



## **Belhar as mirror and window on social cohesion and justice**

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### **Abstract**

This study argues that the Reformed Churches in South Africa failed to constructively contribute to social cohesion and justice since the drafting of the Belhar Confession in 1982 due to its failure to embody the demands of unity, reconciliation and justice. Firstly, the study briefly discusses the historical setting of the Belhar Confession and how it remains a bridge too far to embody for the Church in South Africa since its drafting in 1982. Furthermore, the study indicates how the Church's failure to embody the Belhar Confession leaves a vacuum in the discourses on racial tensions, the land issue and the new apartheid. Finally, the study engages how the Church can be an agent of transformation and hope.

### **Keywords**

*Belhar; reconciliation; New Apartheid; justice; restitution*

## **Introduction**

The Belhar-Confession (hereafter Belhar) was drafted forty years ago by the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church<sup>1</sup> (hereafter DRMC). The drafting and acceptance of the confession was and remained a watershed moment for the Reformed Churches in South Africa. This article will appropriate Belhar as a hermeneutical lens to contemplate whether the Dutch Reformed family of Churches (hereafter Church) in South Africa had and can contribute to social cohesion and justice. This article will argue that the Church did not and cannot contribute to social cohesion and justice in South Africa because it failed to achieve the unity, justice,

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1 The DRMC was established for predominantly “coloured” Reformed Christians.

and reconciliation that the Belhar Confession embodies. Belhar will be the mirror to assess the Church's journey retrospectively and introspectively with Belhar over the past forty years. Furthermore, Belhar will serve as a window of opportunity for the Church to foster social cohesion in the future.

Foremost, the historical setting of Belhar will briefly be discussed. In addition, the Church's failure to embody Belhar will be addressed. Furthermore, this article will address three critical concerns of post-apartheid South Africa, where the absence of the Church's voice is detrimental to social cohesion and justice. The concerns are racial divisions and tension, the land issue and the new apartheid. The article will conclude with considerations of the Church as an agent of transformation and eschatological hope.

## **The historical setting at the drafting of the Belhar confession**

The historical developments concerning Belhar are well documented.<sup>2</sup> Belhar was the first confession of faith to be formulated in almost 300 years within the Reformed tradition and the first to be developed in Africa (Boesak 2011: 44). Drafting a theological confession is not an occurrence that transpires habitually or without contemplation. It is a rare occurrence. Through the hermeneutical elements of black liberation theology, Belhar embodies the black experience under an inhumane and draconic racial system (Fortein 2021). By 1982 the apartheid design dominated every sphere of black life. Where one could live, walk, and even whom one could marry was largely determined by law. Some main streams of apartheid legislation were the Population Registration Act of 1950<sup>3</sup>, The Group Areas Act of 1950<sup>4</sup> and The Bantu Education Act of 1953<sup>5</sup>, which subjugated the population according to their skin pigmentation.

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2 For more on the history of the Belhar Confession, see: Adonis (2006): Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2017) and Smit (1998).

3 The Act required that each inhabitant of South Africa be classified and registered from birth as one of four distinct racial groups: white, coloured, black and other. Race was reflected in the individuals identity number.

4 This Act divided areas in which each racial group could live and work. The best urban, industrial, and agricultural areas were reserved for whites.

5 The Bantu education Act created a separate inferior education system for black students to ensure that black people would only ever be able to work as unskilled and semi-

The police were given *carte blanche* to maintain law and order as the struggle for liberation intensified during the early 1980s as black townships erupted in the aftermath of the 1976 Soweto uprisings.<sup>6</sup> The South African Police and Army destroyed black squatter camps and detained, abused, and killed thousands of black people (Britannica 2022). The 1980s were the most violent years of apartheid, as the government tried to hold on to power and repress black resistance by any means necessary (South African History Online 2019). Our streets were drenched with the innocent blood of our sisters and brothers, our mothers, and fathers, as their resistance was met with fierce military retaliation. Cries went up from the voiceless, the poor, and the oppressed. It is then, as John Calvin (2010) reminds us, as though God heard Himself in the cries and groaning of those who cannot bear injustice. Despite all this, some still do not regard apartheid as a crime against humanity. The violent repression of the apartheid regime came at the back of centuries of land theft, genocide, and dispossession. Above all, and most important for the Church, is that a theology blessed the land theft, genocide, and the detaining and killing of black people (including innocent women and children). The blessings of this theology are still visible in the privilege, power, and wealth of a tiny fraction of the population.

