appears, in consequence of deferral to the Methodist Maori model, to be increasingly ambivalent about ordained ministry – it has imbibed something of the Maori perspective, although not totally so.

In the Anglican context ordained ministry has been valued and promoted within the Maori Church, but today it is operating an alternate educational system with the risk that the divide between Maori ordained clergy and others will deepen. However, it would seem in the Anglican situation there is a greater scope for, and a clear openness to work at the need to forge, healthy relational links, although some would suggest this has yet to be addressed, let alone actively engaged. Nonetheless, I suggest the future appears more optimistic in respect to ameliorating the difficulties and risks inherent in the contemporary culturally divided ecclesial body.

Challenge 4. Paying attention to Belhar would clearly act as a reminder and stimulus to work at resisting and overcoming the negative effects of cultural autonomy. More to the point, however, is the fact that it took theologically grounded and sharpened minds to pen Belhar in the first place: the anti-intellectual underbelly of New Zealand society, which impacts with varying degrees of significance on the Churches (more so with the Methodists; to a lesser, but not absent, degree with the Anglicans) will result, if unchecked, in having Churches that are, to all intents and purposes, theologically illiterate. At the very least such communities run the risk of giving evidence of a reversal of the Troeltschian schema: retreating from being a bona fide denomination of the Church catholic back to forms of sectarian retrenchment. So, in the fourth instance I would see Belhar

offering a direct challenge to the Churches in New Zealand to *beware the lack of self-critical reflection and the seemingly inbuilt resistance to external critique.*

CONCLUSION: ON THE POSSIBLE RECEPTION OF BELHAR

Finally, what of the prospect of the reception of Belhar within New Zealand? Could Belhar be affirmed in the New Zealand context? I would suggest an affirmative response is possible, given due acknowledgement of the context and *kairos* specificity of the Confession, and recognising I am speaking from a context of Churches for whom there is no tradition of confessional reception as there is for the Reformed churches. However, it would certainly be useful for the Church in New Zealand to become aware of the Belhar Confession and to examine and apply its principles.

Belhar confesses faith into the reality of the Church in the world and out of clear grounding in Scripture and Tradition. It upholds the universality of the gospel and the comprehensive inclusiveness of the Church of Christ, which is one body. In Revelation chapter 5, verse 9, there is proclaimed the new song of the one worthy to effect salvation and to bring to God “saints from every tribe and language and people and nation”. The scope of the good news is nothing less than the whole inhabited earth. That was the essential message underpinning Belhar, and it provides the mandate today for Churches beyond South Africa to evaluate and respond to Belhar in terms of their own contexts and issues.