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Christian ethics in post-apartheid South Africa – a Reformed perspective

ABSTRACT

This paper portrays the ethical challenges facing South Africans in the post-apartheid era. I argue that the Confession of Belhar 1986 (hereafter referred to as Belhar) plays an illuminating role in describing these challenges as well as in suggesting ways in which South African churches can respond to them.

The paper is structured as follows. In a first round the origins of Belhar is sketched (a). Thereafter (b) the significance of the five articles of Belhar (1-5) for identifying, describing and showing ways to address the ethical challenges facing South African churches is indicated. Opposition to deism, agnosticism, disunity, alienation, injustice and wrong loyalties is strongly pleaded for. The paper concludes (c) with general remarks about the significance of Belhar for the ethical task of South African churches, especially Reformed churches.

A. THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR 1986 – ORIGINS

The South African reformed theologian Dirkie Smit distinguishes between the broader and narrower historical contexts within which Belhar came into being (*The Confession of Belhar: origins, contents, reception, relevance* 1998:1-6). According to Smith the following factors in the broader historical context led to Belhar: the apartheid ideology and praxis and the religious and biblical legitimating thereof by reformed thought, theology and churches; the struggle of various South African churches and of the ecumenical movement inside and outside South Africa against apartheid; the inspiration drawn from the Confessing Church in Germany, and the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Barmen Declaration, in South African churches.

Factors in the narrower historical context are the declaration of a *status confessionis* on the theological legitimating of apartheid by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa, Canada, in August 1982 and a similar declaration of a *status confessionis* by the synod of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church¹ (DRMC) in October 1982. The declaration of a *status confessionis* opened the doors for the formulation of Belhar at the same synod. This draft confession was discussed in congregations, presbyteries and various organs of the DRMC during

1 The Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) for coloured people was established in 1881 as a result of the decision of a synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in 1857 on the segregated celebration of the holy communion in terms of ethnicity. This decision paved the way for the establishment of separate churches along ethnic lines. In 1910 the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) for black people and in 1968 the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) for Indian people came into being. The DRMC and the DRCA unified in 1994 to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA).

the following four years before it was officially adopted as part of the confessional basis of the DRMC at the synod of the DRMC on 28 September 1986. The Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) also adopted Belhar as part of their confessional basis in 1991 before unification with the DRMC in 1994.

In the accompanying letter to Belhar the DRMC spelled out the attitude, authority, motive and expectation behind Belhar.

As far as the attitude behind Belhar is concerned, the letter explains that the political and ecclesiological (especially with regard to the theological justification of apartheid) situation in the country threatens the heart of the gospel. In this regard Belhar is a typical protestant, specifically reformed, confession which responds to an historical situation in which the gospel is threatened.

Like the other reformed confessions Belhar is rooted in Scripture and in no other motive whatsoever. The authority of Belhar is rooted in Scripture as the Word of God.

The motive of Belhar is to address a false doctrine, an ideological disturbance ... that threatens the gospel in the church and society. Belhar is not aimed against specific people, groups of people, a church or specific churches. Belhar appealed to members of the DRMC and other Christians to be on guard against the deceptive nature of this false doctrine, which manifests itself in the form of the accentuation of half-truths.

The hope of Belhar is that reconciliation and unity will pursue, that Christians who are alienated from each other will join hands, repent, forgive, be transformed in their personal and communal lives, and journey together in the power of the Lord and his Spirit on the road of reconciliation, justice and peace.

This information about the origins, spirit, authority, motive and hope of Belhar prepares the way for a discussion of the significance of the contents of Belhar for the ethical task of South African churches in the post-apartheid society.

B. BELHAR AND THE ETHICAL TASK OF SOUTH AFRICAN CHURCHES

Although Belhar was born in a specific historical situation the significance of its contents is not limited to that specific situation and circumstances. This is part of the message of the accompanying letter to Belhar. Dirkie Smit also states that although the reasons for a confession are historical, the truth and validity of the confession is derived from Scripture. This implies that the confession will have relevance in new times and new contexts (*Versoening – en Belhar?* 2000a:164).