Within the context of gunshots, teargas and police dogs, mass funerals and children's cries, heresy, and *status confessionis*, black Christians confessed their faith anew. Belhar was born amidst the racism and injustice of apartheid. The accompanying letter of the Belhar Confession states that the church and political situation at that particular point in our country and particularly within the Dutch Reformed Church family calls for such a decision (Belhar Confession 1986). The confession and accompanying letter reflect the Church's effort to confess the core truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ over and against an ecclesiastical heresy that sacralised whiteness. Belhar was not their words, but their verbalisation of what God was leading them to say. At a critical moment in the life of the South African Church and society, when no mere theological words or statements would suffice, God spoke in the words of the Belhar Confession. In the words of the late Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, Belhar was born in a moment of truth (Plaatjies

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skilled labourers.

6 For more on the resistance to apartheid, see Simpson (2021).

van Huffel 2017:19). This moment of truth was not the result of human intelligence and extraordinary cleverness. It is a revelation, the gift of the Holy Spirit (Boesak 2015:11). Even though Belhar emerged in apartheid South Africa, it is not bound to that particular time and history. Central to the Confession are our unity in Christ, the reconciliation through Christ, and the justice demanded by God. The reconciliation that Belhar proposes is one characterised by unity and justice. Thus, Belhar speaks to the context and conditions of post-apartheid South Africa, where justice evades God's people.

### **Belhar failed: a bridge too far**

In 1857<sup>7</sup> the Church in South Africa was set on the pathway of division along racial lines.<sup>8</sup> In time, the Reformed Church will divide into a Church for each racial group. Attempts to re-unify the Church has failed over the years. While society seemingly has transformed over the past forty years, the Church is precisely where we were forty years ago, racially apart. Since then, Belhar has been a contentious issue and the nub of theological discourse within the Dutch Reformed family of churches, with critique coming from far and wide.

Church unity talks between the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa<sup>9</sup> (hereafter URCSA) and the Dutch Reformed Church (hereafter DRC) often resulted in a stalemate on the issue of the inclusion of Belhar as a confession of faith. The DRC ruled in 1990 that Belhar does not conflict

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7 The 1857 synod decision reads as follows: “De Synode beschouwt het wenschlijk en schrifmatig, dat onze ledematen uit de Heidenen, in onze bestaande gemeenten opgenomen en ingelijfd worden, overall waar sulks gescheiden kan; maar waar deze maatregel, ten gevolge van de zwakheid van zommigen, de bevordering van deze zaak van Christus onder de Heidenen, in de weg zoude staan, de gemeente uit de Heidenen opgericht, of nog op te rigten, hare Christelijke voorregten in een afzonderlijke gebouw of gesticht genieten zal” (Acta Synodi 1857, 168). (The Synod considers it desirable and Scriptural that our members from the Gentiles be included and incorporated into our existing congregations; but where this measure, because of the weakness of some, would hinder the promotion of this cause of Christ among the Gentiles, erect a congregation from the Gentiles, or yet to erect, a separate building where they will enjoy their Christian privileges.)

8 For more on the infamous 1857 decision of the DRC, see Adonis (1982); De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio (1983) *Pauw* (2007); and Elphick (2012).

9 URCSA is a merger of the DRMC and DRCA in 1994.

with the Three Forms of Unity, but Belhar was nevertheless not accepted as a confession (Acts of General Synod of Dutch Reformed Church 1990:707). Elsewhere, I have argued that if Belhar is indeed the stumbling block for the DRC, why have the DRC not entered and re-united with those black Churches that do not contain Belhar as part of their confessional basis (Fortein 2021)? Here I am thinking of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa<sup>10</sup> (hereafter DRCA) and the Reformed Church in Africa<sup>11</sup> (hereafter RCA). I have also argued that Belhar is not the actual challenge for the DRC but the “ghost of 1857”, the weakness of some. After 165 years, the unity of Belhar is still evading us. Could Belhar’s demands of unity, reconciliation and justice be a bridge too far for the DRC? Are the costs of the radical reconciliation and the radical justice of Belhar simply too high for the DRC? Can a Church that celebrates The Day of the Vow<sup>12</sup> (Geloftedag) and all it stands for also embrace Belhar? Dirkie Smit (2001) asked the following question regarding the DRC, has there been any change? He answers that although the DRC changed during the latter years of apartheid, the fundamental changes have not taken place and seemingly never will (Smit 2011:125).

