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## The Belhar Confession – 29 years on

### ABSTRACT

Twenty-nine years down the line, this essay revisits the birth of the Belhar Confession in 1982. It describes the immediate reaction in South Africa, specifically by the Dutch Reformed Church, to the acceptance of this confession by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church. It shows how the Confession was “held hostage” by church politics in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa from 1982 until 1994, constituting and continuing to constitute, a major stumbling block for efforts of reunification between the DRC and DRMC (and later, URCSA) – either to the chagrin or relief of those involved. In light of the continued importance of this confession with regard to the issue of church reunification and its positive reception over time in some North American and European Reformed churches, the article calls for a reconsideration of the possible role the confession can play in a new millennium, in a vastly different South African church and society and in a time thinking about confessions seem to be closer to those of Calvin and the reformers, and of Karl Barth, steering away from the dogmatic Dordt way in which it for long understood by many Dutch Reformed Christians in South Africa.

### INTRODUCTION

The Belhar Confession was a ground breaking document in South Africa in the 1980s. While the *Kairos Document* is often quoted as the epitome of the South African churches’ confessional protest against apartheid, it came three years after the adoption of Belhar as a draft confession by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa (DRMC) in 1982.

The birth of the Belhar Confession was a surprise development at the 1982 General Synod of the DRMC. It was not on the agenda and no one thought of it before it was suggested by Professor Gustav Bam of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Western Cape.

The issue on the table was a report of the ad hoc commission for ecumenical affairs, *Prinsipiële Besinning oor Versoening en Apartheid* (Principled Consideration Regarding Reconciliation and Apartheid). The commission proposed that the synod follow the example of the Ottawa Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) that “the secular gospel of apartheid” constitutes a *status confessionis* (state of confession) for the church of Jesus Christ (DRMC Synod 1982:704).

The motion by the ad hoc commission did not mention anything about a confession. It merely took over the decision of WARC in Ottawa earlier in 1982 with a few minor changes. It was only after the motion was moved that Professor Bam spoke, quoting Karl Barth and reading the first article of the Barmen Declaration, that the idea of a confession dawned on the synod (DRMC

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Synod Agenda and Minutes 1982:605, 606).<sup>2</sup> Bam asserted that declaring a *status confessionis* cannot stand on its own:

[A] *status confessionis* asks for a clear confession and a clear rebuke from the church. It must create a symbol that will become part of the confession of the church whereby the church declares (its position) now and here, a confession for the church to recognise the heresy (DRMC 1982:605) [my translation – NH].

An ad hoc committee consisting of Professors Bam and Jaap Durand, Doctors Dirkie Smit and Allan Boesak and Reverend Isak Mentoor drew up a draft confession with an accompanying letter. The draft Confession was accepted as such by the synod on 6 October 1982 (DRMC 1982:637). Four years later, at the 24th Synod of the DRMC, the Belhar Confession was adopted as one of the confessions of the church.

## THE REACTION TO AND INFLUENCE OF BELHAR IN THE 1980'S

Much has been written on the content of the Belhar Confession. For this study it is enough to make a few comments regarding its historical significance. While the South African Council of Churches issued several strong statements against apartheid (see De Gruchy 1979:118ff.), and WARC suspended the membership of two Afrikaans Reformed churches (the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk) at its General Council in Ottawa, no church or Christian movement ever felt the need to confess its faith anew in the midst of the South African political situation and the constant support for and religious justification by white churches of the oppressive regime.

### Reaction to Belhar

The reaction of the DRC and its members was predictable. At best the Confession was seen as an inappropriate document at the wrong time. In its official answer to Belhar the *Breë Moderatuur* (executive council) referred to the discussions at the Belhar Synod as a *status accusatonis et divisionis* (a state of accusation and division) (quoted in *Die Kerkbode* of 9 April 1984, see Gaum 1997:36). The term is possibly only a Latin translation without any technical meaning in church history. However, the DRC made it clear that as a church it was not impressed by the process and saw it as an attack on them. Even moderates were cautious to afford any authority to the Belhar Confession. The respected Old Testament scholar Ferdinand Deist defined a *status confessionis* as an explicit declaration of the church or part of the church declaring that a specific political (or economic or social) system or action contradicts the Word of God and [therefore] the church dissociates itself in public from it (Deist 1983:52).