Various prominent South African theologians have recently pointed to the ongoing relevance of Belhar.² John de Gruchy, a theologian of the United Congregational Church in South Africa, comments as follows on Belhar,

2 One should also note the various forms of opposition to Belhar. Dirkie Smit describes the opposition to specifically article three of Belhar which deals with God's identification with the wronged and which is viewed as the most controversial article of the Confession, as follows, "To some, the Bible and the Christian tradition has simply never taught this 'option for the poor'. To some, this claim fundamentally contradicts their understanding of the obvious universality of God's love and actions according to the Bible, especially the New Testament. To some, the idea of partiality is alien to their own moral convictions and not applicable to God. To some, it suggests a parallel of the very idea they are rejecting in Afrikaner civil religion, namely, the particularistic claim to be an *uitverkore volk*, an elected nation. To some, it sounds like nothing more than a crude theological restatement of Marxism and class-struggle theory. To others ... it may become a mere ideological weapon ..." (*Paradigms of radical grace* 1988:17).

The Belhar confession is the confession of a particular denomination, but it has important ecumenical significance and potential ... It has, in fact, opened up fresh possibilities for the emergence not only of a united reformed church but also of an ecumenical confessing church that transcends traditional confessing boundaries. But, by the same token, it recognizes other boundaries of division and conflict in the same way as the Barmen Declaration did. Whether or not the Belhar Confession actually achieves its potential is another matter, of course, one that has to do with whether or not the opportunity it offers is grasped (*Liberating Reformed Theology* 1991:218-219).

A theologian of the Dutch Reformed Church, Willie Jonker, had the following to say about the continuing significance of Belhar,

The Belhar Confession is a gift of God to our churches. It enriches and deepens the historic confessional treasure of the church. Reformed people have always believed that God is not only the God of justification by faith, but also the God of sanctification; that He is not only the God of the individual, but also of the community, not only of the worship service and personal quiet time, but also of politics and social justice. God does not only liberate us from our sin and guilt, but also from enmity and the various faces of suffering and injustice that people bring upon each other. He wills the sanctification of the whole life. Nevertheless, these insights are not manifested concretely in our historic confessions. It is any case not spelled out in these confessions. It took the evil and suffering of the political situation in South Africa to press this aspect of our confession from the heart of the church ... The message of Belhar is universal. Through the grace of God it is a contribution from our country to the confessional treasure of the world church (*Saamkyk na die Belydenis van Belhar maak die pad na mekaar oop* 1998:13 – translation from Afrikaans: NK).

The words of Jaap Durand, a theologian of the Uniting Reformed Church, in the conclusion of his sermon during the 1997 Synod of the Uniting reformed Church is worth quoting,

No matter what the background of Belhar is, we cannot ignore its contents. I want to state it emphatically that the Reformed churches, not only in South Africa, but of the world, let me say all the member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, would be poorer without the confession as articulated in Belhar. The implications of Belhar reach much wider than its original context. I wish the Reformed family would recognise this and that they do not only view it (Belhar – NK) as something that has relevance for South Africa only. I am convinced that the traditional Reformed confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries, despite their significance and value for the church, are inadequate to express the fullness of the Reformed faith. The three main themes of the Confession of Belhar – the unity of the church, the reconciliation amongst people and the justice of God to the poor and the needy – are not addressed in them. Very little is said about the unity of the church. Reconciliation among people and justice are totally absent. *The Confession of Belhar* is not meant for South Africa only (*Nagmaalsrede* 1997:637-640 – translation: NK).

Dirkie Smit locates the relevance of Belhar firstly in the sense of identity and clarity of calling that it gives to the Uniting Reformed Church. Churches who for decades found their identity in their involvement in the struggle against apartheid experience unclarity about their identity and calling in the post-apartheid situation of transformation to a pluralistic, secular democracy, where individualism and privatism, freedom of choice and the appeal of modern success-orientated religions pose big challenges to churches. In this situation Belhar, according to Smit, helps the Uniting Reformed Church,

The church knows in a fresh way what they believe, what their calling and task is. Internally (Belhar – NK) makes mutual acceptance and trust possible, and externally it brings a newfound assertiveness and clarity of witness (1998:19).

