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Becoming a Belhar-Confessing Church
Ministry Manual: Racism & the American Church
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My ministry manual research topic was to critically assess the Belhar Confession in order to discern a way for it to go forward in the CRC and RCA denominations. The impulse behind choosing this topic was a sense that the denominations were dangerously close to paying lip-service to the gift of the Belhar Confession – both had discussed it at their Synods, and both had recommended a time of consideration and education; however, neither had made significant steps toward becoming Belhar-confessing denominations.¹

I set out to do a few things. First, I wanted to better articulate why the Belhar Confession should be adopted, and then to note why its adoption was appropriate as a *confession* rather than a *contemporary testimony* (like “Our Song of Hope” in the RCA and “Our World Belongs to God” in the CRC). A confession is appropriate for adoption in the church when the church is at moment of *status confessionis*, or “a situation of confessing” – one in which the very proclamation of the gospel is at stake. In South Africa, this situation was obvious in apartheid; in North America, some argue that it is less clear. For me, a comparison to our history of race relations (which have clear contemporary results), current U.S. immigration policy,² and the economic globalization

¹ The RCA, in 2007, *provisionally* adopted the Belhar as a confession to stand alongside the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Belgic Confession. For two years the confession will be “tested” in congregations and then the synod will come to a final conclusion. Some might consider this a significant step toward adopting the confession; however, I’ve done little-to-no studying of the Belhar in required seminary courses in this denomination, and I am unaware of how this testing is being carried out. I remain, thus, unconvinced of the significance of this step as it pertains to allowing the Belhar to significantly impact the life of our denomination.

² This is particularly clear in the light of an overture presented to the CRC Synod in 2007, when a classis questioned the right of undocumented immigrants to partake in the Lord’s Supper.

which has resulted in extreme poverty and extreme wealth, made the *status confessionis* undeniable.

Second, I wanted to better articulate how the Belhar is appropriate not only in the South African context, but in a North American one as well – it is the Spirit speaking in a unique way when confessed in North America. It became clear that the prophetic words of the Belhar would, if taken seriously and attempted to live out, challenge the RCA and the CRC into true (and painful) transformation. It would call to question ecclesial structures which limit participation based on gender and sexual orientation. It would call to question economic practices which impoverish and oppress. It would call into question the church's failing to voice opposition to unjust political regimes and practices, no matter how unpopular those messages may be.

Third, I wanted to point to some specific ways that the Belhar Confession could be used in congregations rather than ignored and forgotten the way our other confessions are treated in many RCA and CRC churches. I did find some helpful litanies, educational resources, and hymns for this purpose, but it became clear that this is an area where much more work needs to be done. Without voicing these themes in our worship practices, the people who make up the RCA and CRC denominations will not be significantly impacted. And the Belhar deserves to make an impact that is significant.

But beyond these practical tools, my real goal was to understand why the Belhar Confession mattered – to South Africans, to North American people of color, and to Christians. How was God being seen more fully, how was God's love being felt more deeply, how was God's kingdom breaking forth more evidently through the story of Belhar and its future in the CRC/RCA contexts?

To answer this question, I was particularly blessed by my two interviews: one with an African American pastor from Grand Rapids, one with a white church member from Seattle. In both these conversations, it became clear that the Spirit of God was working through Belhar to move the blessed community into new challenges and new hope. The Belhar, from the voices of the marginalized and oppressed, was a beautiful model of what the Christian life is all about: reconciliation in the face of hatred, and life in the midst of death, empowerment in the midst of oppression. For both my interviewees, there was much to be learned and celebrated and hoped for in our North American context because of the story of the people of color in Belhar.

Another beautiful articulation of why the Belhar matters came from Allan Boesak's lecture (which was emailed to me, so I've attached it). Its personal testimony, clear articulation of the hopeful moment with which we're presented, and helpful theological treatment of the Belhar's place in the Christian life made it the most important piece I read for this project. Boesak says, "Belhar proclaims the victory of Christ, and through him ours, over the power of sin and death and fear, for the power of Satan is broken, his claim on our lives forfeited. We shall no longer be afraid." May it be so – in South Africa, and in the Reformed Church of North America, too.

Bibliography

- Boesak, Allan. "To Stand Where God Stands: Reflection on the Confession of Belhar after 25 years" Cousins Lecture Series, Richmond Baptist Seminary, Richmond Virginia, October 2007.

If you read nothing else on the Belhar, read this. It is a personal testimony to the situation which gave birth to the Belhar, so it is more helpful than any other history lesson that gives light to its context. It also locates the Belhar within a Reformed theological tradition, drawing parallels to the thoughts of Calvin, Bonhoeffer, the Heidelberg, etc. It effectively defends against the assertion that the Belhar should not be called a confession because it speaks to social situations rather than spiritual ones. It is a beautifully written, persuasive, and arresting account of the Spirit's work to give birth to this confession; it will leave readers assured that to adopt the Belhar is not enough – the Belhar exists to transform the church of Jesus Christ into its true identity as radical and prophetic followers of a suffering and loving God.

- *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum*, Volume 15, Number 2, Spring 2008.

Most of the issue deals with confessions broadly – discussing the importance and the life of the confessions within the church today. It's a helpful primer on why confessions matter and how they function for people of faith. The article "Is it time for a New Confession?" by Kathy Smith deals with the Belhar in particular, summarizing a Calvin Theological Seminary conversation among faculty about the arguments for and against adopting the Belhar as a formal confession in the CRCNA. This is a good overview of the main points of contention as well as the driving reasons for adoption. It's also interesting to note the photograph at the end of the article, showing a group of all white men (and one white woman) sitting in a posh living room discussing the confession.

- Collection of worship and education resources,
www.rca.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?pid=2552

I found this collection of resources to be helpful. While articles discussing the importance of adopting the Belhar and studying it within our communities seem to be readily available, the most important piece – actually using it in our faith communities – is largely forgotten. These resources attempt to fill this gap.

Hymns: images.rca.org/docs/worship/BelharHymns.pdf

Because singing is one of the best ways of confessing belief, I think that these are vital resources to truly confess Belhar in our congregations. I see, however, a lack of diversity among these songs – most are tradition hymn structures, and more and more American Reformed churches are foregoing such hymns in favor of repetitive praise songs. This style is not represented among the hymns presented here.

Litany: images.rca.org/docs/worship/BelharLitany.pdf

This litany gets at the main themes of the Belhar in a call-and-response format. For churches who are still using litanies as a form of worship, this may be a helpful resource, although its repetitive “we reject” may give a negative air to the worship service.

