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THE *BELHAR* CONFESSION AND *CHURCH AND SOCIETY*: A COMPARATIVE READING IN FIVE STATEMENTS¹

ABSTRACT

This essay offers a close comparative reading of the *Belhar confession* and the DRC witness document, *Church and Society*. It is argued (in the first statement) that although on the surface there are many similarities in content between the two documents, they are in fact theologically quite distinct (statements two to five). It is hoped that the DRC's decision in 2011 to start a process of adopting the *Belhar* confession represents a return to its Reformed roots in the confessing church tradition.

The year 2011 was a significant one for the family of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa. In this year, we commemorated the 25th birthdays of two important church documents, namely the *Belhar Confession* and *Church and Society*. The *Belhar* document² was adopted as draft confession by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1982 and subsequently formally included as confession in the church orders at the general synod in the suburb of *Belhar* close to Cape Town in October 1986.

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- 1 Revised and shortened version of a paper delivered on 31 October 2011 at the Theological Faculty of the University of the Free State.
 - 2 For a first theological discussion on the origin and intention of the *Belhar* confession, read Cloete & Smit 1984.

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*Kerk en Samelewing*³ (KS/CS) is a witness document accepted as policy guideline for the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) at the General Synod, also in October 1986, and incidentally also in Cape Town.

The relative distance in time of 25 years allows for rich opportunities to reflect on the significance of these documents. In this paper, an attempt is made to read the two documents in a comparative manner. The aim is, however, to go beyond a mere comparison of content, which is addressed in the first paragraph below. The intention is to rather investigate what the significant social and theological divergences were (and still are?) so as to understand why the DRC took a quarter of a century to resolve in principle to accept the Confession of Belhar.⁴

For the sake of clarity and progression of argument, this paper posits five statements which are then explained in the ensuing paragraphs. Each of these statements could have been an academic paper on its own. The weakness of this essay is therefore that huge topics will be stated quite concisely in the hope that what is gained in breadth will adequately compensate for the loss in depth at some points.

1. FIRST STATEMENT

On the face of it, there is a strong convergence in content between the Confession of Belhar (1982/6) and the DRC witness document Kerk en Samelewing (1986).

One can easily draw two columns with Belhar formulations on the one side and those of CS on the other and see that in many cases there are even exact verbal agreements between the two documents. Because of its historical precedence, let us take the five sub-divisions of the Belhar confession as point of departure and do a brief comparative reading.

Belhar's first article confesses the Trinity and the belief that the church came into existence and is under the care of God through the Word and the Spirit.

In section 243 of CS, the DRC confesses that it forms part of God's unique, holy people that has been elected to eternal life via the Word and the Spirit (reflecting Heidelberg Catechism question 45). That the church

3 For this essay, the original Afrikaans version of 1986 is used as basis, with English translations by the author. It should be noted that *Kerk en Samelewing* was revised in 1990.

4 For a definition and discussion of reception of church documents, read Naudé & Smit 2000. For a case study of the DRC's reaction to Belhar, read Botha & Naudé 77-89, and for a more academic account, Naudé 1997.

owes its existence and calling in the world to the gracious election by God is further emphasised with reference to the church and the new covenant through the miracle of re-creation. The essence of the church is therefore determined by the Triune God. The church is – above all – God’s people (see CS sections 42, 46-8, and 82).

Belhar’s second article repeats the creedal formulation from Nicea and the Apostolicum, namely a confession of one, holy, catholic, church, and places emphasis on both the spiritual and visible unity of the church.

The unity of the church is also a core theme in CS. The unity of the church is a reflection of the unity of the Trinity, and by living this unity the church is a window on God’s new world (CS, section 81). Just like in Belhar, the link between theo-logy and ecclesiology is an intricate one. As a direct echo of Belhar’s second article, CS states:

The church is from its inception one in the Triune God, but must seek, serve and make this unity visible in the midst of the diversity in God’s creation and amongst God’s people in this torn-apart reality (section 82, my translation).

