

**THE IMPACT OF BELHAR CONFESSION IN ECCLESIOLOGICAL LIFE OF UNITING
REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA:
THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

This article consists of six parts:

1. The brief historical overview of Belhar confession
2. The content of Belhar confession;
3. The way Belhar confession to be utilized in ecclesiological life of URCSA.
4. The influence of Belhar confession on academic discourse within the theological faculties will be highlighted.
5. Acceptance by ecumenical movements and denominations.
6. The relevance of Belhar Confession to the ecumenical Church

INTRODUCTION

Any confession of the church needs to be tested in the following four aspects namely: the content of the confession, history of the confession, the intention of the confession and functionality of the confession. In this presentation the presenter intends to focus on the functionality of Belhar confession in the life of Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). Belhar confession is the identity of URCSA, therefore whenever one is serving or served in URCSA, there must be reflection of Belhar confession. Belhar confession is used to shape and strengthen the theoretical framework of theology taught in the URCSA partner university.

1. THE BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF BELHAR CONFESSION

Adonis (2017) and Loff (1998) indicate that, the origins of Belhar confession are in an assured logic very closely connected to the apartheid policy of the National Party supported by the Dutch Reformed Church. Already in 1950 the former Presbytery of Wynberg of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa (DRMC) became directly involved with the policies of apartheid. By then the National Party of Dr. Malan had already won its political victory and implement its apartheid policy. Already in the *Kerkbode* of 22 September 1948 the policy of apartheid was called a “church policy” (Loff, 1998).

Since 1950 J Abrahamse wrote a letter and sent it on behalf of one hundred and sixteen (116) church members belonging to twenty-seven (27) congregations of the former DRMC to its moderamen in which it was declared that the apartheid policy was a heresy and therefore, it must be rejected and not be applied in the church nor in rest of the country. The leadership of both the DR Church and DR Mission Church did not deem fit to support these members. At their 1950 synod the former DRMC had already decided that they would neither reject nor approve a political policy. It appears therefore, as if this decision of the DRMC synod was not consistently followed (Adonis, 2017).

In the course of time the former DRMC would condemn more and more aspects of the apartheid policy. In the 1970's it was requested to evaluate it theologically. This request came from the Theological School of the DRMC, which already was at the time a Faculty of the University of the Western Cape. Prof JJF Durand and the theology students played an important role in this theological evaluation of the apartheid. The students came to the conclusion that the forced separation of people contradicts the gospel of reconciliation. They expressed the wish that the DR Mission Church should officially endorse this position (*ibid*, 251). Three ministers, Revs JJF Mettler, IJ Mentor and RJ Stevens (*ibid*, 252), presented this position to the synod of the DRMC. The central aspect of this position was that the apartheid policy of the government was contradictory to the gospel of Jesus Christ (*ibid*, 252). This position was discussed by the synod and, after several amendments, it was accepted. This decision was an important milestone for the synod since the policy of apartheid was seen as contradicting the gospel and therefore it should be rejected. At the same time the mission policy of the DR Church was also rejected. With its rejection of the policy of apartheid the DRMC made a very clear decision in favor of the (re-) unification of the family of D R Churches. The decision that the policy of apartheid is contrary to the gospel also strengthened the desire for structural church unification (*ibid*, 253).

2. THE CONTENT OF BELHAR CONFESSION

The content of Belhar confession is based in the Word of God as point of departure, that means Belhar confession is Scriptural in nature. The content is divided in five important pillars. These pillars are Unity, reconciliation, justice, embracement and obedience.

- The first article emphasizes the unity of God (Triune God) that has the bearing on the unity of Humanity;
- the second article emphasizes reconciliation of the people of God despite their differences;
- the third article emphasizes justice, that make reconciliation not to be cheap but costly;
- the fourth article emphasizes embracement, by standing with the people of God;

- the Fifth article emphasizes that everything is done through obedience to the head of the church.

This content is structured in the theology of “**Yes**” and “**No**”, it is structured that we say “**Yes**” to unity, reconciliation and justice, embracement and obedience, while saying “**No**” to everything that contradicts these five pillars. This content impacts very much on readers of this confession in such a way that they are influenced to act according to the demand of this confession.