Children’s Study Session: images.rca.org/docs/aboutus/BelharLessonForgottenParts.pdf
This children’s session notes that, ideally, this would be used with children whose parents are going through the adult study guide. I think this is a great idea – what’s learned at home is best retained – although in the contexts I’m most familiar with, this would be a difficult arrangement to make. The lesson plan guides students through a process of naming the church – from the familiar congregation to the “church universal” around the world, drawing that universal church, singing a song from an African context, and praying God to watch over all the parts of the church the class mentioned. It’s a helpful and interactive guide to teaching children about the breadth of our faith family. I think it could be more intentionally focused on the Belhar, however.

Youth Study Session: images.rca.org/docs/aboutus/BelharLessonPrejudice.pdf
This is an activity which simulates the experience of exclusion for high school aged youth. It also points out the exclusion within our confessions of large parts of the global church.

- Holder Rich, Cynthia. “Seeking a Contextual ‘Cry from the Heart of Faith:’ The Belhar Confession and Race in the U.S.” *Reformed Review*, Volume 61, Number 1, Winter 2007/08.

Holder Rich is a Western Theological Seminary faculty member, and writes her article for an RCA audience. It outlines the history of the Belhar, and argues that it should be adopted as a confession within the denomination because, (1) it is the first confession to have come out of the Global South, (2) it comes from the voice of those of a different racial and cultural background than typical RCA members, (3) it is a contemporary (20th century) confession, (4) its main themes (unity, reconciliation, and justice) are absent from Dort, Belgic, and Heidelberg, and (5) the theology of the Belhar is distinctively Reformed. The article goes on argue that the RCA is, too, in a *status confessionis* and needs the Belhar specifically to speak to this moment. This is a helpful article for those in the RCA context because of its specificity for this context.

- Janssen, Allan. “Confessing Belhar in America” *Journal of Reformed Theology*, Volume 1, Number 2, 2007, pp. 195-203.

Examines what a confession is (historically speaking, as well as in the context of the Belhar for the Reformed Church in America): a marker of identity and a way to shape one’s religious understanding and being. Confessions have three uses, each unique to the entity to whom the confession is addressed: If addressed to the church, it is used as a hermeneutic through which to read Scripture. If addressed to the world, it is used as a truth that has been spoken and named by the confessing community. If addressed to God, it is a song sung by a believing body. These three uses aren’t exclusive, and they’re not

separable. While this sets the bar high when a denomination like the RCA considers adopting a new confession, the author contends that the Belhar should be adopted.

- Koopman, Nico. “The Confession of Belhar, 1986: A Guide for Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity” *Journal of Reformed Theology*, Volume 2, Number 1, 2008 , pp. 28-39.

The Belhar, argues this author, is the story of God’s work – the same God found in the biblical story bringing about unity, reconciliation, and justice is the God who brought about those gifts in South Africa. God, in the biblical witness and the South African witness, is redeemer of the injustice, alienation, and division that humans create. The article draws out Belhar’s understanding of justice as *compassionate* justice, reconciliation as *overcoming alienation* (between humans and God, humans and humans) and moving toward *embrace*, and unity as *unity in proximity*. The church – embodied by particular congregations – can, through adopting the Belhar, be spaces of hope in a broken world.

- McGarrahan, Eunice T. “A Study of the Belhar Confession and its Accompanying Letter” Office of Theology and Worship, PCUSA. Available for download at www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/confession/belharstudyguide.pdf

This helpful study uses a number of different means to help educate its users about the Belhar: informational essays on the Belhar’s history, importance to the PCUSA, location within the other confessions, theological treatment of its themes, and others; small group discussion questions and activities; responsive readings, songs, and other worship elements. It also includes a printing of the letter accompanying the Belhar Confession itself. Because of the breadth of resources within this study guide, I could see it being helpful in a variety of contexts. It stands out from “Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice” (which is used in CRC/RCA contexts) for that reason, and could end up being more helpful for church leaders. Interestingly, the study guide also prints Martin Luther King Jr’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” I found this to be a helpful addition, but one that could be perceived as heavy-handed for those who hold reservations about the Belhar’s adoption.

- *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* Volume 23, Number 5, May 2008.

This edition of *Perspectives* is dedicated to exploring the use of the Belhar in the life of North American Reformed denominations and congregations.

Peter Vander Meulen’s contribution, “Confessional and Confessing,” is helpful. He uniquely draws connections between the US immigration situation and the Belhar, helping to draw out ways that the Belhar is applicable to the context of the US and can shed light and give direction to the life of Reformed Christians in North America prophetic engagement with its own injustices.

Piet Naude’s lecture helpfully points out that no traditional confession was born from a series of conversations and deliberations; rather, confessions come from an utterance of truth in a moment empowered by the Spirit. They are adopted not because of

careful calculations of their ecclesial and political ramifications, but because they are believed to be true.

Eugene Heideman's "Steffens, Erastus, and Belhar," interestingly pointed out that an amending of the 16th century confessions to fit a 21st century context is not helpful and leads to ambiguity. My uncle, a PCUSA pastor, is involved with a conversation in his denomination regarding the translation of certain language from the Heidelberg which is exclusive of homosexuals. Heideman argues that an adoption of the Belhar sets the church in a position to hold the confessions in tension with one another, allowing each to stand in its own historical position and guide the church on its own terms. I wonder if this kind of argument would be helpful for the PCUSA in this context.

- *Reformed Review*, Fall 2006, Volume 60, Number 1.

The first article of this edition of *Reformed Review*, which focuses solely on the Belhar, deals with the unprecedented nature of the question of whether to adopt the Belhar as a confession within the RCA, as well as arguing that we are in a "situation of confessing," and to not adopt the Belhar is, in itself, a confession.

The second article responds to the first, agreeing that it is one thing to mark a document as a "confession" and never use it, but quite another to speak, to "confess," a document aloud. He also pushes readers to consider whether we are ready to allow the confession to speak into other situations of injustice – Israel and Palestine, US immigration, etc. – when we declare that we will "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." And he pushes readers to consider whether we are ready to declare that reject the notion that "descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church," when our polity has limits based on gender and sexual orientation. He pushes the RCA to not simply shelve this confession next to the others that we don't really use; rather, we should allow ourselves, in all the nuances of our life together, to be confronted and challenged by what the Belhar stands for – the in-breaking Kingdom of God. I found this article to be the most helpful of the bunch.