It is important to note that on the unity question, CS indeed corrects the traditional views of the DRC up to that point in two ways: diversity in creation is not longer used as argument for human and church divisions on the principle of pluriformity, and, whilst acknowledging the theological (spiritual) origin and eschatological fulfilment of this unity, CS clearly calls for *visible* unity, realised here and now. The notion of “unity in freedom” (Belhar, article 2) finds expression in the CS statement that visible unity must not be forced upon people for the mere sake of outward demonstration (CS, section 94).⁵

Belhar’s third article focuses on the conviction that the message of reconciliation has been entrusted to the church and that the church should embody this reconciliation amongst its own members and in society.

In its discussion of the essence and calling of the church in paragraph 11 (with 9 sub-paragraphs), CS presents reconciliation from two perspectives: The priestly task of the church requires it to proclaim in word and deed the love and reconciliation amongst people (section 51). And it, secondly, makes particular mention of the church as “reconciled community” (paragraph 11.7, sections 77-80). Like Belhar, reconciliation is fundamentally seen as gracious gift from God through the blood of Christ.

5 See also sections 59, 62, 74, 76, 82-99 and the practical translation with regard to the DRC family in sections 257-8.

Once the church understands its own reconciliation and peace with God, part of its thankfulness is to take up the ministry of reconciliation, noted for its love and peace amongst people; erecting visible signs of God's kingdom amidst the divisions of society (section 223). Racism is hence declared "a serious sin which no person or church may defend or practise" (section 112).

Belhar's fourth article confesses that God is a God of justice and peace who is in a special way the God of the sufferer, the poor and oppressed, and that the church is called to stand with God to ensure that justice and peace is established.

This has been the most contentious article of the Belhar confession and has been and is still today being used to discredit the confession as "liberation theology" built on the notion of a Marxist class struggle.⁶ In its first reaction to the Belhar confession, the DRC stated that this section could have been formulated differently, and at that point put forward the view that CS actually expresses the concern for justice more adequately.⁷

The point is not whether CS is "better" than Belhar, but whether the DRC's witness can be seen as consonant to the Belhar confession in this specific regard.

A close reading of the CS division on the church and relations amongst groups of people (division 12) reveals an astonishing and passionate plea for justice based on a careful analysis of the same biblical traditions cited in Belhar, namely the prophets and wisdom literature in the Old Testament, and the gospels and James in the New Testament. Justice is particularly expounded in relation to those whose rights have been violated. This is not only relevant on a personal level, but applies equally to the social structures in society (CS, sections 136-137).

Believers are therefore called to stand for the rights of the poor and the vulnerable. In deep consonance with Belhar, CS states that where this happens, believers follow the example of God Himself. "He is indeed *par excellence* (*by uitnemendheid*) the One who stands for the case of the sufferers and those living under injustice" (section 144, my translation, referring to Ps 146). This is repeated in the NT where especially the Lukan gospel describes God as "the One who especially cares for the less privileged and the vulnerable" (section 145, my translation). Indeed,

6 See the discussion about Belhar and liberation theology in Botha & Naudé 1998: 86-88, and Smit's brilliant exegetical study on this article in Cloete & Smit 1984.

7 See the discussion of the DRC General Synod of 1990 decision (point 8 refers to Belhar's article 4) in Botha and Naude 1998: 83.

because we are created in God's image, the Bible demonstrates "special sensitivity for those who are oppressed and exploited" (section 147, my translation).

It is clear that CS uses the same biblical language with the same kind of emphases as we find in Belhar article 4. No reformulation nor discrediting of Belhar can be defended from the strong witness that speaks so clearly from CS. Members of the DRC who still do this, contradict the stance of their own church.

Belhar's last article is a call to embodiment of the confession, despite the actions of governments or the ordinations of men. It recalls the early church's confession that Jesus is Lord, and ends with a doxology to the Father, Son and Spirit.

In the context of South Africa in the early and mid-1980s, the issue was indeed living the faith in the face of strong and sometimes violent state action. Readers are reminded of the controversial movement that prayed for the fall of the government in 1985.⁸ How does one embody one's deepest confession if the state legalises injustice and upholds unjust laws in the name of the very Christ whom one confesses?

CS is quite aware of this. The "Reformed" in the name of the DRC played an important role here. CS distinguishes between the state (ordained by God) and the government of the day, representing the state. The status of the government is dependent on the fulfilment of its calling to be servant of God by caring for all its citizens, and making sure that peace, order, and well-being are promoted (sections 310-432).