3. THE IMPACT OF BELHAR CONFSSION on THE CHURCH LIFE OF URCSA

It is believed that in the Reformed tradition the emphasis is not only on what one believes but also how Christians live, not only orthodox Christian faith but also thankful and obedient Christian practice, not only justification by grace through faith but also sanctification by grace evidenced in good work (Mckim, 1992:24). In URCSA, there are reflections of Belhar confession as the confession that is lived by members within the services in URCSA. The emphasis in URCSA from the 2016 General synod is to focus on gospel in action as is demanded by Belhar confession in Article 4¹ and the church Order article 4² that, the church of God should stand where God stands meaning on the side of the poor, downtrodden, widows and orphans.

3.1 Intra-partnership as reflection of Belhar confession

This is evident in the way congregations and ministries are operating to advance service and care to the needy, “standing where God stands”. The following is evident from regional synod of Namibia where congregations with financial strength have availed funds for two proponents to be called to the needy congregations. The congregation of Windhoek has a partnership with the congregation of Oshikati in the Northern part of Namibia called by Belhar confession to support and journey with the children of God in the poverty stricken area of Namibia. Windhoek congregation stands where God stands on the side of the poor, they acted like a thermostat not a thermometer, they read the temperature and change it as they read it. This is one of the examples of the application of Belhar

¹ We believe that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men; that in a world full of injustice and enmity He is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and wronged and that He calls his church to follow Him is this; that He brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that He frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that He supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for Him pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that He wishes to teach His people to do what is good and seek the right. That the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like [an] ever-flowing stream; that the church as the possession of God must stand where He stands namely against injustice and with the wronged...in the name of the gospel.

² The believers accept mutual responsibility for one another in their spiritual and physical needs. The congregation lives as a family of God where they are inextricably bound to one another and where they mutually share joy and sorrow. Each considers the other higher than him/herself and no one only cares about his/her own needs, but also about the needs of others. In this way they share one another's burdens and fulfil the law of Christ.

confession that is practiced in URCSA, and that ought to be the norm and standard of the church of URCSA. In addressing poverty and vacant congregations that is very high in URCSA, Belhar confession teaches us, how to share what we have with others as in Acts 2:42-45. It needs to be operationalized from the policy making body which is the General synod, that the lessons we learnt from our overseas partner need to be practiced internally by the well to do congregations in the line of Windhoek congregation model. The other example of the implementation of article 4 of Belhar is service and witness operations from ministries.

3.2 The impact of Belhar confession on Ministries' service and witness

The Youth; women and men specialized ministries are influenced by Belhar confession in their service to God, one other and the world. Christian Youth Ministry (CYM) in different regional synods, they have what they called “**CYM cares**” and “**community outreach**”. These projects are evidence of article 4 of Belhar confession, where youth people choose to stand where God stands. These projects are meant to give food and school shoes to the needy in the community that is chosen for that year, this is at the regional level in the Southern Synod.

In the congregational level there is distribution of school shoes for the needy school children in the area where the spiritual revival is held. The Free State and Lesotho are the leading region in this project. The Youth of URCSA are reaching out to the poor being driven by the very confession of Belhar, which demand that they stand where God stands.

This confession touches the hearts of all generation in the church youth, women and men. Belhar confession warmed the hearts of 415 Christian Women's ministry (CWM) at their congress in Benoni on the 14 July 2017, when they donated 1000 sanitary towels to young girls from two schools around Ekurhuleni. This was the launch of the CWM cares and witnesses to the world. Furthermore, these project spread throughout the regions as the CWM in Northern Synod gives groceries to the hospitals within their vicinity as the confessional demand that they stand where God stands.

The Christian men ministry's projects cannot have left unnoticed, in the Northern synod two big houses were built by men of URCSA, as a witness to what they believe in. In the North West part of URCSA within the Southern Synod, they always distribute food and school shoes to the needy in the area where the spiritual revival is held.