The second locus of the relevance of Belhar, according to various articles of Smit, is to be found in its contents, especially the articles which focus on unity, reconciliation and justice (1998:19-23; 2000a:162-165; *In diens van die tale Kanaäns? Oor Sistematiese Teologie vandag*, 2000b:footnote 102; *Living unity? On the Ecumenical Movement and Globalisation* 2001:15-17). It is my contention that all five articles³ are of importance for South African churches in the so-called post-apartheid era. They help churches to identify their most important ethical tasks. And they do so in a time when the challenges facing South African churches seem to be overwhelming. According to Smit the most important challenge to South African churches is to get clarity on their challenges,

In my opinion the first and most important challenge for the church in South Africa today is to obtain clarity on what the most burning tasks and challenges are that it is facing ... We have become insecure and confused, we don't know precisely what we are to do ... the country has been in political, social and economical transition ... we were not prepared for what was happening, and even now we still do not fully understand what actually has happened or how we are to react to it (*Revisioning during reconstruction? Contemporary challenges for the churches in South Africa* 1993:5).

It is exactly in this regard that Belhar makes a crucial contribution. It helps us to identify, to see and to describe our challenges. This recognition and description of challenges pave the way for eventually addressing it adequately. The ethical and theological challenges posed by the five articles of Belhar are consecutively outlined. Smit briefly suggests ways in which the ethical challenges for the current South African context can be inferred from Belhar,

Only Belhar helps us to say that the language inside and outside the church, today, here, should focus on the themes of freedom, unity, reconciliation, justice and responsibility.

Based in the hope of the church upon God in Christ which calls to genuine freedom (the preamble of Belhar; which is more than individualistic autonomy and

3 Smit refers to the articles on unity, reconciliation and justice as the three articles of Belhar and he identifies, besides these three, the preamble and conclusion to the confession. In this paper I use the numbering of the original document, which identifies the preamble as article one and the conclusion as article five. Article two focuses on unity, three on reconciliation and four on justice. For the purpose of this paper it is important to stick to this numbering of articles.

the guarantee of individual freedom), to living unity (the first article; which is more than mere democracy, lawgiving and structures), to genuine reconciliation (the second article; which is more than mere tolerance), to caring justice (the third article; which is more than the striving towards law and order, or equal opportunities in the free market), to a life of responsibility, (the conclusion; which is grounded in obedience to and the following of Christ, the Lord), the church recognizes the faces and causes of despair, and the church sees ways to serve (2000b:25).

Smit identifies three phases in the transformation process of South Africa in which articles two, three and four of Belhar successively were at stake. In the first phase the emphasis was on unity. The South African Constitution expressed this newly found unity. According to Smit the second phase was the Mandela period of reconciliation, which resembles article three of Belhar. Currently the Mbeki era has dawned with its emphasis on transformation and renaissance to economic justice. Smit adds that this identification of phases does not imply that the issues of unity, reconciliation and justice can be separated from each other. One is not possible without the other. Therefore, according to Smit, the subsequent phases did not replace earlier ones. All these challenges have to be addressed together (2001:16-17).

In the outline of challenges in this paper the resemblance with Smit's position becomes clear.

1. Belhar, deism and agnosticism

Article one of Belhar confesses faith in the triune God who assembles and cares for his church. This acknowledgement of the triune God is of utmost importance. In a context where existence, life, the future and even the truth of the gospel are threatened, confession of faith in the triune God who calls us and who cares for us, is no insignificant step. Despite so many positive developments like the dawning of democracy, the current South African situation is still filled with various threats, as the analysis in this paper will henceforth show. These negative facets of South African society cause many people to become despaired, pessimistic, melancholic, depressed and eventually hopeless. Dirkie Smit is of opinion that the deadly sin of *acedia*, the sin of omission, the sin of ignorance, of negligence and apathy is prevalent in South African society (2000a:164). An evil spiral exists in our country. Many negative experiences in our country like the lack of unity, reconciliation, justice and sound morality – which are outlined in the next sections – lead to *acedia*. Simultaneously *acedia* feeds the growth of these negative facets of South African society.