In principle CS agrees with Belhar: The Reformed tradition knows the right to protest against and actively resist the political order of the day (section 323). The chief reason and justification for these actions of last resort – such as civil disobedience and peaceful resistance (section 328) – is if the government in itself demonstrates such a measure of injustice that its legitimacy is fully questionable (section 326).

It will be shown later that this principle agreement (that obedience to Christ the Lord is a higher requirement than obedience to the government or state⁹) was not upheld consistently and in practice by CS. Nevertheless,

8 See the SACC text that motivated the call for prayers to end unjust rule in Villa-Vicencio 1985:247-250.

9 Read the moving testimony of Beyers Naudé and others on the issue of the right to resistance by Christians in the context of the Schlebusch Commission appointment in 1972 to investigate the work of the Christian Institute (Naudé 1995:170-179).

one may assert that on the face of it, CS concurs *in theory* (see section 328) with Belhar, namely that one should rather suffer for your faith than to follow the stipulations of men (sic).

CS ends – like Belhar – on a doxological note from Philippians 1:9 -11, referring to our salvation through faith in Christ, and the eschatological hope that believers will be unblemished when Christ returns, to the honour and glory of God (section 383).

2. SECOND STATEMENT

The primary and most obvious divergence between the two documents is that they represent distinct theological genres with a distinct “status”, namely an official church confession following a status confessionis (1977/1982) and, in the case of Church and Society, a synodical witness document following a rethink of a previous DRC document called Ras, volk en nasie (1974).

Different church traditions respond in distinct ways to new situations in which a reinterpretation of the gospel is required. The most well-known of these ecclesial modes of speaking is the Roman Catholic encyclicals that from time to time provide pastoral and ethical guidelines for believers, whilst at the same time serving as the church’s witness in the world.

It is common knowledge that only the Reformed tradition developed the specific genre of confessions, namely witnessing to the gospel in a specific situation against a perceived heresy and for the truth of the apostolic faith.¹⁰ But that does not happen often. In the normal course of events, churches in the Reformed tradition (obviously with some variations) formulate their witness via the work of officially appointed commissions and synodical reports.

I will not aim to analyse the theological differences underlying the notion of truth, Scripture and authority emanating from dialogues among faith traditions. Within the Reformed tradition, the view is clear: Scripture is the first and primary and ultimate “authority” for all forms of witness in the church. Following this, we find the credo’s of the early church, followed historically by confessions specific to the Reformation tradition that all derive their authority from Scripture and that are always open for revision in the light of a subsequent better understanding of Scripture.

10 For a broad historical overview of *status confessionis*, read Smit’s contribution on this topic in Cloete and Smit 1984. Read Naudé 2010:77-103 on the specific confessional character of the Belhar text in relation to the theology of Karl Barth.

Commission and synod reports are the on-going witness of the church, subject to the same Scriptural truth. However, they do not carry the same “weight” as confessions that are serious expressions of faith following a situation of *status confessionis* in which the truth of the gospel itself is at stake. Barth (1961:79) reminds us that no church can be in a permanent state of *status confessionis* – confessions are therefore rarer, and from the perspective of church law, take a prime position in the orders of the church, from where they flow into the life and ministry of the church.

The simple but – as we will see below – important difference between Belhar and CS is that the latter was an updated witness of the DRC, revising its views of 1974 on core aspects of the faith in the context of South Africa in the early 1980s. In contrast stands Belhar as a confessional response to the very same situation, constituting a fundamental difference on the interpretation of the seriousness of threats to the truth of the gospel at that point.

What appears to be the same content as set out in the first statement above is not the full story.

3. THIRD STATEMENT

Part of the reason for responding differently to the situation of SA in the 1970s and 1980s is that the DRC interpreted the situation from an oppositional perspective compared to the DRMC. These oppositional perspectives have their roots in at least three factors pertaining to the DRC, namely socio-economic status, political ideology, and natural theology.

