

The Belhar Confession in the South African Context

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The assigned task for this presentation is to consider “The Belhar Confession in the South African Context.” To do so we will look at the historic conditions in southern Africa that gave rise to this confession of the twentieth century. We will then look at the Belhar Confession in the context beyond South Africa.

We begin in 1652, when Dutch settlers founded a halfway and refreshment station on the western coast of Africa in the Cape region. This settlement was overseen by Jan van Riebeeck and sponsored by the Dutch East India Company. It was the beginning of the slave trade by the Dutch. It was the practice that Africans captured for the slave trade were baptized, taught the Dutch language and culture by plying them with brandy and tobacco, but not considered to be part of the established church, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). As missionary enterprises by competing churches appeared, the Dutch Reformed Church began its own missionary work in earnest. It established different churches with the principle of the supremacy of the white population, a practice that continued for almost two centuries.

In 1829, the Dutch Reformed Church, also known as the “white church,” took action to end the practice of discrimination based on the color of skin. In spite of the action, the practice of discrimination at worship and Holy Communion continued and was formalized in 1857, establishing the practice of separate worship based on the color of skin.

In 1881 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church was formed at Wellington in the Cape region, representing the developing mission congregations of the DRC. It was known as the “colored church.” The new church was controlled by the DRC, which had veto power over all decisions. Properties were held by the DRC. In 1951 another church was spawned, called the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. This church was for the “blacks,” thus furthering the separation of people by skin color. In 1968 a church was formed for Indian members, known as the Asian Reformed Church in Africa. Over the years, the Dutch Reformed Church had morphed into a family of churches along racial lines. The family of churches consisted of the Dutch Reformed Church (white), the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (colored), the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (black), and the Asian Reformed Church in Africa (Indian).

The preface to the book, "A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982," edited by G. D. Cloete and D. J. Smit, states: "It is the firm conviction of many Christians in South Africa that the ideology of apartheid has its roots within the church itself, especially the Dutch Reformed Church."¹ Studies have shown that the decision of the DRC synod of 1857 was a marker event in fostering the ideology of separation of people by skin color. In time that ideology became a popular and widespread practice, eventually enacted into law.

In 1924 the Dutch Reformed Church (white) urged the government of South Africa to adopt segregation policies based on the argument that "competition between black and white on economic level, leads to poverty, friction, misunderstanding, suspicion and embitterment."² Apartheid, a policy of segregation and political and economic discrimination against non-European groups, was finally implemented in the Republic of South Africa. The Dutch Reformed Church (white) developed and provided the scriptural, theological, and moral justifications for the law of apartheid. Though occasionally challenged within the family of churches, apartheid was not seriously challenged and in fact was vigorously defended by the DRC both by overt actions and by silent consent.

In time all began to change. Clergy of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (colored) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (black) began to question the legal grounds of apartheid. The scriptural, theological and moral justifications of apartheid were challenged. The church's condoning of discrimination against people of color and indigenous people was challenged. Several factors led to this questioning and challenge. The "daughter churches" of the Dutch Reformed Church were becoming less rural and more urban. Clergy of the "daughter churches" were studying in Europe and North America. There they acquired new perspectives and insights into apartheid practices in their homeland churches and society. Ecumenical networks developed. Sensitivity toward discrimination and institutionalized racism increased. Apartheid began to be examined critically both within and outside of South Africa.

The year 1982 was critical with regard to apartheid in South Africa. Meeting in Ottawa, Canada, the twenty-first Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) took action to declare the practice of apartheid to be a situation of *status confessionis*. Apartheid was declared a heresy.³ In a subsequent action the World Alliance of Reformed Churches suspended the membership of the Dutch Reformed Church (white) and the Reformed Church in Africa (Indian). As if to underscore the importance of its actions the WARC elected the Reverend Dr. Allan Boesak as its president. Boesak was a minister of

the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (colored) and had been one of its leading voices challenging apartheid.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches had thrown down the gauntlet. By denouncing the scriptural, theological, and moral justification of apartheid as irreconcilable with the gospel, apartheid was seen as to jeopardize the integrity of the Reformed churches. A line between truth and error had to be drawn. For the sake of the Gospel a time of decision was at hand. A state of confession (*status confessionis*) was declared. The Dutch Reformed Church (white) was challenged to end its support of political and economic discrimination against people of color and declare apartheid a heresy. These were the conditions for reinstatement of membership in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

As a result of these actions vigorous conversations began throughout the *oikoumene*. The focus was the practice, going all the way back to the seventeenth century, passively assented to and codified into law, that allowed Christians to overtly practice and covertly consent to discrimination within the bounds of church and society.