The third article summarizes the Belhar's history and context within South Africa and then widens its lens to view the use of the Belhar in other contexts, including a case for why the confession should be adopted in the RCA. It's probably the best historical and contextual summary of those I read, and would be a helpful teaching tool.

The fourth article responds to the previous, and argues that the way the RCA could most honor its sister church's gift of the Belhar is to engage in a decade-long dialogue about its adoption and use in our contexts.

- *Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Study Guide for the Belhar Confession*, Reformed Church in America, 2006.

This 102-page study guide, designed to help people reflect on the Belhar Confession as speaking directly to a North American ecclesial context, was written by and for members of the RCA (it is also used in the CRC). It is designed for a 9-week course of study, though the supplemental materials are enough to go much deeper. It's user-friendly for

discussion leaders, and includes real-life testimonies and stories, songs, worship helps, and a very helpful "Welcoming Diversity Inventory," which could help a congregation practically apply that which they learn from the study regarding racial reconciliation.

The guide comes in response to the 2007 General Synod of the RCA's request to test the Belhar in a congregational context: in worship/liturgy, in teaching, and in confession. I think this guide is helpful as a teaching tool, which hopefully will give impetus for a congregation to respond in its worship and its confession; however, I think more than this guide is needed to assist congregations in incorporating these themes in worship (which have remained largely absent from our worship services for generations), as well as how to "confess" in what many consider a largely non-confessional worship context.

**An Interview with
Laura Carpenter,
Pastor of Worship and Diversity at Madison Square CRC, Grand Rapids, MI.**

1) *What does the Belhar have to do with racial reconciliation?*

It calls us to live out what the Bible says we should live out as a diverse body of believers as it relates to unity, justice, and reconciliation. The third main point of the Belhar is reconciliation. Reconciliation is everything to it. You can't do justice w/o reconciliation and you can't be unified without reconciliation.

2) *What has the Belhar meant in your faith community?*

Nothing. Yet. I just introduced it to the leaders on Tuesday. In our church, there's been no application yet. It was well-received when I presented it. One of the members of our team is from South Africa, and endorses it and fully believes in it. Because of the mission at Madison, it's a natural connection to embrace the Belhar. It might bring clarity to how we might articulate and live out our mission.

3) *What might this document mean to your congregation if it is passed as a Reformed Confession?*

It might ... we fully believe in and embrace the confessions of the CRC. But to make this a part of our denomination would bring us... would build a stronger connection between Madison and the denomination. Sometimes it feels like we're our own island. The Belhar could be an identity document that reflects who we're trying to be. It could inform who we're trying to be. The Heidelberg, Canons of Dort do... we teach those things... but the Belhar is who we are. It would build a bridge to the denomination.

4) *How do you see the Belhar being used in the life of your congregation (liturgically, educationally, etc.)?*

We recite the Apostles' Creed, we could recite portions of the Belhar. The creed names who we are, what we believe, how we identify ourselves; the Belhar could do this, too. The Belhar could be taught in Sunday school classes. Kids would really get it embedded in their minds, hearts, if this is who we are as a church. Who we believe God is calling us to be. It could shape education, what we proclaim in our worship, what we teach, how people begin to identify themselves.

5) *How would life in this denomination be different if we adopted the Belhar?*

I have no idea. I could say... as a denomination, we're good at having documents and mission statements and creeds... to live them out is a whole other thing. The change would be small, monumental change would come slowly, institution change would slowly. [The CRCNA] is very ethnically defined. For this 150-year old denomination,

that started off around ethnically, to begin to embrace this is going to be a major paradigm shift... it may take another 100 years to see its fruit. Maybe it would change who we hire - more people of color in leadership, more ethnically diverse churches. But it will take intentionality and time. I don't know that I will see the full expression of the change in my lifetime.

6) *Why is the Belhar meaningful or important to you?*

For me, to see a country that was bound by apartheid and a church that was bound by apartheid... the Belhar was drafted by people of color and presented to the white part of the church. Now maybe one day we'll have a time when people of color and white folks will get together and draft something like that. But what typically happens is the white people draft and document and give it to people of color. Maybe it's why there's been so much push-back – because this didn't come from the white community. To see people of color rise up and boldly and prophetically speak the truth, call people to account, that speaks to me of the love of God. I've yet to see something like that occur in the US or occur in my church. That's why the Belhar is meaningful to me.

**An Interview with
Wendell Verduin
Member at Seattle First CRC, Seattle WA**

1) *What does the Belhar have to do with racial reconciliation?*

Belhar's gestation and birth came out of an environment of intense racial conflict. One of its poignant features is that the call for reconciliation and unity came not from the oppressors but from the oppressed. By God's miraculous grace the oppressed majority called not for revenge or retribution but for reconciliation in the body of Christ based on the very Scriptures that had been given to them by their oppressors. The Christian black believers led the church and the nation in a quest for reconciliation that shocked and amazed the world. This was an incredible witness to the world of the power of the gospel of Jesus.

2) *What might this document mean to your congregation if it is passed as a Reformed Confession?*

We have accepted Belhar as a fourth standard of unity. In the process I believe that the soul of our congregation at Seattle First CRC has been changed. Through a two year interface with Belhar, most importantly done hand in hand with a multi-cultural (mostly black) faith community in our inner city a significant nucleus of our congregation has been changed. There is new awareness of a brotherhood of believers far more extensive than the small largely sheltered community with which we have been so comfortable. There is now more awareness of another greater world filled with poverty and injustice. There is recognition that we have a responsibility for brothers and sisters far beyond our comfortable bubble. Church planting and Missions have become a far greater priority. Sister Church relationships have been established with black communities of faith in Africa and in our own back yard. Outreach to our own neighborhood has become a

priority with enthusiastic support by many in the congregation. For many this is exciting, even exhilarating.

This is not without conflict, change almost always causes conflict. In our busy hectic Western culture a new focus on others sometimes leads to less focus on things honored as tradition. To some this is uncomfortable, even distressing. One of our big challenges is to heal these kinds of rifts in the spirit of love to which Belhar directs us.

3) *How do you see the Belhar being used in the life of your congregation (liturgically, educationally, etc.)?*

We still struggle to see how this will be done. It will be a continuing process. Shelving Belhar, as has become our approach to the other confessions, is not an option. In fact, Belhar brings a new opportunity to examine and appreciate our confessional grounding as we together now consider the meaning of Confessions with many newer members who have not had a Confessional tradition.