3.1 Socio-economic status

There are quite a number of perspectives on how social factors determine our view of the world. The most prominent of these perspectives in theological circles is the Latin American liberation theologians’ emphasis on the so-called “preferential option for the poor” which constructs reality “from the underside of history” and then takes the view of the poor as hermeneutical key to retrieve core themes in Scripture from this perspective. In the broader field of hermeneutics and Biblical Studies, the same point regarding social location (from different angles) has been made by feminist scholars, materialist exegetes, black and African theologians, and those who give privilege to the “ordinary readers” of the Bible.¹¹

11 For an accessible overview of different hermeneutical approaches with references to original literature, see Maimela and König 1998:257-450.

Outside the field of theology, some of the most prevalent theories related to our perspective-dependant view of reality, are related to Marxism¹² (the sub-structure of economic class determining the supra-structure of religion, culture and politics) and the paradigm theory of Thomas Kuhn¹³ (scientific interpretation is shaped by the “normality” of a relevant community of scholars).

The South Africa of the period 1950-1980 from which the two documents under discussion emerged, was predicated upon a strict spatial, social and economic model of separation. White and coloured people in particular through the implementation of the Group Areas Act, literally and metaphorically lived in different worlds, and it is therefore to be expected that their perspective on South African realities would be markedly different: one from the upper, and the other from the underside of history and power.

This is evident in many ways, but perhaps nowhere more poignantly reflected than in the DRC’s official response to Belhar during the general synod of 1990. The principle right of the DRMC to accept a new confession is granted. The DRC also noted that this acceptance was done “in great earnest” (*met groot erns*) “and that the content addresses matters that are of essential importance to the Mission Church” (Botha and Naudé 1998:83).

It is this last sentence that strikes one as the most revealing of viewing the world from different perspectives. Matters like unity, reconciliation and justice (and the seriousness of a *status confessionis* associated with them) were just not on the radar screen of the DRC in the same way, simply because it is very, very difficult to jump over one’s own shadow - in this case one’s social location. Barth is right: If you do not see the no! of the confession you will also not confess the yes! of the confession (Barth 1956: 630-631).

3.2 Political ideology

One could further argue that this social location of legal and practical separation, sprung from a political ideology which is unfortunately still present in aspects of CS. In this particular sense, CS is an ambiguous witness:

12 For a short statement on the interpretation of history as that of a class struggle, read Marx and Engels 1971 (original 1848).

13 See Kuhn’s highly influential study on paradigms in science (1962) and the theological interpretation of his views by Tracy and Küng (1989)

It takes as point of departure (in the Calvinist tradition) that God rules over all of reality and all spheres of society (sections 42, 44, 50, 216). It then proceeds to state that love, justice and human dignity are the tests for any political model (309). But in stead of logically moving forward to actually judge the politics of race-based separation from this perspective, CS retreats into a supposedly “neutral” position, stating that it is not the task of the church to actually prescribe any political model or policy. It names apartheid openly, but in stead of an unequivocal rejection, it says: “The DRC is convinced that the handling of apartheid (*hantering van apartheid*) as a political and social system that brings injustice to people and benefit one group unjustly above another, cannot be accepted on Christian ethical grounds...” (306). CS continues to state that not all suffering of people can be attributed to apartheid only (307), and that (perhaps) some of the legal measures in place were only experienced as hurtful and inhuman (339).

The same tension between “principle” and “practice”, resolved in a supposedly neutral position, emerges from the section on the church and government. It was noted above that the CS accepts the right to rise up against a government which – due to injustice (323) – has lost its legitimacy (326). But even cases of peaceful protest like the call for sanctions or marches for freedom, the DRC cannot support, due the fact that they bring greater suffering and lead to unrest and violence. The retreat into “neutrality” is the way out: “The DRC may not identify itself with existing or other political ideologies or attempt to be involved in politics via the drafting of political programs or models” (332).

It is evidently clear: The DRC of the mid 1980s was politically just too compromised to clearly state that apartheid *as such* was not acceptable on ethical grounds, and that in fact the government of the day has lost all legitimacy in the eyes of the majority and in terms of the DRC’s own ethical criteria. The dual power of social status and political ideology was too strong.

But again: that is not the full story. Theology was the real issue at stake.