The expression of *status confessionis* hails from the sixteenth century, when issues of a serious nature place the very heart of the gospel at issue or in jeopardy of being exposed to imminent threat of loss or injury. It is a "time of confession," when the church is compelled to speak to a situation that goes to the credibility of the gospel and the very essence and nature of the church.

The Barmen Declaration of 1934 was such a time in the twentieth century. Then the Confessing Church in Germany, led by Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, had its genesis in its opposition to those Christians loyal to Adolph Hitler and the practice of determining membership in the church by biological (racial) factors and not solely by baptism. The Confessing Church saw that a time had come when theological arguments had ended and a time of "confession" had arrived "because the Gospel itself (was) put at risk and everything (had become) concentrated on one crucial issue." ⁴

The action of the twenty-first council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1982 had far-reaching consequences. The decision galvanized the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (colored) to continue its struggle against apartheid. WARC's action moved the Dutch Reformed Mission Church to continue its push toward church unity between the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (colored) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (black) that was voted in 1974 and 1978. Emboldened by the decision of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and supported by churches in Europe and North America,

the Reformed Church in America being one of the earliest, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (colored) began drafting a confession in the fall of 1982.

While not mentioning the word apartheid, the new confession placed a strong emphasis on the theological themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice. The theme of unity addressed unity in the church and unity among people. The theme of reconciliation addressed reconciliation within the church and society. The theme of justice proclaimed the justice of God vis à vis the poor and the destitute.

In 1986 at Belhar the new confession was adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (colored). It set the foundation for what was to become a new, emergent Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. While it was the hope that the Belhar Confession would become the common confession of the “family of churches” spawned by the Dutch Reformed Church (white), the DRC at that time did not revisit its position on apartheid or become part of the Uniting Reformed Church.

THE BELHAR CONFESSION IN THE CONTEXT BEYOND SOUTH AFRICA

In an address, as the ecumenical delegate to the 2002 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, from the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa the Reverend Dr. Seth Pitikoe said, “The implications of Belhar are far wider than its original context. Our wish is that the Reformed family would recognize this and not see it as only South African.”⁵ He said, “The three main themes of the Belhar, unity of the church, reconciliation between peoples, and God’s justice vis à vis the poor and the destitute are not addressed in the sixteenth-century confessions.”⁶ For the Reformed family of churches, the Belhar Confession moves the church beyond the themes of the sixteenth-century, so important in that era, to the crucial themes of our time. Belhar offers complementarity, filling out and bringing completion to the historic confessions of our Reformed tradition.

The Belhar themes of unity, reconciliation and justice are grounded in and lifted up from scripture. They are expressed in and through the ministry of our Lord, Jesus Christ. They are intrinsic to the call upon the church to stand where God stands in the world. The confession offers a vision of the church as one of unity; the community of believers in Christ, reconciled in the cross/resurrection event of Christ. The confession makes clear the call upon the church to witness to the reign of God’s righteousness, which is to say the inexorable will of God for justice to be lived and practiced in creation; for compassion and intervention on

behalf of those marginalized by the political, economic, and religious principalities and powers; for the intentional exercise of will on behalf of the helpless, poor, and weak.

The theological themes of the Belhar Confession, with the historic confessions – the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort – bring scriptural fullness and theological richness that provide core values for a vision and mission of the Reformed faith in the context of the twenty-first century.

Unity is a gift and an obligation for the church. It is something to be pursued, becoming visible whenever and wherever possible as witness to the working of God’s Spirit for the unity manifest in the Trinity and the fulfillment of the oneness for which Jesus passionately prayed as recorded in John 17:11-21. The confessing voices of our Reformed sisters and brothers from South Africa challenge us: “Unity of the People of God must be manifest and be active in a variety of ways. Separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin and anything which threatens this unity has no place in the church and must be resisted.”⁷

Reconciliation is the heart of the gospel seen in the life and ministry of Jesus. It is the proclamation and mission that God has entrusted to the church. The church is called to be a peacemaker, “to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world” in both word and deed.⁸

Justice and peace are revealed in the nature of God. Again our sisters and brothers in southern Africa remind us 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 his church to follow him in this; that he brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that he frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that he supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows, and blocks the path of the ungodly; that he wishes to teach his people to do what is good and to seek the right.”⁹

THE BELHAR CONFSSION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

The histories of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) differ. The RCA was planted and grew in the context of political, economic, and religious freedom in what became America. The URCSA was conceived in the crucible of oppression, constrained by political, economic, and religious policies of racism. However, the RCA and the URCSA share a common heritage.