My personal belief is that we must apply Belhar principles directly and openly to not only matters of race and injustice in our communities and worldwide, but we must apply them also to matters of disunity within our own body. Reformed church history is replete with fractious splits not worthy of the body of Christ. Christ's model of forgiveness and love was mirrored by the black South African church. Belhar calls us to follow that model.

5) *How would life in this denomination be different if we adopted the Belhar?*

I believe a serious interface with Belhar will change our denomination. There will be new awareness, new relationships, a new draw for those not Dutch to our fellowship. We will be more outwardly focused. We will ultimately look far more like the Rev 7:9 image of that "...great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language." God's Kingdom on earth would be enhanced by our witness.

6) *What's the most helpful reading you've done in regards to the Belhar confession?*

There are so many. I believe one must start with reading the litany of Scriptural bases that found the Confession. Nothing compares to that in significance. Secular works that are extremely helpful, not only for Belhar but for its context include:

- *No Future Without Forgiveness* by Desmond Tutu
- *The Covenant* by James Mitchener
- *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela
- *The Afrikaners* by Herman Giliomee
- *Cry the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton
- *Beyond the Miracle* by Allister Sparks
- *The Church Struggle in South Africa* by John W. de Gruchy
- *Dominee, are you Listening to the Drums* by A.S. van Niekerk
- *Not Without Honor: Tribute to Beyers Naude* by Peter Randall
- *Fault Lines* by David Goodman

- *Farewell to Innocence* by Allan Boesak
- *One Destiny* by A.S. van Niekerk

**Site visit:
Black and Reformed Conference**

On April 25 I attended the Black and Reformed Conference at Heritage Christian Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, MI. There were about 50 attendees there, at least two-thirds of whom were African American. Many had come from other areas of the country: New Jersey, Seattle, California. All were members of or deeply involved in the ministry of a Christian Reformed Church. There were keynote speakers as well as small break-out groups for conversation and discussion.

One of the keynote speakers was Albert Mulder who works for Christian Reformed World Missions and also is a member of an anti-racism team at his multi-racial CRC church. He spoke about the history of the CRC when it came to race relations, highlighting not only the synodical decisions that pertained to race (like the formation of the Synodical Committee on Race Relations in 1970 after an incident in Chicago in which one of the CRC-sponsored Christian schools refused to admit African American students and caused a big controversy in the denomination). He also talked about the cultural history of the CRC as an immigrant church with a tendency to isolate themselves, and thus a pattern of cultural homogeneity. "If you're not Dutch, you're not much," was a slogan that he felt, shamefully, encapsulated much of the spirit of the denomination even today.

Another speaker was Victoria Proctor-Gibbs who was also a member of the same anti-racism team as Al. Together they highlighted some of the ways in which racism played out in white culture as well as in black culture, and how the Belhar confession was one way of overcoming these kinds of overt and internalized racist tendencies. The Belhar created a new reality for people of faith, they contended, that does not accept racism with in the body of Christ.

After this presentation there was some time for comments and questions. It was interesting to note that both an African American woman and a white woman shared the need they observed within their own race-groups to admit the ways that their own race perpetuated the problem. In the case of African Americans, shared the black woman, it was easy to blame white folks for the problems with which blacks are faced. In the case of white America, responded the white woman, it is easy to make judgments and walk away from the complexities of the race issue, harboring unquestioned prejudice and simply unflinchingly benefiting from an unjust system. Both these comments seemed very well-received by the community.

There were others who seemed unmoved by these statements, as if they had come prepared to get a little deeper in the conversation – why was it that the Belhar had not yet been adopted? What did we need to do to get it to that point? How would we mobilize strategically to get the denomination thinking, talking, and energized for change? I was unable to attend the remaining day of the conference, so I hoped that these questions were answered. It was certainly a good opportunity for a feel-good conversation, but for those who have been doing race relations work for a long time, it's only so helpful to name the problem over and over. For them, it was time to strategize about solutions.

I was surprised to meet a number of African American women who were pastors of CRC churches, in Kalamazoo, New Jersey, and elsewhere on the East Coast. Of course

they seemed like very different churches than the ones I'm familiar with in West Michigan – very community-focused, less concerned about theological correctness than being a prophetic presence within a violence-filled neighborhood.

While I think an influx of whites at the Black and Reformed conference would likely make its purpose impossible to fulfill, I would love to see more whites in Reformed congregations have the opportunity to gather with a group of African Americans who find themselves in a Reformed context. It is rare to be a minority, as a white person, when discussing matters of Reformed faith – but so helpful, too. It reminded me that the Reformed tradition doesn't belong to whites, and that whites need the voices of people of color to remind us, together, of our call: to follow the way of Christ, to model the costly and sacrificial love of our savior.

TO STAND WHERE GOD STANDS
Reflections on the Confession of Belhar after 25 years
Cousins Lecture Series, Richmond Baptist Seminary, Richmond
Virginia, October 2007

A rare and precious occurrence

Twenty-five years ago, the church in which I serve, the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (now the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa), adopted a new confession called the Confession of Belhar. It was the first confession of faith to be formulated in 300 years within the Reformed family of churches and the first to come from a church in Africa in modern times. It is a rare and precious occurrence.

Like all true confessions, it was born out of the hearts of the faithful, and into a situation of deep despair and uncertainty, of trial and tribulation, of crisis and testing, a time in which the fundamental tenets of the gospel and the heart of our faith were under so severe a threat that no mere religious statement or even a theological declaration, no anxious repetition of doctrinal certitudes would suffice: the church could only turn to the rare and radical act of confession to proclaim the gospel anew. It was a moment of truth and of *kairos*, of being overpowered by the Word of God and being empowered by the Spirit of God. It arises in a specific situation, but like all true confessions, because of its rootedness in the Word of God, it speaks to a universal reality. Its necessity was parochial, its application is ecumenical. The gospel was at stake, our very lives were at risk and the testimony of the church was in jeopardy. We could only call upon the One who is the source of it all. Hence the Confession speaks to the human situation everywhere.