According to Deist's understanding, a church may only declare a *status confessionis* or proceed to an act of confession once all other remedies have failed and he doubted that the DRMC could really say that this had been the case (Deist 1983:55).

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<sup>2</sup> It is known that Bam requested the moderator to allow him the last word before the synod voted on the *status confessionis* motion. A motion of closure prevented the moderator to give him the last word. Instead, the moderator gave the floor to Bam immediately after the motion was moved. Since Professor Bam has passed away, one can only speculate on what he wanted to say before voting took place. It may be that he wanted the synod to consider the seriousness of declaring a *status confessionis*, pointing out the confessional consequences of such a decision. Being a principled, consistent Christian, he used the opportunity after the motion was moved, to guide the synod towards the next step.

Deist made the classic mistake to see the *status confessionis* primarily as a reaction of the church to an unjust system. The Confession is, however, much clearer. In paragraph 3 the so called Accompanying Letter to the Confession explains that the latter is not directed at specific people or groups but against a false doctrine and an ideological distortion that threatens the gospel in the church and country. The problem with apartheid was not only that it was a dehumanising political ideology, but that it was proclaimed by both the state and a significant section of the church as a God given solution in the South African context.

If a moderate like Deist had so little understanding of the issues that lead the DRMC to follow the example of the church of the Reformation and the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, the chances that the rest of the white DRC would react in a positive manner was almost non-existent. Jonker described October 1982 DRC Synod as one driven by the momentum of the political right in Afrikaner politics (Jonker 1998:164).

If the DRMC expected a sudden change of heart in its so called mother church, the Belhar Confession was obviously not the right instrument, and it definitely did not come at the right time. Jonker (1998:164) referred to the influence of growing extreme right wing tendencies in South African politics as one of the strong forces at the 1982 DRC Synod. The majority of the elected leadership were people whose rightist political sentiments were well known and clearly expressed in the debates and motions.

However, there were also some positive signs, albeit from individuals and small segments in the DRC. The most important reaction to Belhar came from the Western Cape Synod in 1983. However, it remained a solitary voice in the 1980s.

### **Belhar's influence in South Africa**

Belhar could never break out of its Reformed confessional box. The first twelve years between 1982 and 1994 it was held hostage by the church politics of the Dutch Reformed family. It became the shibboleth of those in favour of structural unity of the ethnic denominations, while its opponents (the majority in the DRC) scrutinised Belhar with the proverbial comb to find traits and signs of its allegiance to liberation theology. While the DRMC was successful in using Belhar as a tool in its negotiations on reunification with the majority of congregations in the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA), it failed to create a unified confessional platform for all black Christians in the historical Dutch Reformed family. The Reformed Church in Africa, consisting predominantly of Christians of Indian descent, and a number of churches in the DRCA did not join the new church.

The DRMC, and after reunification URCSA, was not prepared to compromise on the issue of the Belhar Confession. Belhar is seen as a confession similar in status to the three other Reformation confessions of the Dutch Reformed family, the so called Three Forms of Unity, that is, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Belgic Confession (1566) and the Canons of Dordt (1619).

For those opposed to reunification in the DRC, the strong position taken by the DRMC and later URCSA was like manna from heaven. They could hide behind some dogmatic or confessional position as to why they opposed Belhar as a confession of faith.

In one sense the approach of the DRMC and URCSA can be said to have been and to be too narrow. Any possible influence that Belhar could have had outside the Dutch Reformed

churches came to naught because of the bitter struggle in the DRC family. When the ethnic denominations of the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), the biggest Pentecostal church in South Africa, united in 1994, they saw no reason to be involved in any movement or to give attention to a document that, in their minds, did not result in a unified church.