The North American theologians Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon (*The truth about God. The Ten Commandments in Christian life* 1998b:18, 28) reckon that Christians can become deistic and even agnostic. They make this statement in the North American modernistic context where they oppose, according to them, the phenomenon amongst many Christians, who become trapped in the liberal way of thinking, to think about the moral life in a way which reflects that they do not really take God seriously, that they do not really expect that God can make a difference. Hauerwas and Willimon state that these liberal Christians would give the same portrayal of the moral life, whether God exists or not. According to them they actually live deistically – that means they know God exists but their praxis creates the impression that they reckon that He withdrew Him from the affairs of this world – or even agnostically – that means they live as if it does not really matter whether God exists or not; they live as if you cannot really know the answer to the question whether God exists or not.

Hauerwas and Willimon's theory of deistic and agnostic Christians is perhaps also true of South African Christians. In the South African context, however, it is not only the dawning of the liberal democracy with its accompanying secularism, individualism and privatism, which causes

Christians to become deistic and agnostic. The various crises in the South African context, which are portrayed in subsequent sections of this paper, feed this phenomenon. In this context article one of Belhar appeals to South African Christians to take God seriously, to expect redemption and healing from Him, to focus on Him in the midst of suffering and despair. This article is true to the First Commandment of the Decalogue, which appeals to us to honour God. Hauerwas refers to Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther who are of opinion that we obey all the commandments if we obey this commandment. Those who obey the first commandment, who acknowledges God as God, who honour God, are the people who trust upon Him. This trust enables them to obey the other commandments. Consequently they will, for instance, not steal, because God will provide (*Sanctify them in the truth* 1998a:50-53).

Applied to the South African situation we can conclude that we can only face the challenges posed by the four other articles of Belhar if we pay thorough attention to the first one, if we honour God, if we trust upon Him, if we take Him seriously, if we, through God's grace, are freed from deism and agnosticism.

This article is not indispensable only with regard to our faithfulness to the challenges posed by the consequent articles. It also indicates that the honour of God is at stake in the other articles. The South African theologian Russel Botman is of opinion that the articles of Belhar do describe God to us. It tells us something of the nature and actions of God and of its implications for our lives. According to Botman the *imitatio Dei* is central to Belhar,

... to confess faith ... is to follow God in his acts of reconciliation, in the way He creates unity, in his establishment of justice (*Gereformeerdeheid en die Belydenis van Belhar* (1986)? 1998:94 – translation from Afrikaans: NK).

Not to follow God with regard to his commitment to unity, reconciliation and justice, not to honour Him, not to live according to the Reformed principle of *solī Deo gloria*, not to recognise that we have to do with the living God every moment and on every square inch of the world, is to make us guilty of idolatry. In fact, powers, which oppose unity, reconciliation and justice, are not only dishonouring human beings. They, in fact, dishonour God. (Botman 1998:94-95).

According to Smit this doxological focus on God in article one of Belhar forms the theological logic of the other articles as well,

The deepest intention is every time doxological, to praise God, as the God who gives unity to the church, who reconciles believers, who is the Help of the helpless. From this it can be inferred that God calls the church to follow Him, to seek and practise unity, to practise reconciliation, and to stand by the destitute (2000a:164 – translation from Afrikaans: NK).⁴