Like all true confessions, the Confession of Belhar seeks neither to attack nor defend, but to uphold and affirm; not to condemn or rationalize, but to testify and proclaim. Like all true confessions, it responds to heresy, that wilful and deliberate turning of the truth away from the light of the gospel into the shadow of human distortion and satisfaction. The rediscovery and recognition of that truth is not a moment of triumphal gloating, but rather a moment of profound and humble joy: the truth has found, recovered, and reclaimed *us*. We are not the light; the light illumines and leads us. Hence we do not *announce*, we *proclaim*; we do not pontificate, we *confess*. For that reason, joy is the most visible, sustained and enduring trait of the confession. "The joy of the LORD, it is your strength!" (Neh. 8:10)

That joy reverberates vibrantly throughout the Confession of Belhar. From the first sentence, "We believe in the triune God, father, Son and

Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church by God's Word and Spirit, as God has done since the beginning of the world and will do so to the end", to the last: "To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be the honour and the glory for ever and ever!". Joyfully we claim with all the saints the affirmation of the unity of God's people as gift and obligation, the message of reconciliation God has entrusted to the church and the truth that through Jesus Christ we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, called to be peacemakers. We celebrate the good news that God is a God who brings true justice amongst humankind and that the church as the possession of God must stand where God stands, against all injustice and with the wronged and that we are empowered to stand with the powerless against the powerful. We sing joyfully that we are called to confess all these things not through earthly power, arrogance or recklessness, but in obedience to Jesus Christ, even though it may provoke the wrath of earthly authorities and human laws, because above all we know: Jesus is Lord.

It was the joy the young students knew in that very year when they danced and sang around the police vehicle in which some of their friends were thrown as they emerged from a church service in my church in Bellville near Cape Town:

Akanamandla, akanamandla, akanamandla uSatani!

Sim'swabisile, Alleluia!

Sim'swabisile, u Satani!

Akanamandla, uSatani,

Alleluia!

It is broken, it is broken,

The power of Satan is broken!

We have disappointed him (we are no longer afraid)

The power of Satan is broken!

Alleluia!

Belhar proclaims the victory of Christ, and through him ours, over the power of sin and death and fear, for the power of Satan is broken, his claim on our lives forfeited. We shall no longer be afraid.

From amongst the poor and the downtrodden

To understand the power of this confession and the reason for our joy, one must understand something of the situation into which the Confession of Belhar was born. The crisis which moved us to the confession was both political and spiritual. South Africa was in the grip of a system called apartheid, a system of racial oppression, domination and economic exploitation that held sway over every area of our lives. It dehumanized black people while according an idolatrous status to whites. Skin colour determined everything: from education to

employment, from the courts of law to the definition of human dignity. It caused immense suffering amongst millions. It was a system inherently violent and indescribably destructive, while ever more draconian laws and growing physical violence were constantly necessary to keep it in place.

But South Africa was not the only place in the world where racist oppression, social discrimination and economic exploitation were the daily bread of the poor and defenceless. What made our situation unique was the role of the Christian church. The policy of apartheid was in its essence the legacy of English colonial rule. It was, however, also the logical political outcome of the so-called "mission policy" of the Dutch Reformed Church. But it was more. It was presented to both white and black people as an all-embracing, soteriologically loaded, God-given solution to what was seen as "the race problem". It was not just willy-nilly presented as God's will; there was a complete theological rationale, a comprehensive "apartheid theology" for its biblical, moral and theological justification. As such it became more than just a political ideology and system or a socio-economic construct. It became in fact a pseudo-gospel, challenging and replacing the truth and the authority of the true gospel in our personal lives, in the life of the church as well as in the corporate life of the nation.

The church I am speaking of now specifically is the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa. That church was (and to a large extent still is) divided on the basis of race and skin colour. This is not to say that other churches did not, overtly or covertly support apartheid. That fact is hardly contested. But this is the church that came with the colonization of South Africa, into which the first natives and the slaves who became Christians were baptized, and became members.

In time this church became more and more the church of the colonist and slave owner, the church of the white, "European Christian" (as distinct from the "heathen Christian") whose superior place in the political and socio-economic hierarchy in the colonist society had to be reflected in the church. More and more conscious of race, skin colour and social status, there was less and less room for those who were not white, who were considered "heathen" even though they confessed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. As political tensions rose, Christian fellowship declined. The strains of power and powerlessness, of enforced superiority and inferiority, of ownership and being owned, could no longer be hidden. As white Christians laid more and more claim to land, destroyed whole communities and people, slaves and native people began to reassert ownership of their land and to demand recognition of their human dignity.

In the end the contradictions proved too much. The same Bible that proclaimed childhood of God justified the subjugation and ownership of human souls. The bondage of slavery and the bonds of Christian love could not live side by side. The "slave-holding, the woman-whipping, the mind-darkening, the soul-destroying religion" to use the words of Frederick Douglass, could not share the same baptism, break the bread and drink of the same cup at the Lord's table, make the same confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, with those who sought that religion which is "first pure, then peaceable, then gentle, without partiality and without hypocrisy..." Could one rape a woman on Friday, then whip a man to death or lynch him on Saturday because he wanted his freedom, and on Sunday be witness to the baptism of his child and celebrate our oneness in Christ? Can the oppressor hear the psalms that sing of the God who will "protect the stranger and support the downtrodden, crush the oppressor" while standing next to the oppressed who are promised freedom, who lift their head high because they will be "lifted up from the dust of the earth"? Can the message of Jesus be heard while the cries from the slave lodge across the street cannot be drowned out?

By the middle of the 19th century these contradictions, embodied as they were in the very bodies and voices of the slaves, simply became unbearable. And since the church could not ignore them nor deny their existence, it sought to remove their presence. The church found it easier, even though they knew and acknowledged that the demand of the gospel was different, to first opt for separate baptisms and a separated communion, then separate worship services altogether, then finally for separate, race-based church formations. Now the justification of slavery could be preached without the accusing presence of those whose pain constituted your wealth. Now communion could be served without the broken body of Christ reminding one of the broken bodies of slaves after "punishment". Now baptism would no longer be a reminder that we all, in equal measure, are sinners before God, and that through the redeeming grace of God, now belong to Christ. Now the "slave catechism" would be less embarrassing, and slaves could be taught that even though their lot is unjust, dismal and undeserved, "the things that seem unbearable to us are the will of God for our good; and that indeed, if they had stayed in their home country they would never have heard of the saving grace of our Lord and on dying would have been lost forever". (Rev MC Vos, minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape during the first half of the 19th century).

The rationalisations abound: racial separation was "preferred" by the "heathen Christians"; it would be better for the "mission" of the church, it was "the more practical way", and as formulated in an

official decision of 1857, the church did it to accommodate "the weakness of some" (white members.) This decision stands as the crucial moment in the history of the church in South Africa. Henceforth not faith in Jesus Christ alone, but race, culture and pigmentation would begin to define membership of the church of Jesus Christ in South Africa. This moment is, in the words of Dr Chris Loff, "the birth of a heresy". The painful consequences of that decision have been with us for 150 years now. But stripped of all pretence, this fateful decision was essentially the creation of a haven for a conscience that would not bend to the will of Christ.