3.3 The impact of Belhar confession on congregational level

Belhar confession is now of late touching the lives of people in different ways and this is being seen through service and witness projects that are running within the entire URCSA ministries and congregations. At congregational level, there are projects that are managed by church councils for poverty alleviation and relief (soup kitchens; Early Child Development centers; after-care and old age-care and profit generating projects). These examples are the reflection of what is happening in congregations, presbyteries and regionals synods as the reflection of Belhar confession article four demanded.

4. THE IMPACT OF BELHAR CONFESSION ON ACADEMIC AND DOCTRINAL DISCOURSE

There is a reflection of Belhar confession on how URCSA academics and theologians are influenced by Belhar confession in their theological discourse. In the book, “ Belhar confession: The embracing Confession of Faith for church and society published 2017, there are reflections on how Belhar confession shape the theological thinking of academics of URCSA in different theological disciplines. Baron; Dames and MacMaster, have demonstrated how Belhar confession can shape practical theology in the field of pastoral care and counselling. Dames (2017) indicates:

The Confession transformed the structuralist philosophy, identity and culture of apartheid ideology and its theological justification. The Confession embodies Christ's creativity, transformation, social cohesion, compassion, reconciliation, love, hope and peace. The Confession assisted the former structuralist Dutch Reformed Mission Church to decentre itself, and to embrace a new identity with an alternative narrative.

Dames shows how Belhar confession can contribute in thickening the narrative counselling, to externalized the internalized domination and oppression that is been suffered by the members of URCSA. Kuys (2017) postulates that, Christians must be always aware that what we believe as community of faith, we must pursue in the life of the church. Real internal unity has been a continual challenge since the inception of the URCSA. Dames (2017) saw Belhar confession as the tool to be used to address such a challenge in a theoretical and practical way. Likewise, Baron (2017) saw Belhar confession as therapeutic resource to bring unity, reconciliation, and justice, in the sense he contributes to the academic field of pastoral counselling from the narrative counselling as Dames did. Furthermore, Macmaster (2017) emphasizes the light that Belhar confession brings to public pastoral care in the sense that Christians and unchristian are the community of God that need to embrace each other with Christian love. This community needs to stand where God stands. The three authors mentioned in this section how Belhar confession can strengthen the theological thinking of practical theology practitioners rather than theologians to live out the confession they confess. The

contributors in this book, throughout their discussion from different theological disciplines, have illustrated how important and relevant Belhar confession is for their theological thinking and teaching. They have demonstrated how URCSA members critically evaluate their belief in Christ the head of the church using Belhar confession.

- **Liturgy**

This confession has its reflections on the church order of URCSA moreover on article 3 on membership; article 4 and 5 on services within the URCSA. The liturgical order of the church in the church service and synodical devotions, liturgy reflects Belhar confession.

- **Church and society**

In the three decades DRMC and later URCSA engaged, on the basis of the Belhar confession, on numerous issues namely: Church re-unification; racism; domestic violence; gender; genetic modification of food; xenophobia and globalization (Plaatjies van Huffel and Modise, 2017:24).

5. ACCEPTANCE BY ECUMENICAL MOVEMENTS AND DENOMINATIONS

Belhar's relevance is not confined to southern Africa or its religious context. It addresses three key issues of concern in all churches: unity of the church and unity among all people, reconciliation within the church and society, and God's justice. Belhar confession of faith as a reformed confession is carried by URCSA on behalf of all reformed churches. This is justified by the words of Barth:

A reformed creed is the statement, spontaneously and publicly formulated by a Christian community within a geographically limited area, which, until further action, defines its character to outsiders, and which, until further action, gives guidance for its own doctrine and life; it is a formulation of the insight currently given to the whole Christian Church by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ by the holy scripture alone (Barth 1962:112).

In line with Barth (1962) the URCSA General synod of 2005 confirms that, Belhar confession although written and accepted by the church at a specific time and place, is a living confession inspiring the church world-wide, not aimed against certain groups and not confined by political or geographical boundaries. It makes of the members of URCSA not a church with confession whose value lies in the mindless repetitions of words, but a confessing church, on whom rests the obligation to allow the confession to become a way of life, utterly convincing in its love, utterly compelling in its call. The way in which the confession of Belhar has reached far beyond URCSA and South Africa to constantly

inspire the churches of our Reformed family and the broader ecumenical movement, is a source of humble rejoice and deep gratitude for which the URCSA praises God (Acts of Synod, 2005:152).