Post-1994, South Africa needed a witness to serve as a hopeful beacon. South Africa, as the last bastion of colonialism in Africa, needed an alternative community underpinned by reconciliation and justice that could set the rest of the country on a path of genuine nation-building and reconciliation. After centuries of colonialism and injustices, we needed a vehicle that could assist with the healing of memories and the issue of restorative justice. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter TRC) attempted to be this vehicle, but unfortunately, it was ineffective as it left the leaders of apartheid’s worst atrocities almost entirely untouched. Post-1994, South Africa needed a unified and reconciled Church. A Church where unity is seen as a gift and a reality that earnestly must be pursued and sought. A Church where diversity is celebrated and where we give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another. The accompanying

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10 The DRCA was established for predominantly black Reformed Christians.

11 The RCA was established for predominantly Indian Reformed Christians.

12 The Voortrekkers asked God to give them victory over the Zulus at Blood River. In return, they would build a church building, and they and their generations to celebrate this day as a day of thanksgiving.

letter states so pleadingly that the act of confessing might be reconciling and uniting (Belhar Confession 1986). Unfortunately, we failed Belhar.

The URCSA is also struggling to give a concrete expression of Belhar. Gender equality and sensitivity are overpowered by power struggles, as women are excluded from the recently elected all male General Synod moderamen. Equally, the URCSA is grappling with extending the inclusiveness of God's embrace to LGBTQIA+ persons in the same way Belhar calls for justice and dignity for people of colour in a racist society (Boesak 2015:94). Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, URCSA is evidently still a male dominated, patriarchal, and homophobic Church. As far back as 1984, the late Jaap Durand (1984:46) stated that the credibility of Belhar would depend on the preparedness of the DRMC (now URCSA) to reflect the confession in all ecclesiastical life. These words continue to challenge URCSA.

Internal church unity is fragile as the URCSA is trapped in the racial antics that have become synonymous with post-apartheid South Africa. This is certainly true of the URCSA Cape and Free State and Lesotho synods of which I was and am a part. The recently concluded General Synod of the URCSA has proven again how divided we are as a brand of political games, and cadre employment seems to prevail. Race has become a stumbling block in the URCSA as we returned to the apartheid racial constructs of "coloured" and black when voting for leadership positions. The demands of Belhar's unity are then pushed by the wayside. Siphon Mahokoto (2019:363) attests to this in his article, *Is there any hope for church unity? Some perspectives on the causes of the Reformed Churches split since the Reformation and its impact on church unity discussions today*. In this article, Mahokoto (2019:365) recalls the sorrowful events at the URCSA's Cape Synod in 2018 and how filling leadership positions became a power struggle between Afrikaans and Xhosa-speaking members. Members of URCSA no longer look at each other through the eyes of Belhar, like during the time of struggle. We now look at each other in the way apartheid wanted us to look at each other, with prejudice and suspicion and only seeing the difference between us. Prior to the founding of the URCSA, the late Beyers Naudé emphasised the need to bring members of different ethnic groups into contact with one another on a congregational level to enhance constructive communication and community among them. Naudé stated the following:

The policy of apartheid has so estranged, disturbed and disrupted normal communication between Christians of different languages, ethnic, racial and social groups, that deliberate efforts will have to be taken to assist our people, especially at congregational level, to learn again how to communicate positively and creatively between themselves, especially where there is a possibility of serious conflict, arising from the overemphasis of ethnic, racial and cultural differences which apartheid has deliberately provoked and encouraged (Naudé 1994:71).

Belhar (1986) states that the unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in the way we confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope. Belhar (1986) states further that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, and the diversity of languages and cultures, is by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God. Unfortunately, gauging the current state, URCSA, as the bearers of Belhar, has failed her own confession. The words of emperor Constantine at the commencement of the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. seems to have importance, “Division in the Church was worse than war” (Shelly 2013:137).