These people of whom British scientist Robert Knox asked, "What signify these races to us? Who cares particularly for the Negro, or the Hottentot, or the Kaffir? ...Destined by the nature of their race to run, like animals, a certain limited course of existence, it matters little how their extinction is brought about", these people were our ancestors. Bereft of land, dignity and everything they held dear, they sought and found comfort and strength in the gospel even if, as blind African poet and catechist John Ntsikana confessed in 1884, that gospel was a "fabulous ghost" we sought to embrace in vain. Their struggles with the presence of evil and the absence of God are largely unknown. Neither have we much of a record of how they felt when they heard those slave-holding preachers tell them about the God of Jesus Christ or when they were told that they were no longer welcome in the church where they learned to know their Lord.

But the gospel asserts itself. Always. It might be manipulated and distorted, but its truth cannot be denied. It might be perverted, but it cannot be buried. Crushed to earth, that truth shall rise again. Here and there, almost as lost echoes down the dongas and valleys of our history, and in the stories handed down the generations, there is witness of those who found in the words of the prophets and the message of Jesus the power of the gospel, that Word of life that cannot be bound, that empowers and enables for justice and freedom, for dignity and peace. They spoke, and in their speech we, their children and their children's children, discovered the continuity with the prophets and Jesus of Nazareth. Carried and sustained by their faith, we walked the wilderness and drank the water from the angel's hand with Hagar; we climbed to the mountain top with Moses and slept under the broom tree with Elijah. We cried in the temple with Hannah and wept with Elisha for the coming destruction. Our voices rose with the psalmist, "How long Lord?" and with Isaiah and Jeremiah we heard, and believed, the promise of salvation and restoration. With Mary we sang the Magnificat and with Jesus we suffered on a cross made by human hands. In prison, we learned to sing with Paul and Silas, and with the ancient church we discovered that there is no

power in heaven or on earth, not even death, that can separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ: Jesus is Lord.

And so, from amongst the poor and oppressed, the despised and the voiceless, the dejected and downtrodden, came the Confession of Belhar, and this is, perhaps, its most eminent, and to some, its most offensive characteristic. Its birthplace was not the palaces of the privileged or the halls of power. It gave voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless. Neither was it the child of esoteric academic debate; it emerges from the struggles of ordinary people with the presence of evil and the promises of God and it speaks with the eloquence of faith. It was not commissioned by the powerful for earthly power to be legitimated. It places earthly power under the critique of heaven and earth: of the outraged God and the suffering people. In its words pulsates a life, lived not under the protection of the throne but in the shadow of the cross. In it one will not find the arrogance of certitude; it is the trembling steadfastness of those who walk by faith, not by sight.

Bending our will to the mind of Christ

Belhar does not see the need to repeat the deep doctrinal truths we inherited from the ancient church, and some use that to argue that Belhar is therefore not "a true confession". That, however, is a false argumentation. There are some revered confessions in the Christian tradition that are not at all only concerned with doctrinal matters. Besides, the first known confession of the Christian church, "Jesus is Lord", was made not as a doctrinal statement, but as living testimony over against an idolatrous state and claims of divinity from Roman Caesars. Our commitment to those truths has never wavered. That Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God was not the issue; rather the question: how seriously do we take God's incarnate presence in Jesus Christ? We were called to revisit, for our time again and anew, the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29), so well understood and asked again by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a time filled with pain and suffering and marked by painful contradictions: "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" That is the question with which we grappled. What value does it have to confess Jesus Christ when the church loses its way on the moral consequences of the gospel, and while confessing Christ the church makes common cause with the destructive powers of the world? When the doctrine is piously repeated, but the life of the church, even as it affirms the doctrine, denies the message of Jesus?

We struggled with our Christian identity: what does it mean to be Christian in a situation when one of the most systematically exploitative and oppressive systems of the twentieth century is

proudly claimed by the Christian church as its own? When, in blind and sinful submission to a race-obsessed society, race and skin colour, rather than faith in Jesus Christ alone, is made the criterion of membership of the church? Then the confession must be made that "true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of (the) church".

The divinity of Jesus is not denied, but the humanity of the poor is, and hence the good news for the poor that Jesus brought. The continued impoverishment of the poor is the result of deliberate policy and the church, rather than seeking the justice that rolls down like waters, and the righteousness that flows like a mighty stream, chooses to benefit from the exploitation of the poor and justifies their plight as God's will. In such a situation we are called to confess, boldly and publicly, "that God has revealed Godself as the One who brings justice and true peace amongst humankind, that in a word full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the poor, the destitute and the wronged; that the church must therefore stand where God stands: with the wronged and against any and all forms of injustice".

The church affirms Christ as mediator, but preaches the irreconcilability of people on the basis of race and culture and skin colour. The church administers the sacraments, but allows racist prejudices to disempower the efficacy of the sacraments. The church affirms the unity of the church, but insists on the division of the church on the basis of race. The church supports missions, but rejects the reciprocity of all-transcending love that should characterise the life of the followers of Jesus. Then we are called to confess that "we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name..."

The church confesses the sinfulness of all humankind, but in effect makes an idolatry of racial identity and denies the equality before God that that confession expresses. It rebuilds the walls of enmity that Christ has broken down with a political and theological deliberation and purposefulness that belie the affirmation of that central biblical truth. When this happens we are called to confess that "Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another, that that unity is therefore both gift and obligation for the church of Jesus Christ... and that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, hatred and enmity between people and groups is a sin which Christ has already conquered".

The church professes its dependence upon the triune God, but in reality relies on, and makes common cause with worldly power, political privilege, economic exploitation and military might so that the

church itself becomes a powerful force in the justification and safeguarding of such a system and of its own power, privilege and survival. Hence we cannot but confess that in standing where God stands, "the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others".

Should some seek to hide behind the sinfulness of humankind and the brokenness of the world, we in turn remind them that "God's life-giving Word and Spirit, have conquered the powers of sin and death" and so made us all conquerors through Jesus Christ, and that God's life-giving Word and Spirit "enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world". And should we be reminded of the wrath of the state, the relentlessness of its violence, the wide range of its powers and the reach of its security apparatus, we in turn remind ourselves that "we believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering may be the consequence." In this we do no more, but no less than echo the *Confessio Scotica* which calls upon Reformed Christians to "save the lives of the innocent, to repress tyranny, to defend the oppressed".

And then we said: "Jesus is Lord".