4 In this context it is worthwhile noting the statement by the feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson that Christian theology in the 20th century responded to the accusation of a theism that portrays God by implication as deistic, by emphasising the doctrine of God, specifically the doctrine of the trinity. This implicit deism, according to Johnson, was expressed in classic formulations like the following: God is a projection of the best human qualities that robs persons of their own dignity (Feuerbach); God is an opiate of the people whose promises of future reward cut the nerve of passion for justice (Marx); God is an illusion that fulfils the wish for a cosmic protector but keeps the believer immature (Freud). To these accusations and also to the strengthening of this accusation that God has withdrew Himself from this world by the history of massive, public and bloody suffering in the 20th century, Christians responded with the confession of faith in the relational Christian God (*Trinity: to let the symbol sing again* 1997:301-302). The resemblance with the faith confessed in article one of Belhar in a context where deism is a threat, is remarkable.

Article one of Belhar calls us to honour God as the One who is alive and who can be known, and thereby oppose agnosticism. It appeals to us to believe in God as the One who is involved in this world and not apathetic, as deists believe. It inspires us to recognise his nature and deeds of unity, reconciliation and justice and to trust Him enough to be his followers.

2. Belhar and continued disunity

The scene with regard to church unity in South Africa remains bleak. Smit states that solidarity, mutual love and support are on the decrease within denominations and congregations (2000a:163). Even within churches that unified, practised unity is hard to found. This is true of, amongst others, the Uniting Reformed Church, the Anglican Church, the Lutheran Church and the Presbyterian Church. Moreover, the unification processes amongst different denominations, like the Uniting Reformed Church, Dutch Reformed Church, Reformed Church in Africa and the part of the Dutch Reformed Church that did not unify with the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1994, are not progressing satisfactorily. Despite noble decisions by all these churches about church unity,⁵ the praxis of their unity processes currently does not raise excitement. Moreover, many commentators on the South African ecclesiological scene refer to the decrease in the involvement of churches in ecumenical affairs.

This continued disunity in South African church life can be attributed to sociological factors like a wrong dealing with diversity in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic and related status, culture, language and worship style. The dawn of the modernistic or liberal *Zeitgeist* with its elements of individualism, privatism and even secularisation causes many Christians not to take the question of unity, koinonia and community seriously. It rather causes them to be apathetic with regard to these issues and to live self-centeredly. The South African theologian Etienne de Villiers reckons that the process of modernisation has not only restricted the influence of religion and churches to the private sphere, but that it also has led to an attitude of individualism amongst believers. The urbanisation process in South Africa with its accompanying disruption of the extended family, has also fed the growth of individualism (*Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en die nuwe situasie in die samelewing* 1995:559).

This brief analysis explains the relevance of article two of Belhar in the current South African society. In the light of the theological logic of the articles of Belhar referred to above, this article confesses that God is a God of unity. It therefore appeals to God's church to accept the gift of unity and to seek unity. The church, therefore, cannot accept that division and separation are the only ways to deal with ethnic, economic and other kinds of diversity. Her unity is not uniformity. Her unity is enriched by diversity. The church cannot accept the apathy and neutrality with which the spirit of individualism responds to this challenge. Unity is not only a gift; it is also a divine command. It is not something you can be neutral about. It is a command of God. More than that,

5 The most recent decisions of the Dutch Reformed Church concerning apartheid and church unification are remarkable. The 1998 synod of the Dutch Reformed Church took the following decision about apartheid in response to discussions with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches,

The Dutch Reformed Church assures the churches of the Alliance that it rejects apartheid as wrong and sinful, not simply in its effects and operations, *but also in its fundamental nature* (*Handelinge van die Algemene Sinode* 1998:509 – emphasis: NK).

With regard to church unification the same synod has expressed its disappointment with the slow progress in this regard and has committed itself to one denomination for the so-called family of Dutch Reformed Churches (1998:516).

it is part of the being of the triune God and also of his church. Not to be one, not to seek unity is to betray not only the character of the church, but also of God. And because it is part of our being it is not a unity that is forced or imposed, but it is, according to Belhar, a unity in freedom.⁶

A united church can be a symbol of hope in a society where the unity in governments, sports and cultural bodies, schools and universities, work places and in various agents of civil society is still so very fragile and in many instances artificial and forced by external, political and economic rather than internal, fundamental motives.