## BELHAR AND THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS

Unlike the Lutheran confessions, Reformed confessions from the Reformation period were never seen as compendia or codifications of Reformed dogma. While the Genevan Harmonica Confessionem of 1581 and the Corpus et Syntagma of 1612 were, like the Lutheran Formula Concordia, a compilation of several confessions, it never had the same authority. The two Reformed confessions remained private, regional confessions binding only a small section of Reformed churches (Weber 1962:15). It is interesting to note that both these ancient Reformed confessions included important Lutheran confessions such as the Augsburg, Saxon and Württemberg Confessions – possibly as a sign of the unity of the Protestant tradition.

The Reformed confessions were never drafted with the intention to become enforceable confessions of the church. The Zürich Confession of 1523 was drafted by Zwingli at the request of the rulers of the city to give them an adversarial document to use against radical Protestantism and Catholicism. The document deals with the place of images in the church and the role of the Eucharist. While the rulers of the city accepted the document, it was never adopted by any church council (Augustijn 1969:11).

In the Lutheran tradition confessions are always more formal. They were much more than documents guiding political authorities in Lutheran cities. The Augsburg Confession became an authoritative confession of the Lutheran faith after 1553. After 1580, the Formula Concordia codified the Lutheran confessions.

This approach of affirming one confession or a set of confessions at the cost of all others was not initially followed by the Reformed tradition possibly because of the influence of Calvin and the fact that Reformed churches spread much wider across Europe than the Lutheran churches.

While both Calvin and Zwingli often asserted their unity with the Lutherans by affirming the Augsburg Confession, Calvin discouraged the French Reformed church to accept it as a confession because Augsburg was closely related to the German context and issues which were not relevant in France, and also because he doubted the quality of the document (Augustijn 1969:31).

Flexibility similar to that of Calvin was also demonstrated by the next generation in the Reformed version of the Formula Concordia, the Harmonica of 1581. While they had similar objectives, they followed totally different approaches. The Formula Concordia is a codification of Lutheran confessions and dogma, while the Harmonica is not a codification of the Reformed faith. All the Protestant confessions, including three Lutheran confessions, the Augsburg Confession, the Saxon Confession and the Württemberg Confession are equal to each other, organised according to subject and include a short explanatory notes. It also included the Bohemian Confession of the Hussites and the Anglican Confession (1562). The message of Jean-François Salvart and his co-workers was clear: none of the classic confessions has prominence over the other. And the Lutheran, Hussite and Anglican confessions are included without any adversarial statements.

Augustijn quotes from a book by Ursinus, one of the drafters of the Heidelberg Catechism. This book was published in 1581, eighteen years after the adoption of the Catechism. In it Ursinus condemned the static, inflexible use of confessions (Augustijn 1969:64f.). Not all disagreements are heresies or lies, Ursinus observed. He severely criticised Lutherans for making the acceptance of Lutheran confessions a prerequisite for Christian fellowship. To Ursinus, confessions were not necessarily eternal truths valid in all places and in all circumstances.

The next generation of Reformed theologians and church leaders in the Netherlands and Germany did not adhere to the foundations laid by the Harmonica Confession or the understanding of Calvin and Ursinus. In 1619 they created their own Reformed concord at the Synod of Dort where the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort were accepted as the so called Three Forms of Unity. It is important to bear in mind that the latter is a continental compilation that played little if any role in the English speaking world. It never became the “Formula Concordia of the Reformed world”. The Westminster Confession became the most prominent Reformed confession of the English speaking world.

The Synod of Dort nevertheless represented a clear break with the tolerant character of the first two generations of Reformed thought. In South Africa, with its Dutch/German Reformed heritage, the Three Forms of Unity were seen as the authoritative confessions – especially by Afrikaans Reformed churches.