I should make one more important remark in this regard. As we made this confession, *even as we spoke*, many of us had been imprisoned without charge; many under false charges. Lives had been threatened, lost and otherwise destroyed. Many had disappeared. Our youth were on the streets of the nation in flaming protest, risking their lives every day in clashes with police and the army. The casualties numbered in the thousands. Security police, under the most draconian laws had free reign, harassed and tortured those who resisted by the hundreds, many were tortured, some to death. Parents saw their children flee without hope of ever seeing them again. By June 1987 at least 14,000 children would be held in detention without trial. We lived in daily fear of our lives. Trust in each other was destroyed: many were bought, or coerced into becoming spies for the police. Enmity, hatred, distrust, and fear were the most natural of responses. Our country was becoming less and less our mother and more and more our grave. Most churches in the white communities watched all this with a casual detachment that stunned the mind.

Yet in the midst of all this the Confession of Belhar, constantly giving account of the hope that is within us, and having grounded itself in the tradition and faith of the ancient church, calls first and foremost upon Christ's work of reconciliation, proclaiming to those who suffer

oppression not to be tempted by hatred, enmity and self-justifying revenge but to remember “that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another, (since) we share the one faith...” In South Africa at the time, whites and blacks were enemies. In politics, talk of reconciliation was considered premature, if not traitorous. And even though most of our members were crucially engaged in the struggle for liberation, it was not the call of politics that had to dictate our conduct, but the call of the gospel. The reality of our oneness in Christ overrode the political necessity to see the other as an enemy, even if there was blood on the streets. Here popularity with our struggling masses was not the issue, our obligation to Christ was. It remains a source of pain that so many in the Dutch Reformed Church to this very day remain incapable of understanding that.

Also, note that the obligation of worship, reconciliation, unity, and standing with the poor are firstly directed to those who confess, and only in second instance to those who might listen. Furthermore, those who are called to confess are also called to obedience. The act of confession is an act of commitment: it allows for no arrogance, disengagement or sense of spiritual superiority. And it is this humble submission to the Word of God, this bending of our mind and will to the obedience of Christ that strengthens and emboldens us to say what follows next: “Therefore, we reject...”

That act of rejection does not mean the spiritual elimination of a person or group; far from it. The rejection does not stand on its own; it is embedded in the obligation to love, forgive and reconcile. Without this obligation it is invalidated. We must have, said John Calvin in his *Institutes*, the humility to realize that we stand and are upheld by God alone, that “naked and empty-handed we flee to his mercy, repose entirely in it, hide deep within it, and seize upon it alone for righteousness and merit”. In Jesus Christ, he goes on, God’s face shines in perfect grace and gentleness, even upon those who profane God’s name, betray God’s trust, and dishonour our baptism.

It is in that spirit that Belhar was written, discussed, and finally adopted as a fourth confession in our church. For that reason we have asked that the accompanying letter should be read before one reads the Confession. And it is in that spirit that we have offered it to the ecumenical church. And once offered thus, it no longer belongs to the Uniting Reformed Church. It cannot be used to judge, humiliate or annihilate the other. It cannot ever be the measure of *our* spiritual superiority, neither can it be cross upon which the other is nailed, and kept hanging. In doing that we would crucify Christ all over again. It is not a weapon to brandish, it is a staff on which to lean. Belhar symbolizes, indisputably and sublimely, the merciful and loving

embrace of Jesus the Messiah. All notions of exclusivity, in whatever shape or form, are alien to it.

There are encouraging signs that a significant number from within the DRC are ready to embrace fully the Confession of Belhar, i.e. they are ready to move beyond even the decision by the 2004 General Synod that Belhar should be part of the confessional basis of a re-united church. They intend not to be accidental, but purposeful inheritors of the confession. The impact on the unification process within the Dutch Reformed church family could be profound. Even more profound would be if that meant the emergence of a new community of faith, based upon renewed theological convictions and convergence of understanding, a different understanding and interpretation of Scripture and the Reformed tradition. This would be a community beyond the boundaries of race and culture, beyond the resurgent "identity politics" which is threatening to drag South Africans back to the vagaries of ethnic mobilisation and the dangerous undercurrents of racial stagnation. It will not matter if the whole of the church throughout South Africa does not immediately follow this course of action. The church shall be known, and judged, not by the reticence of the many but by the faithfulness of the few. Not by the hesitations of its legions, but by the courage of its prophets.

Standing where God stands

The Confession of Belhar helped us then, and it helps us now, as we face the new challenges of the 21st century.

- First, Belhar helps us to see the value of the tradition within which we stand. In an age of amazing arrogance, when a new Christian fundamentalism disengages itself completely from the heritage of the early church, finds refuge and legitimacy in alliances with worldly powers and measures itself and its success by its acceptance by those powers, Belhar reminds us of the true meaning of the confession that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is Lord. Not Jesus and our struggle, or Jesus and our national pride, or Jesus and our economic prosperity, or Jesus and our patriotic fervour. That is the very first confession of the Christian church and it stood over against the imperial claims of absolute power, over against the claims of divinity by the Caesar, and over against the belief that true power lies in military might. It rejected the idolatry that that military might can be a handmaiden of the Cross and that it may be exercised in the name of Jesus. It binds us with the early church who understood that true power lies in the powerlessness of the

Cross, in the willingness to give one's life for the sake of others, and in the love that overcomes evil.

- Second, Belhar refocuses us on our inescapable bond of and call to unity - its source the triune God; its reality the one, visible body of Christ; its life: sharing and receiving the gifts of the Spirit; its driving force the love of Christ; its goal: "so that the world may believe". It destroys our sense of self-sufficient, opinionated, self-deluding isolation. It seeks to engrave upon the faces of the brothers and sisters the face of Christ, so that, to speak again with John Calvin, "none (of them) can be injured, despised, rejected, abused or in any way be offended by us, without at the same time inuring, despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do... that we cannot love Christ without loving him in the brothers (and sisters)...for they are members of our (own) body..."
- Third, Belhar helps us to understand that in standing where God stands, the church in a particular situation, however pressed or isolated, never stands alone. We are ensconced in the womb of the church universal, bound together by the Spirit of the Lord in a solidarity and love that knows no borders – cultural, political, or physical. In rediscovering the heart of the gospel, we discovered the communion of the saints and found ourselves opened for their listening, correction, support and love. There were few things in those dark and dismal days that strengthened us more than the knowledge of ecumenical solidarity. And there were few things more humbling than the realisation that our words, spoken in our suffering, pain, hope and faith, were words spoken into the heart of the universal church. In our powerlessness we empowered the church to respond and do bold things in the name of the Lord.
- Belhar helps us, fourth, to find our voice and place globally, as we face the momentous changes and challenges globalization is forcing upon our countries and peoples; as we struggle with new idolatries and with the immense temptations of imperial alliances confronting us today. In our globalizing world with its powers and myths of power, its distortions of reality and