It seems that the URCSA has forgotten the lessons of the great Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko, during the resistance against apartheid. While the apartheid regime sought to cripple the oppressed by dividing them into the different racial categories of coloured, Indian, and black, Biko taught about the need of the black man to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation (Stubbs 2004:50). Biko reminded us that the oppressor’s most potent weapon is the mind of the oppressed and that liberation begins with the emancipation of the mind (Stubbs 2004, 69). Black Consciousness and oppression galvanised black solidarity never seen or experienced before or since. That black solidarity was vibrant in organisations like the United Democratic Front<sup>13</sup> (UDF) and finally broke the back of apartheid. Perhaps the URCSA will have to relearn Biko’s lessons.

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13 For more on the UDF, see Boesak (2009) and Du Preez (2003).

After forty years, the Church is still failing and struggling with Belhar. Hence, the Church failed to contribute to social cohesion and justice meaningfully. Sunday mornings at ten o'clock remains the most segregated hour as believers, with the same confessional basis and tradition, claiming to drink from the same cup and eat from the same bread, worship in our own little corners. Racism and prejudice, culture and language, status and money continue to weigh heavier than addressing the critical issues of inequalities and delayed justice. Like the politicians, the Church ignored these issues and opted for a reconciliation unescorted by transformative and restorative justice. The following questions beg to be answered: if the Church failed in uniting and fostering cohesion among its members and in doing justice, what hope is there for society? If the Church struggles to embody our unity in Christ, the reconciliation through Christ, and the justice demanded by God, our country has no hope.

### **Flawed reconciliation: racial divisions and tensions**

With the dawn of the “new” South Africa came a “new” description, “The Rainbow Nation.” Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela used this phrase to refer to South Africa’s diverse racial composition. The country, especially whites, was obsessed with “Madiba Magic” as Mandela preached a reconciliation without consequential restitution and restoration. Suddenly, it was as if white racism and apartheid never existed, as whites seemed to love Mandela more than Jesus because of Mandela’s weak stance on social justice. It was wishful thinking to assume that people who have been driven apart since the genesis of South Africa could automatically reconcile. Now, 28 years into democracy, the ANC continues with the apartheid racial constructs of white, black, coloured, and Indian, as the Population Registration Act of 1950 was repealed back in 1991. This practice has contributed to the phenomenon of tribalism, ethnic nationalism, and racial tensions. It is apparent how racial tensions flair up at the slightest chance. We have yet to learn that we are human beings before anything else.

South Africa’s challenges with race matters cannot be divorced from our flawed reconciliation process. Perhaps the different views on the definition of reconciliation may be the reason. Itumeleng Mosala (1987:19) explains that whites “see reconciliation as a substitute for revolution and liberation.”



For black people, reconciliation means something different. The TRC attempted to reconcile the victims and perpetrators of apartheid crimes and produced moments of genuine forgiveness. Boesak (2009) argues that the TRC failed to call big businesses to account and that the process left no room to deal with the anger of apartheid victims. Reconciliation is not a mere political or secular process. At its core, the reconciliation process failed, because it failed to do compassionate justice to the least of God's children. Article four of Belhar<sup>14</sup> (1986) states that God, as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the Church to follow in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed. For Belhar, justice refers to social, economic, gender, sexual and political justice, which is painfully absent in our current political, social and economic implementations (Boesak 2012:5). Miroslav Volf (1996:169) reminds us of the close relationship between justice and embrace. He states that there can be no justice without the will to embrace the other. Embrace is, therefore, inherent to the very heart of justice.

Nico Koopman (2007:97) states that Belhar's reconciliation draws on the two dimensions of reconciliation found in Pauline thought. He refers to reconciliation as *hilasmos* and *katalassoo*. According to Koopman (2007:97), reconciliation as *hilasmos* refers to the extinguishing of wrongs

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14 The full article 4 of Belhar reads as follows: "We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoners and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the strangers, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that God wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right; that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; that the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others. *Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel*" (Belhar Confession 1986).

and stumbling blocks in the pathway to atonement. This is based on Anselm's objective theory of atonement (how Christ did the redemptive on our behalf), Abelard's subjective theory of atonement (how the Triune God's love transforms our lives) and Irenaeus' theory of atonement (how Christ's victory over the cosmic powers of evil liberated us from them). Belhar confirms the vertical and horizontal dimensions of reconciliation in that God reconciles us with Him and one another (Koopman 2007:97). Reconciliation, as *katalassoo*, refers to harmony in the relationship with the other. Thus, Belhar's vision of reconciliation is an all-inclusive embrace, irrespective of race, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, and abilities.