3. Belhar and alienation

Despite progress with regard to reconciliation in our country, as exemplified, amongst others, by the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was established by parliament to deal with the gross violations of human rights during the apartheid years, the levels of alienation, enmity and suspicion amongst various ethnic groups remain high. The description of relationships in South African society by Dirkie Smit as well as by Frank Chikane, former secretary general of the South African Council of Churches and currently director general in the office of the President of the Republic of South Africa, remains applicable and is worth quoting,

... for a very long time in South Africa we were separated from one another in every conceivable way. Probably the most serious, disconcerting and the most challenging dimension of the conflict in South Africa was and probably still is our “apartheid” – “separateness”, our being divided in such a manner that we are in fact strangers who live in mutual distrust and animosity. Due to numerous divisive measures South Africans came to differ from one another, became separated and estranged in a variety of ways. To mention only a number of the divisions, we have: multiculturalism, ethnic variety, multi-lingualism, colonialism, racial differences, differences of class and of standing, the divisive legacy of patriarchy and sexism, and religious heteronomy. It has become commonplace that South Africa is a microcosm, a remarkable mirror image of the world itself with its enormous variety, estrangement and conflict, “a world in one country”. For so many different reasons South Africans have become strangers to one another, that indeed, we do live in different worlds (Smit 1993:6).

If I had to sum up the situation in South Africa, I would say that South Africa consists of at least two worlds and at least two histories. The black world and the white world. The world of the privileged and the underprivileged, the oppressors and the oppressed. All this because of the heretic system of apartheid ... In the past we have alienated ourselves from one another. We have violently denounced one

6 Belhar enhances church unity. Even the fact that the 1997 synod of the Uniting Reformed Church has decided that they would not unify with sister churches without Belhar, does not imply that Belhar is a stumbling block to church unification. Article 2 of the Church Order of the Uniting Reformed Church, which deals with the confessional basis of the Uniting Reformed Church, acknowledges the historical character of confessions. This implies that new confessions or amendments to current confessions can be formulated if new contexts and better readings of the Bible require the church to confess her faith afresh. The confessional basis of a new united church, therefore, might exist of confessions, which were not part of the confessional bases of all the unifying churches. The reception of each other as unifying churches imply that we accept each other's confessions – especially since our confessions determine our identities. To a large extent we are our confessions. In the case of the Uniting Reformed Church it can be stated that Belhar constitutes her identity. In ecumenical circles the term reception refers to both the acceptance of confessions and of each other.

another. We have viciously attacked one another. We have been divided one against another: blacks against whites; women against men; young people against old people; rich against poor; privileged against the underprivileged. We have hated one another. We have fought one another. We have killed one another even within the very body of Christ (Chikane, quoted by Smit 1993:6-7).

Article two of Belhar confesses that this alienation does not have the last word. It cannot accept the idea that people of different ethnicities for instance, just because of that fact, cannot live in reconciliation, harmony and peace. According to Smit the practices of apartheid rested, perhaps unconsciously, on the faith of the irreconcilability of people from diverse backgrounds.⁷ This faith was manifested, not as the catechism of the book, but of the heart (2000a:164-165). In our current situation the danger is real that the inadequate progress with reconciliation amongst South Africans can be attributed to and can simultaneously lead to the faith in the irreconcilability of people.

Belhar confesses the Christological foundation of the reconciliation between human beings and God, as well as amongst human beings. Belhar helps us to address the question of reconciliation amongst South Africans theologically. The South African theologian Adrio König is of opinion that traditional Christian theology has emphasised the vertical dimension of reconciliation, that is the reconciliation with God, but that it has neglected the horizontal dimension thereof, namely the reconciliation amongst human beings (*Versoening. Goedkoop? Duur? Verniet?* 1996). Article three of Belhar makes a very important contribution in this regard. This article encourages us to accept reconciliation with God and amongst human beings as a gift and to participate in the ministry of reconciliation in the world.