There was always a school of thought in continental Europe that opted for the less dogmatic and more flexible approach of the early Reformed churches and theologians, Karl Barth being its most prominent proponent. He summarised his own understanding of the authority of confessions in an article he wrote shortly after the Synod of Barmen (Barth 1976:592ff.).<sup>3</sup>

In Barth’s understanding, confessions are always temporal and called for by a specific historical situation. A confession can, therefore, never be applied in a legalistic way or forced upon others (Barth 1956:625f.). Therefore, the authority of a confession does not depend on the authority of a synod, or the way in which it was adopted, but in its conformity to Scripture. “What really decides its authority is simply its content as scriptural exposition, which is necessarily confirmed or judged by Scripture itself” (Barth 1956:638). Barth warns against two extreme approaches to confessions. On the one hand, one should not place it on par with Scripture or see it as a direct revelation from God. However, on the other hand, it is an important document that draws the line between the true and false church:

It says Yes and No – not as God says Yes and No, but in the human sphere, and yet in that sphere with an appeal to God Himself, and therefore with a definite assertion and denial of the unity of the Church, and with a definite indication in what sense and within what limits there is or is not fellowship in God (Barth 1956:643).

## BELHAR, A REFORMED CONFESSION

Despite its history as a confessional document that had a tremendous effect on the South African churches, the Belhar Confession never managed to play any significant role outside the Reformed tradition. While several American and European Reformed churches aligned

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<sup>3</sup> Although written in 1934, a fragment of the article was only published in 1976 in *Evangelische Theologie* Vol. 36, several years after Barth’s death.

themselves in some way or another with the Confession, in Southern Africa it soon became internal Reformed “confusion”. It became the ammunition in the unity battles between the DRC and URCSA, a battle that seems to be far from over.

In the process both the DRC and URCSA deal with the Belhar Confession in the spirit of the Synod of Dordt. For URCSA this means that no compromise is possible: the DRC has to adopt the Belhar Confession and align itself to it as a fourth confession on par with the Three Forms of Unity.

In the aftermath of the Belhar Synod of 1982, a dogmatic, noncompromising stand on the DRMC’s position was unavoidable. The draft Confession was a direct result of the declaration of a *status confessionis* against apartheid. The use of the term dates back to the Protestant protest against the adoption of Roman Catholic Church practices in the new Protestant churches in 1548. When several Protestants approved of the practice because church practices are “neutral” (*adiaphora*), the Reformed theologian Flavius answered: “*In status persecutionis et confessionis nihil est adiaphoron*” (In a state of persecution and confession nothing is neutral) (quoted in Bethge 1982:2).

However, dogmatism did not help others to see Belhar as a special gift to the church in the apartheid era, but rather as a typical Reformed Dordt instrument of exclusion. Even Johan Botha and Piet Naudé in their *On route with Belhar* take as point of departure the Reformed confessions rather than the “cry from the heart” of the Belhar Synod (1998:622). They use the Canons of Dordt’s strong rejection of both the Anabaptists and the Roman Catholics as an example of how confessions addressed heresy during the Reformation (1998:15). One would at least expect a reference to the understanding of these dogmatic statements at the turn of the twenty first century. To merely state that the Dordt truths of election and rejection can only be understood if one knows something of the battle with the Armenians does not help either. It is doubtful whether dogmatism plays any significant role in the life of the average Reformed Christian.

Is this how Belhar will function as a confession? Until the 1980s the DRC played a prominent role in keeping Pentecostals, Roman Catholics and evangelicals from broadcasting church services over the Afrikaans service of national radio and television – the reason being that they did not subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity. Both the Canons of Dordt and the Belgic Confession formed the foundations of the Reformed battle against the *Roomse gevaar* (Roman threat).

While the authors of Belhar seem to address the members of the DRC, it is debatable whether a reliance on the Three Forms of Unity will be of any assistance to understand Belhar. Belhar is a modern confession, inclusive and without the harsh condemnations and exclusions of the Canons of Dordt.

After the declaration of a *status confessionis* and in the light of the effect of apartheid on in the churches, it was impossible for the DRMC to allow the draft Confession, and after 1986 the Belhar Confession, to be an optional document amongst many others. Belhar was the shibboleth that distinguished between the true church and the heretical church; it was a call for repentance.