In Boesak & DeYoung (2012), Curtiss Paul DeYoung states further that reconciliation is real, radical, and revolutionary according to Paul's writings in 2 Corinthians 5. DeYoung (Boesak & DeYoung 201:16–17) mentions that reconciliation is real according to Paul's conversion in Acts 9: 3–16. Reconciliation produces a decolonised humanity. God raising Jesus from the dead reversed the death of Jesus Christ by Rome. In the same way, reconciliation restores a damaged, enslaved, and colonised identity to its original design as a human identity created in the image of God. Based on this new humanity, Paul makes the statement in Galatians 3: 28 that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

DeYoung (Boesak & DeYoung 2012:18) further states that reconciliation is radical in reaching the root of injustice in its search for social justice. The work of social justice is rooted in Jesus' prophetic words in Luke 4: 18–19: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Jesus' words envision a radically transformed reality for the poor and needy. All forms of injustice create the need for reconciliation. Hence, reconciliation is all about social justice (Boesak & DeYoung 2012:18). Social justice is inseparable from the biblical understanding of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is revolutionary because it seeks to replace the status quo with a qualitatively different one (Boesak & DeYoung 2012:19). Paul writes in Ephesians 2 that Jesus made peace and reconciled two groups to God in

one body on the cross. The old categories of humanity, colonisers and the colonised, are now displaced by a qualitatively new humanity. In this new humanity, some things must happen in the coloniser's life. DeYoung states that the coloniser has to reject the non-legitimate position of superiority and all the privileges that go with that position (Boesak & DeYoung 2012:20). It is inevitable that true reconciliation, through the cross of Jesus, will bear a cost to the privileged.

The real, radical, and revolutionary biblical reconciliation has not yet occurred in South Africa and is hence the reason for the brittle state of our reconciliation. Whites continue to enjoy the ill-gained fruits that came at the expense of black people, and any talks of radical reconciliation are met with a sense of foolishness and even aggression. The Church had an opportunity to display radical reconciliation, but it failed. The DRC had the opportunity to display radical reconciliation by accepting the challenge of Belhar by radically embracing those who were previously excluded. What has the DRC, as the Church that birthed apartheid, done to mobilise its members towards acts of radical reconciliation? Charity and projects are not acts of radical reconciliation if it does not bring fundamental changes to the lives of the poor. The Dutch Reformed family of Churches could have been a model where the new humanity in Christ was visible in a unity reconciled by the cross of Jesus Christ and supported by acts of revolutionary social justice. It could have been the "Rainbow Nation" where there is no more black and white, but brothers and sisters committed to justice and reconciled into one body. Unfortunately, this reconciliation is too radical for some. What hope does society have if the Church are unable to attain this?

### **Flawed justice: land restitution**

According to Janet Smith (2019:278), nothing is more important for black people in democratic South Africa than land. The first clause of the Freedom Charter (1955) reads that "our people have been robbed of their birth right to land." The land debate is currently hotly contested as attempts are made to amend section 25 of the constitution to allow land expropriation without compensation. This initiative comes from the legacies of the apartheid-

driven laws of the Natives Land Act of 1913<sup>15</sup>, the Native Trust and Land Act of 1936<sup>16</sup> and the Group Areas Act of 1950, as indicated in the book of Saleem Badat (2012) entitled, *The Forgotten People: Political Banishment under Apartheid*. These acts were nothing more than the continuation of land dispossession that started on the banks of the Camissa River when Jan van Riebeeck dispossessed Autshumao and the ||Ammaqua people. This was done to secure the strategically located water source. The DRC was at the centre and benefited, and continues to benefit, from these apartheid laws. The Dutch Reformed family of Churches could contribute to the land redistribution if it were to exercise Belhar's transformative and restorative justice.