4. Belhar and injustice

In 1994 a spirit of euphoria prevailed in our country because of the dawning of our first democratic elections. Although political liberation has arrived, we are, seven years later, still far from the point of economic and related liberation.

South Africa shares the joint first position in the world with Brazil as the countries with the biggest gaps between rich and poor. In South Africa the economic discrepancies run along ethnic lines. Fairly recent studies have shown that the income of the poorest 40% of the population has decreased by 21% in the period 1991 to 1996, whilst the income of the richest 10% are growing (Whiteford, A & Sevenster, D E, *Winners and losers. South Africa's changing income distribution in the 1990's*).

Article four of Belhar confesses that justice is part of the being, the nature of God. It confesses that the church should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and in solidarity with poor, the destitute and the wronged. It is noteworthy that this article bases the struggle of Christians for justice by implication in the being and identity of God and believers. This coincides with the appeal by so-called virtue and character theologians like Stanley Hauerwas that the task of Christians are not only to formulate theories of justice, but in the first place and fundamentally to be just persons.

... for Christians, justice is first and foremost a claim about the kind of people we ought to be. You cannot have, contrary to liberal assumptions, a just social system,

7 The 1978 synod of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church condemned apartheid as sin exactly because it functioned with the underlying pseudotheological notion of the irreconcilability of people (*Agenda and Minutes of the 1978 Synod*). Apartheid, therefore, or any other practice or ideology, which believes in the irreconcilability of people, betrays the heart of Christianity, namely the doctrine of reconciliation.

without people being just. The attempts to create such systems end in creating greater state power in the name of doing justice. Christians do not need such accounts of justice to know that the ill need care and the hungry need food. By learning to share their lives in the church, Christians have learned that justice often demands no more than the most common acts of care (*Should Christians talk so much about justice?* 1986:6).

Hauerwas perhaps reflects the spirit of this article with his appeal that Christians should be totally involved in the quest for justice, not only by proposing theories and advocating values, but by being just people, that is by embodying the virtue of justice. The type of justice that Hauerwas refers to also resembles the fact that the poor, destitute, wronged, suffering and needy that Belhar refers to do not only imply the socio-economically poor, but other kinds of suffering and injustices as well.

A last crucial remark with regard to the importance of this article with its emphasis on those who suffer. This article reminds us of the notion, which should always determine the agenda of the church's social ethic, namely the fact that God identifies in a special way with those who suffer. Since the 1960s Liberation Theology reminded us of this truth. Belhar does the same, whilst avoiding the danger of making God's solidarity with wronged and suffering people exclusive and of talking in a reductionist way about it.

5. Belhar and competing loyalties

The last article of Belhar confesses faith in Jesus Christ, the *Kurios*, and calls for obedience to Him alone amidst the appeal for our loyalty from many other forces. In the immediate historical context of Belhar, the force of the powers of apartheid wanted to silence protesting voices, to co-opt them and to convince them to accommodate to the apartheid ideology and to render loyalty to it. In this context Belhar appealed to us to be loyal to Jesus Christ alone, as the first Christian martyrs and the martyrs at a later stage of the history of the church in various parts of the world did.

Although the apartheid regime with its accompanying forces no longer exists in South Africa, various other forces, which are in opposition to Christ, ask for the loyalty of Christians.

Churches who fought against apartheid can become so anxious in their wish that the first democratically elected government of South Africa functions successfully that they might enter the danger zone where they are not adequately critical with regard to the government of the day, on Christian theological and ethical basis. One of the main accusations against these churches is indeed that their prophetic voice has become quiet. This silence might be ascribed to the fact that churches still struggle to identify their public theological role in a democratic society. Nevertheless, Belhar reminds churches of their ultimate loyalty and obedience in the light of the Christian theological and biblical tradition.