The Reformed Church in America and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa are heirs of the Protestant Reformed Church in the Netherlands; they are related; they are family. Both hail from the Dutch migration in the seventeenth century with its economic and missionary zeal; one in the northern hemisphere and one in the southern. Both share and confess the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession and the Canons of the Synod of Dort. Both the RCA and the URCSA confess, "Jesus is Lord." Both confess, "In the one spirit we were baptized into one body...and that we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13).

The Belhar Confession is foundational to the existence of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. It is the vision and the unifier of that church, the result of the historical and prophetic development of the confession. Recognition of and reception of the URCSA would necessarily imply a recognition of and reception of its Belhar Confession. Since its inception, the URCSA has been recognized by the RCA. There is a common history, over two decades, of receiving ecumenical delegates to each other's general synods. An ecumenical partnership has been enjoined by both churches.

Receiving the gift of Belhar, the first confession from an African church, is a challenge to the Reformed Church in America. It is a challenge to show a factious church and world the gospel of unity, reconciliation, and justice; a Christ worthy identity and mission for the twenty-first century. Perhaps the moment is at hand for the RCA to step forward and receive the gift of the Belhar Confession as the RCA seeks "to follow Christ in a world so loved by God...participating in God's ongoing transformation of lives, congregations, and the world...extending God's mercy and grace to people in communities and countries around the globe." ¹⁰

After five years of intentional, churchwide study of the Belhar Confession, the RCA is now at a moment in time. The RCA is being called, by a sister church of the Reformed family, to be radically attentive to the world in which God has placed it for witness and mission. The RCA is at a kairos moment, being challenged by a sister church of the Reformed family to proclaim in word and deed the manifestation of God's healing, redeeming, and renewing of a broken church in a broken world, so loved by God. Perhaps the call upon the RCA is to lift up a vision of what the human family is called to be; a family unified, reconciled, living God's righteousness, transformed by its living together under the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- ❖ Imagine a church called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to stand where God stands, with the poor and powerless, the marginalized of society, those invisible and weak before the principalities and powers.
- ❖ Imagine a church that gives voice to the voiceless, exercises power on behalf of the powerless, and labors to right the wrongs of those wronged.
- ❖ Imagine a church called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit that resists and rejects as contrary to the gospel and essence of the church any form of separation, enmity, and hatred between people and groups.
- ❖ Imagine a church where baptism and not biology (race) determines a person's status and opportunity of membership in the body of Christ.
- ❖ Imagine hurts being healed, the lost being found, the hungry being fed, peace healing brokenness, hope replacing despair, lives transformed by the love of Jesus Christ.
- ❖ Imagine the Reformed Church in America engaging the world... "a thousand churches in million ways doing one thing... following Christ in mission, in a lost and broken world so loved by God."
- ❖ Imagine the Reformed Church in America receiving Belhar; confessing Belhar; living Belhar; the embodiment of Belhar.

The letter drafted in 1986 by the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa that accompanied the newly adopted confession brings to a close this review of the Behhar Confession in the context of South Africa. It speaks to the Belhar Confession in the context of the larger church and to the Reformed Church in America as it continues its study and possible reception of Belhar as a fourth confession.

"This confession must be seen as a call to a continuous process of soul searching together, a joint wrestling with the issues, and a readiness to repent in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world. It demands the pain of repentance, remorse, and confession; the pain of individual and collective renewal and a changed life. It places us on a road whose end we can neither foresee or manipulate to our own desire. We shall have to come to know and encounter both ourselves and others in new ways."¹¹

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ G. D. Cloete and D. J. Smit, *A Moment of Truth*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), vii.
- ² Reformed Church in America, *Acts and Proceedings of the 196th Regular Session of the General Synod* (Reformed Church Press, 1982) "Ecumenical Address from the Rev. Dr. Pitikoe," 169.
- ³ Cloete and Smit, *A Moment of Truth*, viii.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁵ Reformed Church in America, *Acts and Proceedings*, 171.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.
- ⁷ Belhar Confession, section 2.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, section 3.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, section 4.
- ¹⁰ "Our Call," The Reformed Church in America.
- ¹¹ Cloete and Smit, *A Moment of Truth*, 6.