The late Mary-Anne Plaatjies-van Huffel wrote two excellent articles on the land issue and DRC, DRMC and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (hereafter DRCA). In the article, *Whose Land Is it anyway? A historical Reflection on the Challenges URCSA Encountered with Land and Property Rights*, Plaatjies-van Huffel describes how the mission policy of the DRC<sup>17</sup> between 1935 and 1947 ultimately led to the dispossession of black land. Plaatjies-van Huffel (2020:2) explains further how the DRMC, at its inception in 1881, were allowed to own property and how provisions were made in the constitution of the DRC that property could either be transported in the name of the DRC or the name of the mission congregation. It was, therefore, possible for the DRMC to own property during apartheid as it was seen as a legal person. However, the constitution of the DRC ordered that DRMC required the permission of the DRC if it wanted to sell a property (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2011:180). Unfortunately, the DRMC would suffer at the hands of the Groups Areas Act, as areas where congregations held properties were declared "white areas". The consequence was that congregations lost their properties and relocated to the most underdeveloped and desolated areas, as the acts of the synods of 1978 and 1994 indicate.

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15 The Act limited black land ownership to 7 percent of South Africa's land.

16 The Act increased black land ownership to 13 percent. It opened the door for white ownership of 87 percent of land.

17 For more on the mission policy of the DRC, see: Adonis (1982).

In the case of the DRCA, property rights worked entirely differently. At the establishment of the DRCA, provisions were made that the property could only be transported in either the name of the local DRC congregation or in the name of the General Mission Commission of the DRC or the name of other bodies approved by the General Mission Commission of the DRC (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2020:3). Unlike the DRMC, the DRCA was not considered a legal person and could not own property. According to the provisions in the Group Areas Act, Act No. 41 of 1950, the properties occupied by the DRCA in the townships were registered in the name of the DRC. According to Section 14(2)(a) (i) and (ii), the DRC holds the right to property for mission purposes in group areas or controlled areas reserved for black people (Group Areas Act, Act No. 41 of 1950, Section 14(2)(a) (i) and (ii)).

The DRCA was allowed to hold property within the Bantustans<sup>18</sup> (Plaatjiesvan Huffel 2020, 3). Plaatjies-van Huffel (2020:3) mentions that, according to the minutes of the General Synodical Commission of 2009, the DRC acquired vast portions of land in the Bantustans from traditional chiefs and the state for mission purposes. It is noteworthy that most of these properties were not transferred to URCSA or DRCA. Hence, even after 28 years of democracy, many church buildings in which black Reformed Christians worship every Sunday are still registered at the Deeds Office in the name of the DRC. Plaatjies-van Huffel discusses real cases in the two articles, including the lengthy court case between the remaining members of the DRCA and the URCSA.

Tshepo Lephakga (2015:149) states that colonialism and apartheid conquered the Being of Africans, which was their existence in connection with their land. This connection was part and parcel of their identity and faith, central to the notion of belonging. Lephakga (2015:149) mentions further that when this link is disrupted, the individuals involved lose both a link to past experiences as meaningful and a link to a future imagined as potentially significant. The greatest steal in this country is that of the land, as indicated by Patric Tariq Mellet (2020) in his book, *The Lie of 1652*.

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18 A partially self-governing territory established during the apartheid era for a particular indigenous African people, a so-called homeland. The apartheid government regarded the Bantustans as independent states from South Africa.

*A Decolonised History of Land*. Van Riebeeck and the colonists wiped our Khoi and San<sup>19</sup> foremothers and fathers to get their hands on the land. I have argued in a chapter in a book called *Holy Black Rage. An Inconvenience for Whiteness* (2022) that the delayed justice in land reform is a catalyst for the rage and anger experienced by black people today.

The land and property should be given back to their rightful owners if Belhar is to be taken seriously. Itumeleng Mosala (1987:25) mentions that biblical reconciliation is not just reconciliation between God and humankind and humankind among ourselves but also is a re-unification with the land. Here the DRC can take the lead in reparations and handing church properties back to black congregations. The DRC can motivate and inspire its members toward restorative justice and land reform initiatives. This will indicate whether the DRC is serious and committed to the issues of church re-unification and nation building, but ultimately to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel narrative of Zaccheus in Luke 10:1–10 is a fitting one relating to restorative justice. Zaccheus, who ripped off his people with his corrupt tax-collecting acts, underwent a conversion upon a meeting with Jesus. In the story, we see that reconciliation is the restoration of justice (Boesak 2008:640). Zaccheus knew that his newly reconciled status with God had far-reaching implications for his life. He knew reconciliation has to be transformational if it has any significance, especially to those he has wronged. In his quest for restorative justice, Zaccheus does not spare himself or his possessions (Boesak 2008:640). He knows that his ill-gained wealth was stolen at the expense of the poor and decides to give back fourfold. Zaccheus knows that he could not only return what he took from the poor, but he also had to return the profits he gained with what he stole from the poor. Is this justice too radical for the wealthy and privileged? Is Belhar's justice too costly for the rich? I assume so. What hope does society have if the Church cannot commit to transformative and restorative justice?