This threat of Constantinianism, as Hauerwas and Willimon call this positioning towards the government (*Resident Aliens* 1989:30-36), is also real for those churches that originally supported apartheid. To regain credibility amongst their own members and in society these churches also run the risk of compromising where they should actually confront. It is, of course, important that these churches are, in the light of their unfortunate histories during apartheid, more cautious, but this does not mean that they should extend this sensitivity to the point where they do not let their prophetic voices be heard. Neither should the warning from many within their ranks that any involvement in public affairs can lead to the wrong use of the gospel, as has happened in these churches during apartheid, inhibit the public proclamation of the commitment of the church to Jesus Christ – especially where this commitment entails criticism of the authorities, as well as concrete, public and even political involvement for the sake of the poor and the suffering.

It is not only Constantinianism that threatens the loyalty of Christians and churches to Jesus Christ. The liberal democratic constitution has brought with it freedom that South Africans in pre-

democratic South Africa did not know. In the sphere of morality, for instance, the involvement of government by means of legislation is increasingly being minimized. Legislation, as in any democracy, strives to deal only with that moral principles without which no society can exist in harmony, namely respect for life, truth and the property of the other including their bodies (Kuitert, *Morele consensus: moegelijkheden en grenzen* 1988:33). The other facets of morality are increasingly privatised. This implies that individuals must decide on their own about moral matters that the government, in many instances with the assistance of those churches who supported them, previously decided about. Examples of these ethical issues are gambling, lotteries, abortion on demand, euthanasia, prostitution, pornography as well as nakedness, eroticism and sexual promiscuity in the media. Christians are now challenged to choose against certain moral practices, not because a law of government prohibits it, but because of our loyalty and obedience to the Christ that Belhar confesses to.

Materialism is also one of the idols in post-apartheid South Africa, which appeals to the loyalty of Christians. The high level of fraud, corruption and nepotism is an indication of the way in which South Africans, also South African Christians, bend to this idol. In this context the message of Belhar is loud and clear. It calls for a recognition of and opposition to the evil of materialism and greed which, in subtle ways, enters the hearts of churches and Christians, and which does not even bother treating the environment with disrespect in order to fulfil its selfish motives.

This article of Belhar also puts a corrective on the high level of lawlessness in South Africa. This anomaly is manifested in all spheres of life, from the breaking down of traditional family values and the disobedience of traffic rules to the breaking of laws, which protect life, truth and the property and dignity of human beings. Obedience to Christ, which Belhar calls for, entails obedience to the laws in society, which are not in conflict with the biblical moral directives. Faithfulness to this article of Belhar entails investigating and addressing, from theological and sociological perspectives, the causes of this high level of lawlessness.

C. CONCLUSION

The Confession of Belhar calls upon churches – especially Reformed churches – in South Africa and hopefully in other parts of the world, to honour and trust upon God and to put their hope in Him as the living God who is present in our midst. It challenges us to live in unity in a world where diversity and pluralism lead to disunity, enmity and bloodshed. It calls us to be servants and agents of reconciliation and healing in a broken world. It appeals to us to be just people who care and sacrifice on behalf of the suffering people of this world. It urges us to be always sure as to Whom we are loyal in a world where the competition for our loyalties is fierce.

It has hopefully also become clear from the outline of the ethical challenges in the light of Belhar that Belhar is representative of the Reformed position. Belhar, indeed, affirms highly cherished Reformed notions afresh, amongst others the honour and sovereignty of the triune God; the election and calling to service of the church by God; the Christological and covenantal nature of unity and reconciliation; the involvement of God in history, politics and economics; the lordship of Christ in every square inch of the world⁸, and the faithfulness to Scripture.

8 The Reformed theologian John Leith states clearly that for Reformed Christians the world we live in, the society we live in, the political, social and economic realities we live in, are all matters of faith. The central theme of Calvinist theology is the conviction that every human being has every moment to do with the living God (*Introduction to the Reformed tradition* 1981:70). According to Lehmann, in Reformed theology God is called the Great Politician (*Ethics in a Christian context* 1963) and according to Meeks the Supreme Economist (*God the economist. The doctrine of God and political economy* 1989).

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