Various churches, based on their own historical moments, decided to adopt the Belhar confession as part of their confessional basis. The following denomination adopted Belhar confession:

- Calvin Protestant church in 1988;
- Evangelical Reformed church in Africa in Namibia in 1997;
- United Protestant church in Belgium in 1998;
- Seattle First Christian Reformed Church in 2007;
- Iglesia Reformanda Dominicana, the Dominican Reformed Church in 2009
- Reformed Church in America in 2010;
- Uniting Presbyterian church in Southern Africa in 2011
- Lesotho Evangelical church in 2016
- The Presbyterian Church in the USA in 2016

Belhar confession is a gift from God to URCSA and URCSA give it as a gift to the ecumenical movements and denominations that are ready to accept and live according to this confession.

6. THE RELEVANCE OF BELHAR CONFESSION TO THE ECUMENICAL CHURCH

Confession is a free action. It is a response to a summons, resting on free choice. It proceeds from the Holy Spirit who breathes where He wills. It is related to God's free grace. Confession is bound to neither calendar nor clock. When its hour comes it may and must occur. None can demand confession from another, nor can one commission another one to confess. He who goes into the open with his confession does it of his own impulse, on his own account and on his own responsibility. He cannot denigrate the confession of another. Nor can he be persuaded or forced by any to confess this or that (Barth, 1969:85). In a confession a man stands on God's side, this has the sober and liberating implication, in respect of all that may be entailed, that God stands on his side. He who confesses no longer has to fear. Confessing, he puts everything he might fear behind him. In the act of confession he steps out into the freedom of God in which he, too, may be free (Barth, 1969:85).

Betha (2017:347) indicates that, the church of God, called and held together by Jesus Christ himself, lives only through the continual renewal of this fundamental confession of Faith. A confession of faith may thus be defined more precisely as a public declaration before God and world of what a church believes. It is an officially adopted statement. The confession enriches the church with words to

address the challenges of the day. Smit (2009:302) indicates that confessions are not only written for liturgical purposes, as it is commonly perceived. Confessions fulfil many purposes:

- They provide the church with language to proclaim God's praise, both in liturgy and ordinary life.
- They become hermeneutical lenses by which to read the Scriptures.
- They express identity and thereby contribute to the sense of belonging.
- They assist in instructing and forming new believers.
- They help the church to distinguish truth from falsehood.
- They serve as forms of public witness to Jesus Christ the Lord as the gospel.

A confession is not written to become an ornament; it is useful not only for the moment but also for the future moments to reflect upon. Confessions exist to become interpretive statements of the meaning of the biblical message for the church and for their time, to form a concrete embodiment of the church's convictions in everyday actions, including, cultural, social, political and economic activities.

Belhar confession in URCSA and ecumenical partners who have adopted Belhar confession, has a great influence on the way that theology is practiced. Belhar confession is about the integrity of the church in the public arena. There are new struggles that the church has to address, such as restorative justice, hate speech, incitement, statelessness, atrocity crimes, human rights violations, state capture, land grabbing, gender justice, the neoliberal economic globalization and eco-justice (Plaatjie van Huffel, 2017:87). Issues mentioned here are the agenda of the ecumenical movements we belongs to, as Reformed and Lutheran, these is the clear indication that Belhar confession is always relevant to the entire church as long as democracy is the favoured government model for this world. Democracy is government for the people by the people, and reformed tradition accepts that human beings are fallible therefore a fallible human being needs a church that has a rich confessional language to speak to these ills. In that sense URCSA and ecumenical partners that confess Belhar maintain that Belhar is always relevant.

CONCLUSION

Confession is a free action and is a response to a summons and rests ultimately on free choice. God compels us to confess. It proceeds from the Holy Spirit who breathes where He wills. Confessions are related to God's free grace.

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