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19 For on the Khoi and San and the early settlement at the Cape, see Giliomee, Mbenga, & Nasson (2022).

## Flawed unity and justice: the new apartheid

In an article entitled, *Space and power in South Africa: The township as a mechanism of control*, Glen Mills (1989) describes the ideology and architecture behind the design of South Africa's townships. This design was deliberately orchestrated to keep black people poor, uneducated, and dependent. In this study, Mills concludes that even though the country underwent dramatic political changes, the living conditions of the black majority remained unchanged. For us who grew up in the townships, it carries the same meaning as the lynching tree does for black people in America. James Cone (2013:xiii) states that the lynching tree represents death, black oppression, and white supremacy for black people. Even in democratic South Africa, townships remain symbols of death, black oppression, and white supremacy, as very few black people manage to escape the perpetuation of the deliberate design. Jakub Urbaniak (2017:9) echoes Mills in saying that despite the end of statutory apartheid and the achievement of political freedom, many believed that their conditions of life during the last two decades have worsened. While the political power changed, the same economic structures that undergirded apartheid remained and these neoliberal economic systems are driven by white supremacist agendas, which perpetuate the gap between rich and poor (Urbaniak 2017:9).

The title of Julian Kunnie's book, *Is Apartheid Really Dead?* poses a genuine question to answer. Kunnie (2000:252) identifies expanding and thriving connivance between "capitalism and colonialism" that attempts to recreate "a European ruling class culture, at the cost of humiliating black people and forcing us to serve this oppressive culture". In his book, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*, Patrick Bond (2000) explains how South Africa went from "racial to class apartheid". In this publication, Bond probes into the economic and social compromises that have been, and are being, made between the past and present powers in South Africa and how the ANC went from a liberation movement to serving the economic interest of an elite few. In this event, we indeed find that there are pharaohs on both sides of the blood-red waters, to quote the title of Allan Boesak's 2017 book publication. The question remains:

How will the Church, particularly the black Church, respond now that the pharaoh looks like us?

Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh (2021) released a riveting book entitled, *The New Apartheid*. He describes how South Africa transformed from a race-ruled to a market-ruled society. The market, not the state, now dictates the boundaries of opportunity, while fees, surcharges, qualification criteria, and income thresholds now enforce separate development (Mpofu-Walsh 2021:17). Apartheid, therefore, did not die but instead adapted and was privatised as power shifted from the state to private hands. According to Mpofu-Walsh (2021:17), the new apartheid emerges in every application: for a house, a car, a university, a job, a loan, or a medical aid scheme.

Mpofu-Walsh (2021:22) mentions further that 1994 signified a reversal in apartheid-designed Bantustan policy, where the former Bantustans were integrated into the centre while the centre itself became “Bantustanised”. South Africa, as a country, resembles one big, centralised Bantustan as it achieved all that the original Bantustans intended. Mpofu-Walsh (2021:21) states that the new South Africa preserved white economic domination by conceding black political rights, as did the Bantustans. It reduced international scrutiny and condemnation, just like the Bantustans. The white economy is now free to trade on international markets with extensive profits. Further, the new South Africa pacified black anger through the transferral of political rights, just like the Bantustans. Like the Bantustans, black people in the new South Africa carry the administrative burden of governance without any real stake in the economy.

The new apartheid and new South Africa continue to benefit the DRC and its members, while it leaves black people even poorer than under apartheid. This is important as reconciliation, and unity cannot occur between unequal parties, but only among equals. In this context of continued apartheid and inequality, the Church can contribute to social cohesion and justice by exercising justice in the quest for unity among equals with its black sister churches. Is the DRC, which claims to belong to God and, in the words of Belhar, prepared not only to stand where God stands but to stand as God stands, against injustice and with the wronged? Is the DRC prepared to witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own



interests and thus control and harm others? Based on history, this seems highly unlikely.