3.3 Natural theology

The differences in social analysis and political ideology are not adequate to explain why CS and Belhar seem so close in terms of content, but in fact stand quite far apart. It has to do with the theological departure point as is witnessed in the interpretation of South African society at that time.

Chapter 1 in CS (entitled: “Background”) refers to the complex society in which the DRC finds itself. This complexity is constituted by

the fact that there is a wide divergence of racial groups, and CS gives exact percentages of the population for Zulu, Xhosa, White and Coloured people. This is followed by the remark that population growth amongst Whites is slower than amongst Black peoples and will lead Whites to occupy a proportionally smaller part of the total population. Literacy amongst Whites is much higher than amongst Blacks, and this will play a role in economic differences between rich and poor. In summary: the issue which needs to be addressed by the church is the wide diversity related to “race, skin colour, folk and culture, language and education, politics and economics, religion and church coupled to a big difference in levels of development...” If all these factors are present in one society, and one adds the strife between capitalism and communism and the struggle for world power, the potential for conflict is huge (CS, section 29).

What is crucial to note, is that this “background” is stated first, and then the principles of accountability (read: theology) follow in chapter 2. This is not a simple question of whether contextual analysis precedes or follows theological reflection. No, the real observation is that the DRC uses race differentiation and a philosophical principle of pluriformity as hermeneutical key to “frame” the subsequent theological response. When it is then stated that Scripture is the only criterion for judging the South African situation (section 36), the reading of Scripture is already embedded in a compromised principle of natural theology where God’s revelation is seen in relation to the pluriformity in creation and recreation.

It is not in the nature of a confession to do extensive social analysis. In Belhar this “analysis” must be sought in the accompanying letter and in a few contextual references in the confession itself (e.g. article 3). What is immediately evident is a totally different spirit: Belhar approaches the South African situation from the perspective of whether the truth of the gospel is at stake or not. In other words, Belhar approaches the situation from a confessional starting point and not from any philosophical or political or language or race perspective. Yes, all these matters are indeed relevant in the confession of unity, reconciliation and justice – Belhar is far from neutral or objective – but it approaches the situation via a *status confessionis*.

In short: For CS the “problem” is how to live together in a complex and diverse society. For Belhar the “problem” is a false gospel supporting the division in church and society on the basis of diversity.

If one adds this latter theological point to the socio-economic status and political arguments above, it creates a fuller picture why CS and Belhar hold oppositional views, despite the seeming concurrence in content.

4. FOURTH STATEMENT

Apart from the fact of situational interpretation, the DRC at that point did not actualise its claim of being a confessional church in the Reformed tradition open to new revelation of the truth in dialogue with the ecumenical church, partially because of its ecumenical isolation, and more fundamentally because its theological identity was Reformed in the formal, but not in the normative sense.

It is not surprising to note how often the DRC refers to itself as a confessional church in the tradition of the Reformation. That is what its name and history say!

The church is a confessional community that stands in the tradition of the New Testament church and the apostolic faith. In fact, the apostolicity of the church refers to a sound adherence to the teaching of the apostles (sections 60-61). And the catholicity of the church refers to the unity of the one people of God on earth (sections 73-75). Truth arises from dialogue, and we must accept that no one has the monopoly on truth – openness to each other let us know the full nature of truth (159).

In sections 245 – 264, the DRC positions itself in the widening circle of ecumenical relations from its own family to the Roman Catholic Church and separatist groups. The DRC states that it will strive for membership of ecumenical bodies “where the basis, aims and practical living of these are compatible with its own confessional viewpoints” (264).

The question then arises: If confessions of the apostolic faith are particular to the Reformed tradition, and if the truth is not held by any one church, but in openness in dialogue, why did the DRC that claims to stand in this confessional tradition not accept the confession of Belhar in the period between 1982/86 and 1990 – or even up to this day?

There are many reasons – some of them implicit in the analyses of statements above. In this specific context, a part of the answer lies in the innocuously sounding end of paragraph 264: By 1986 the DRC was under huge ecumenical pressure to denounce the theology of apartheid.¹⁴ It was a relatively lonely church who felt itself under attack from others who could not see how complex the situation was and how honest the DRC was in its intentions to respond theologically. Deep down was the conviction that if others believe and practice those beliefs differently, the confession held by the DRC was the truth.