However, the important, uncompromising stance of the 1980s became a dogmatic issue after 1990. The attitude of URCSA was demonstrated by the general reaction to a comment by

Allan Boesak at the Church's synod in 2005. Presenting a report on gay and lesbian Christians, Boesak referred to the discrimination against homosexuals and stated that Belhar was never meant to be the last word against discrimination or opposed only apartheid but that it is a document that speaks out against all forms of discrimination. The synod reacted with anger against the idea of relating the Belhar Confession to the gay issue. Boesak, on the other hand, maintained that if one does not see Belhar as a confession against discrimination in general, it amounts to a denial of its confessional position (Jackson 2008). For the majority at the synod the Belhar Confession was a document confessing in the harsh apartheid era of the 1980s and early 1990s against an unrepentant church and nothing more. This attitude can, in the long term, only lead to the diminishing importance of Belhar.

The attitude of the DRC, as we saw, was even more dogmatic. Despite the steps taken in Ottawa by WARC against the DRC and the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk, the latter churches still refused to see any merit in listening and reacting to Belhar as a serious attempt to bring unity to the church and justice to society.

DRC ministers were schooled in the orthodox thinking of the Dordt Synod. The initial objection to adopt the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession on par with the Three Forms of Unity was an orthodox response: Reformed faith was codified at Dordt, giving the latter an almost sacred status equal to Scripture. Belhar could not compete as a confession with the historical documents of the Reformation and the DRC was by no means convinced that the political Reformed process of the Nationalist Party was not going to bring about a just society – an opinion shared by moderate theologians such as Ferdinand Deist.

To read Belhar as a confession complementing the confessions of the Reformation seemed illogical from the perspective of Afrikaner Protestant thinking. The Three Forms of Unity was known ground. It made the DRC stand out as the church, or at least the only true church. The powerful DRC could use its influence to keep “sects” from broadcasting on national radio and television by relying on the Three Forms of Unity.

As recent as November 2010, journalist and historian Leopold Scholtz attempted to justify any political implications in Belhar by pointing out that the Three Forms of Unity were all drafted and adopted with political motives (Scholtz 2010). In a response in the Afrikaans daily, *Die Burger*, a DRC member pointed out that the Reformed confessions are nowadays seldom read from the pulpit. The Reformed confessions, the reader stated, are possibly no longer meaningful for church members. Why then add another one, he asked (Erasmus 2010).

The context of the South African church struggle is so different from the orthodox battles of the sixteenth and seventeenth century that it would possibly be historically more acceptable to link Belhar with what Beyers Naudé referred to as the South African “confessing church” (De Gruchy 1997:103ff.) and the confessional documents of the apartheid era, beginning with the Message to the People of South Africa (see de Gruchy 1979:115ff.), the so called Open Letter by Bishop Auala to Prime Minister John Vorster (Auala and Gowaseb 1971. Cf. Buys and Nambala 2003:331ff.), Belhar and finally Kairos (Kairos Theologians 1986), the *Evangelical Witness* (Concerned Evangelicals 1986) and the *Relevant Pentecostal Witness* (Relevant Pentecostal Witness 1991). However, if the supporters of Belhar see it only as an extension of the traditional Reformed confessions, it will remain a bone of contention between two opposing confessional positions in the South African Dutch Reformed family rather than a universal South African confession.

## BELHAR, 29 YEARS ON

In 1982, the white DRC was still representative of mainline Afrikaner ideology and in many ways a national church of the Afrikaners. Kuyperian Calvinism was the generally accepted theology of the DRC, with a minority following the Scottish pietism of Andrew Murray. The extreme right wing element was the dominant political faction in the leadership (Jonker 1998:164) and the church's executive was still prepared to defend the inhumane apartheid ideology as good intentions of the church and the state.