## **The church as a sign of the eschaton, transformation and hope**

The emphasis on the Church's potential to effect social change is not an invention of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Liberation Theology. History is saturated with the Church's influence on society. Whether good or bad, the Church always managed to assert some form of direction in the world. Jerry Pillay (2017) writes how the Church has been an agent of transformation and change from the early Church to the Reformation to the missionary era of the 19th century. In this study, Pillay illustrates how the Church seem to effect significant and radical changes in the social, political, and economic spheres during various periods of history. Ironically the early Church attracted those on the periphery of society, like the slaves, women and foreigners, people who seemingly did not hold influence over society (Pillay 2017:2). However, the Church's influence on society over the following millennia would be extensive as it gained more favour and spread throughout the Roman Empire after Constantine's conversion. Pillay (2017:3) mentions that the Church's transformational efforts were motivated by compassion, communal justice and the love of God, which set it apart from other societal organisations. The Church's potential to influence society is perhaps nowhere as evident as in South Africa in how theology was manoeuvred to enhance Afrikaner nationalism and inspire oppressed people towards freedom and justice.

The Church always held a particular strand of uniqueness to the world. It was never meant to conform to worldly values and standards, but to point to something beyond itself and the world. Deeply entrenched in the essence of the Church lies the ability to articulate and reveal fragments of the kingdom of God in this world. These fragments are "sneak peaks" of God's kingdom and how the world can be. David Bosch (2011:155), based on his understanding of Paul's missionary activities, states that the Church is called "to be a community of those who glorify God by showing forth his nature and works and by making manifest the reconciliation and redemption God has wrought through the death, resurrection, and reign of Christ." Flip Theron (1978:142) emphasises that the Church has a prophetic-

exemplary mode of existence that showcases fragments of God's coming kingdom. Bosch (1982:18; 2011:30) refers to the Church as "God's colony in man's world" and as "God's experimental garden", as the fragment of God's reign and a pledge of what is coming. John De Gruchy continues in the same vein when he states the following:

The eschaton judges our clinging to the past, our attachment to the present status quo, making us dissatisfied with anything less than God's righteousness, justice, and peace in the world. It lures us into the future, making us restless with things as they are; it stimulates hope for the fulfilment of God's purpose for the universe. (De Gruchy 1979:199)

De Gruchy does not only allude to the Church as the precursor or sign towards the eschaton, but the Church's potential to transform the world wherever God's reign is threatened. Through the sacrament of baptism, barriers are transcended into a new creation where human relations are transformed (Bosch 2011:154).

In the article, *What hope is there for South Africa? A public theological reflection on the role of the Church as a bearer of hope for the future*, Dion Forster (2015) makes the point that a clear expectation should inform our Christian hope that our work and witness of the present will configure what we hope for in the future. Throughout this article, the question was continually asked, what hope is there for South Africa if the Church cannot perform acts of unity, justice, and reconciliation? Forster provides a fitting proposal towards the question of hope in South Africa. He states that the Church must actively engage in the current political, economic, and social spheres (2015:12). The Church's existence cannot be confined to Sunday service and the walls of the building. The Church must acknowledge the serious problems and challenges facing the poor and previously disadvantaged groups and its contribution to poor and vulnerable people. Secondly, the Church must be honest in stating that the current South African society is not a just reflection of the eschatological hope God envisages for His children. The Church will have to work towards development policies on every level of society, taking the lead in the acts of reforms, restitution, and reconciliation. Hence, Forster (2015:12) states that the Church must adopt a "present-futurist eschatology" since it will

assist the Church to act concretely and courageously in the present *en route* to a future yearned for by all. The Church must act in the present on the issues of racial tensions (unity/reconciliation), land restitution (restorative justice/restitution) and the new apartheid (justice) if it wants to be a sign of hope. The Church is sent to the world for the sake of the world. To transform the world by being a mirror and a window of what is possible and what is to come.

## Conclusion

This study considered the Church's contribution towards social cohesion and justice over the past forty years since the drafting of the Belhar Confession in 1982. The study commenced with a brief overview of the historical setting of the Belhar Confession and the Church's failure to embody Belhar. Furthermore, the study established that the Church failed to contribute towards social cohesion and justice, because it failed to embrace Belhar's claims of unity, reconciliation and justice which could have assisted in the unfinished business-like racial tensions, land restitution and the new apartheid. The study concludes with a brief discussion of the Church as an agent for societal transformation and how eschatological hope can assist in acts of justice and reconciliation in the present.

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