14 For a discussion of the DRC's ecumenical relations in this period, see the incisive analysis by De Villiers (1986).

And yes, church politics was a reality. But for the first years after 1982, and for some even up to this day, the confession could not be heard because it was seen as an attack on the DRC from both the ecumenical world (Lutheran World Federation and the WARC) and its own daughter church, the DRMC. The reaction in the first phase after 1986 was not humble co-confession, but defence, because the DRC was no longer in the broader catholic and apostolic church where the specific truths of unity, reconciliation and justice resided (see Naudé 1997).

There have been numerous studies on the theology which enabled the DRC to justify apartheid as church and political policy.¹⁵ Dirkie Smit makes the distinction between being Reformed in the formal or normative senses of the word.¹⁶ A church may have the right church orders and may officially subscribe to the right confessions, and even call itself “Reformed” without in fact being Reformed if judged by the normative criteria of this tradition. In actual terms, the DRC’s identity in the first half of the 20th century has been predominantly shaped by neo-Calvinist, missiological Pietism (Kuyper, Warneck, Murray) – a theology that was in principle open to confession but not in actual practice. The DRMC had its identity shaped by the normative Reformed tradition of Calvin, Kuyper (reinterpreted), and specifically Barth¹⁷ in the confessing church tradition of Barmen and Bonhoeffer, and was as a church therefore much better prepared for the act of confession. It was Beyers Naudé, a son of the DRC, who first called for a confessing church as early as 1965 (Naudé 1965). But we know his voice was not heard for decades in his home church, because he spoke “too early”.

5. FIFTH STATEMENT

The DRC’s general synod’s recommendation that Belhar becomes a part of its confessional basis (despite significant legal obstacles) probably represents both a societal and a theological shift, and it has the potential

15 See Hexham 1981, De Gruchy 1979, Kinghorn 1986, and for a condensed version Naudé 2005, and 2010:23-48. For recent contributions on the work of Ben Marais and Beyers Naudé as critical voices from within the DRC, read Coetzee 2011, and for an analysis of Ben Marais and FJM Potgieter, read the study by Hans Engdahl (2006).

16 For a short exposition of this difference, see Smit 2009:221; and for an outline of the normative frame of being Reformed, see Smit 2010.

17 For the enormous direct and indirect influence of Barth in the Belhar synod of 1982, read Naudé 2010:77-83; and for a general assessment of Barth’s value for confessional theology, read McCormack 2003.

to invigorate the truly Reformed roots of the DRC, and make the visible reunification of the family possible.

A very difficult question to answer is: What changed in the DRC that its general synod recently (October 2011) decided with a significant majority to recommend to its parishes the adoption of Belhar as fourth confession? The answer to the question is probably too complex to answer right now. And we are perhaps too close to the events to fully understand what is going on.

One could somewhat cynically argue that the DRC is just a very late arrival in the new South Africa, and had to wait for its members to adapt to the realities of losing social, political and some economic power. This awareness of relative social status is then transferred to the ecclesial realm, and members are more comfortable to accept Belhar. Perhaps younger people (who according to reports played a significant role at the General Synod of 2011) do not know and are no longer emotionally blinded by the origins of Belhar and the leading figures of that time. They can read Belhar for what it says and not by whom it was said.

On the level of theology, one can argue that the DRC is currently a truly pluralistic church with no dominant paradigm: there are Pentecostal, Baptist, Congregational, Pietistic and various shades of Reformed strands all making up the complex and ever shifting theological self-understanding of the DRC. The most positive interpretation of the decision by the 2011 synod is to infer that the DRC has indeed returned – via a fairly lengthy detour of 130 years – to its normative, confessional roots. This inference will be tested in the lengthy process of confessional adoption, and we shall only know the answer with more surety afterward.

But it must be said with hope and joy: The structural and visible reunification of the DRC Family on the basis of an already shared tradition, complemented by the Belhar confession, will auger in a new and exciting theological and prophetic phase in the history of the Reformed churches in SA, and hopefully further into Africa. We cannot rest until the visible unity of the church is realised in practice.

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