neglect of truth, Belhar helps us to discern the difference between gospel and ideology, between genuine good news and propaganda, between truth-telling and myth-making, between the dictates of so-called "political realism" and the reality of the kingdom of God. It helps us to distinguish between half-hearted vacillation and commitment, between obedience and Christian solidarity. In the Bible, "standing where God stands" was the guarantee for the prophets to distinguish between the myths of the idols, the demands of the palace, and the "whispers" of the LORD. And as we ourselves have discovered, while it is by no means the safest place to stand, it is without doubt the *right* place to stand. It is the only place from where we can make the affirmation to which the Confession of Belhar clings: "Jesus is Lord".

- Fifth, Belhar helps us because it affirms that unalterable biblical truth that the God of Jesus Christ is in a special way the God of the poor, the weak, the destitute and the wronged. This is the claim of the exodus, of the Commandments, of the prophets and the song writers of the Hebrew Bible; and this is the song of Hannah, of Mary in the Magnificat, and the message and life of Jesus of Nazareth. Next, it helps us to understand that the poor are not poor because of some historical accident, genetic traits or because it is the will of God. The poor are poor because they are *wronged*. They are poor because of injustice. They are victims, not of an act of God, but of deliberate historical, political and economic decisions through which injustice was done to them, in a systematized and systemic fashion. These decisions were and are still made by human beings in positions of power who fully understand the consequences of their actions.
- To stand with the poor means in the first place to stand up and be counted. To stand not just *where*, but *as* God stands: not just in front of, in protection; but alongside, in solidarity of struggle. Not just in sympathy with, but in empathetic identification with them. In Matthew 25 Jesus *becomes* the poor, the prisoner, the naked, the hungry. What we have done to them, is done to him. In not doing what is right we wrong

God. What we do for and with them is done for and with him. The cry "how long, Lord", John Calvin again reminds us, as it emanates from amongst the poor and the downtrodden, who know that "this confusion of order and justice is not to be endured", actually comes from the heart of God. "It is", Calvin asserts, "the same as though God heard Himself when he hears the cries and groaning of those who cannot bear injustice".

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer has taught us yet another truth which illustrates how intimately Belhar reflects our understanding of John Calvin on this point. To stand where God stands does not only mean to stand with the poor and the destitute. It means, he says, to "stand with God in the hour of God's grieving". We must be "caught up in the way of Christ". It is not our religion that makes of us believers and followers of Christ, but our participation in the sufferings of God. We are called to share the sufferings of God at the hands of a hostile world. That, Bonhoeffer maintains, is what distinguishes us from pagans. It does not distinguish us from people of other faiths, but from pagans. But here Bonhoeffer criticises not the pagans, but the Christians for whom their religiosity, their symbols and their rituals have become the hallmark of their life. They who think that it is more important to be religious than to be followers of Christ.
- We are disciples of Christ when we stand by God in the hour of God's grieving. The grieving of God is not in the pain of God for God, but in the pain of God in the suffering of humanity. That pain inflicted by people on people, is inflicted upon God. When Bonhoeffer speaks of the pain of God, he does not look toward heaven, but around him, at the pain of people created in God's image. When we fail to stand with them, we fail to stand with God. We do not ask whether their pain is the pain of heathen or pagans or enemies. *That* is the pagan within us who asks. We stand by them because their pain is the pain of a grieving God. That is discipleship, because it is being caught up in the way of Jesus Christ. It is for that reason that the Confession of Belhar is embraced by Palestinian Christians as well as North American Christians who are marginalised, poor and voiceless,

and by those who hear their voice. It will give comfort to the suffering people of Iraq as it will to those brave fighters for democracy in Burma, as it does for us still.

- We are disciples of Christ, caught up in the way of Christ, says Bonhoeffer. We are the possession of God, says Belhar, and therefore driven by God's love and compassionate justice. Belhar helps us to continue to remember this, to continue to remember who we are and what we are called for; to reclaim in our life and work that spirituality without which we cannot face the challenges before us, to bring about the transformation that reaches out for justice, human dignity and freedom; for the responsibility for the earth, for the very things most necessary in our global reality. It is a spirituality that is not captive to triumphalism, not dependent upon earthly powers to gain acceptance in the world. It is not locked up in a desire to escape the realities of this world, a privatized, inner experience of God while shutting out the voices of pain. It is the trembling of the soul before God, so that we are sent out to seek the glory of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of life. It leaves us open to the woundedness of others and makes us take the risk of vulnerability ourselves. It is sharing the pain of God in the pain of humanity, but it is also sharing the rage of God against injustice and all forms of inhumanity.

Two years before the Confession of Belhar was written, I realised something that is truer today than even then. It was a dismal and difficult time, our struggle seemed in vain, death and terror was all around, it was as if all humanity had fled. I was tired, bereft of hope sometimes, called to lead a people when I feared I could not trust myself. My life was under threat on a daily basis and sleep was a prolonging of the fears of the day. I discovered then in the ancient Reformed confessions something that provided me with prophetic faith and pastoral comfort. It comes from the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day One, in answer to that most crucial question, "What is your only comfort in life and death? The Catechism answers:

That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for my sins and delivered me from all the power of the devil, and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly

Father not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, wherefore by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth, to live unto him.

I said then and I believe it now, that this is a revolutionary spirituality without which our being Christian in the world is not complete, and without which the temptations that are part and parcel of the liberation struggle will prove too much for us. The "authoritarian audacity" I ascribed then to the powers in South Africa is once again seen in the destructive powers that today are rampant the world, who speak of the "market" as if it were a god, who speak of human life as if it is easily expendable, of people as if they do not matter but profits do; who claim with totalitarian arrogance a place in our lives that only God can – then, as now, it is of vital importance that we never forget to whom our ultimate allegiance and obedience are due. I said then and I believe it now, that our lives have meaning only when they are in the hands of the One who has given his life for the sake of others. And although he is the Lamb who is slaughtered, for those who call him Lord, he is also "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth".

It is to this Jesus that Belhar testifies. It is this Spirit who empowers us. It is this God whom it calls us to worship. To this God be glory and honour and praise for ever and ever.