However, the DRC and South African society of 2011 have little resemblance to the church and society of 1982:

- The extreme right wing leaders left the DRC to form the Afrikaans Protestant Church;
- the DRC is no longer a church with a single theological identity. The church represents extreme positions, from conservative charismatics and evangelical fundamentalists to liberal theologians questioning the fundamentals of the Three Forms of Unity and attempts to “purify” the DRC from one side or the other are almost without exception unsuccessful;
- the confessions, including the Three Forms of Unity, have become a reminder of the theology of the Reformation rather than truths and shibboleths dividing the true and the false church;
- the DRC (or the Reformed churches) are no longer the sole representatives of Afrikaner religiosity.
- the growing independent evangelical and charismatic movements are not only growing in numbers, but are also taking over the traditional role of the DRC in advising government;
- in November 1990, at the historic Rustenburg Consultation of churches, Willie Jonker confessed the sins of the DRC in initiating and keeping apartheid in place. His confession was later condoned by the leadership of the DRC and publicly accepted by Bishop Tutu (Jonker 1998:204ff.);
- Beyers Naudé, once epitomising resistance to apartheid, was welcomed back into the DRC fold (see Ryan 1990:207f.);
- the acceptance of Belhar by North American and European churches confirmed the Reformed basis of the Confession;
- political changes were even more dramatic:
  1. South Africa has a democratically elected government since 1994;
  2. apartheid is no longer part of the political environment and even conservative political parties stay clear of any reference to apartheid in their ideological approach;
- however, the majority of the pastors and congregations of the DRC are not in favour of accepting Belhar as a confession. If one accepts the historical significance of the Belhar Confession, it does not make sense to expect URCSA to compromise on the issue. In their understanding it is an important landmark in the struggle against a heresy.

The history of the church since 1982 has taken the Belhar Confession out of the 1982 context as a document of a disenfranchised group to a national and international confession of the church.

In the DRC the old Dordt view of confessions is no longer the prevalent theological approach to confessions. Unless one can still accept that all the ministers (let alone the members) subscribe to the theological content of the Three Forms of Unity, it seems as if the thinking of the early Reformers (including Calvin) and later the theology of Karl Barth have become the mainstream way of thinking within the DRC. One can even argue that the DRC of the twenty first century is less concerned with confessions than Calvin and the early Reformed theologians. The Armenian pastors within the DRC may not be comfortable with the Canons of Dordt, but that does not prevent them from signing the confessions and then transforming their congregations into typical fundamentalist evangelical congregations. The allegations of heresy against the theologians of the church always come to naught and somehow very few pastors leave the church for confessional reasons.

The question still remains: Why is the DRC so reluctant to accept the Belhar Confession? Given the different theological streams in the DRC, there is possibly more consensus on the four articles of Belhar than on the Canons of Dordt or even the interpretation of the Nicene Confession.

Theologically there seem to be no reason why Belhar cannot take its place next to the Three Forms of Unity. It will be the last step of the DRC to rid itself of its historical role in developing and supporting apartheid, both as a doctrine and an ideology of the state. Accepting the Belhar Confession will be the logical final step to make the confession of Willie Jonker at Rustenburg credible.

And URCSA? No one should expect URCSA to let go its demand that Belhar be a confession of a future united Reformed church in Southern Africa. But one can expect of them to be less rigid in their understanding of confessions. Is it really necessary that all *congregations* of the DRC accept Belhar as a confession? Why not allow the DRC to accept the Confession while the local congregations can become part of the new church without making it a precondition? It seems that Calvin and Zwingli would have been comfortable with such an arrangement.

The confessional crisis can be changed into an opportunity. Why do both churches not acknowledge the fact that the Three Forms of Unity means little if anything to its members and play an insignificant role as real "catechisms of the heart", to use the expression of Karl Rahner? Why should a modern Reformed church persist in a hypocritical allegiance to confessions that are icons of the past, "catechisms of the book", that are neither appreciated nor believed?

Looking at the reception of Belhar in Reformed churches in Europe and North America, it seems to answer the need of a modern confession addressing the needs of a movement to whom the language and the issues of the seventeenth century has no relevance. But URCSA must allow the Belhar Confession to speak against the post apartheid oppression of women, gays, and other oppressed people. In this way the one church of Jesus Christ may just find one confession that can become a "catechism of the heart".

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### KEY WORDS

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### TREFWOORDE

Gereformeerde Belydenisse  
 Belydenis van Belhar  
 NGK & VGKSA  
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