

The Belhar Confession

by Jack Rogers

The Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa traditionally had Three Standards of Unity: The Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and The Canons of Dort (1618-1619). In their original European context these documents asserted that Protestant Christians were not anarchists, but were good citizens, willing to obey the government of the land. These confessions from the 16th and 17th centuries were used in the 19th and 20th centuries in South Africa to justify obedience to a government that imposed strict separation of the races and domination by members of the white race. The system was called by its Afrikaans name, "Apartheid." The Confession of Belhar was written as a protest against a heretical theological stance by the white Dutch Reformed Church that used the Bible and the Confessions to justify the harsh and unjust system of Apartheid.

Historical Context: A History of Racial Segregation in South Africa

In 1652, Dutchman Jan van Riebeeck brought the first Protestant Christians to the southern tip of what he viewed as the vast, heathen and uncivilized continent of Africa. There had been indigenous, dark-skinned people living in Southern Africa for millennia. There were many tribes, each with their distinctive language and culture. The early Europeans, such as the Portuguese, sailed around the Cape of Good Hope but were not interested in colonizing it. The Dutch East India Company wanted to leave just a small contingent of their men to found a trading post where food and water could be provided for Dutch ships on their way to and from their colonies in Asia. The Dutch wanted no contact with the indigenous people, the Khoikhoi, but they did want laborers to help develop farming. So, they imported slaves from the Dutch colonies in Madagascar and Indonesia. In time, some of these slaves bore children by white sailors and Dutch settlers. Their offspring eventually intermarried with the indigenous black population. The result was a mixed race population in the Cape province.

In time, many white farmers wanted independence from the Dutch East India Company, the commercial interests that controlled the Cape. Especially after Dutch women were imported as wives, some of these farmers began to move further North. They typically had a wagon, a tent, a gun and a Bible. They occupied what for them were expanses of free land. Most of these farmers, called Boers, originally spoke Dutch. Over several centuries, separated from The Netherlands, they acquired a distinctive language. In the meantime on the Cape a simplified form of Dutch became the means of communication between citizens of the Cape and their slaves.

As early as 1671 travelers reported that Dutch spoken at the Cape no longer sounded like its European predecessor. By the nineteenth century contact with English and the languages of various indigenous groups in the interior also had influence. Muslims established schools at the Cape and committed the local language into Arabic script. From all of these influences, a new language emerged called Afrikaans. A significant impetus for having an identifiable new language came from conflict with the British.

Dutch sea power had faded, and in 1795, the British conquered the Cape. English was declared the official language of the Cape and efforts were made to prevent the use of any other language. The Cape had 15,000 inhabitants, 10,000 of whom were slaves. Whites were called "bass," and were assumed to be Christians. Their ministers did nothing to challenge white supremacy. Later, white missionaries from the London

Missionary Society espoused the cause of the Khoikhoi and the Xhosa, but primarily to ameliorate their meager living conditions. Finally, by 1828, the British House of Commons ruled that the colonial government of South Africa had to give the same rights to native people as to free English and Dutch people. Technically, slaves were freed. Practically their freedom was very limited since whites owned all the land. Government officials referred to the non-whites as the Cape Colored people. The name stuck.

By the 1830s, English alone was authorized for use in government offices, law courts and public schools. This was a foreign language to Afrikaners, the descendants of the original Dutch settlers. There was wide-spread anti-British feeling among all classes of Afrikaners.

In 1835 a large group of farmers, called Voortrekkers, sought freedom from British control. It was estimated that by 1840, 6000 men, women and children, 9 percent of the white population of the Cape, accompanied by 5,000 colored servants, moved north in what was called the Great Trek. These Boers moved further and further northward to occupy great tracts of land. This also led to battles with the indigenous black population. The Zulus were especially fierce in their opposition, and even when not fighting, they refused to work for the white settlers.

The 1830s saw a proliferation of mission schools and hospitals intended to serve the non-white population. The first missionaries to the Khoikhoi were German Moravians. Then came the English and Scots. By 1870, the London Missionary Society had seven mission stations, each with 10,000 acres of land and homes for 1200 people. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions beginning in 1835, provided schools and medical facilities to serve the needs of the indigenous population. In 1928, there were forty-eight missionary organizations in South Africa with 1,700 white missionaries, teachers, doctors and nurses. The missionaries ran the only schools where Africans could acquire the basic skills necessary for effective participation in an industrialized economy. By 1935, mission schools registered 342,181 Africans.

In 1860 a new ethnic population appeared. Between 1860 and 1866, 6000 Indians from Madras and Calcutta arrived in Natal where they outnumbered whites. The British imported 150,000 workers from India over the next 50 years. The Indians came as indenture servants, most of whom were free after ten years. In 1893 a London-trained attorney, Mohandas Gandhi, came. He stayed for 21 years, attempting to organize these people in protest of their oppression.

Social pressure from whites to separate from the Cape Colored population caused the Dutch Reformed Church in 1857 to create a separate Dutch Reformed Mission Church exclusively for Colored people. By 1861, colored children were banned from the public schools.

In 1866, at Paarl, a Dutchman, Arnoldus Pannevis, began to teach in a private school for those who spoke Cape Dutch. He was a linguist and concluded that the dissimilarities with Dutch were such that Cape Dutch deserved to be recognized as a new language which he called Afrikaans.

In 1867, diamonds were discovered near Kimberley. In 1879, gold was discovered in Witwatersrand. Both discoveries led to a massive influx of outsiders come to hunt for their fortune. This greatly increased the tension between the Boers who regarded this

large center section of land as their country. The British soon controlled both the diamond and the gold industry. They developed a system of near slavery for the thousands of mostly black workers that these digging operations needed.

Now politics, religion, and local pride combined to create a movement to establish Afrikaans as a distinct language and to create a distinctive non-British culture. A Society of True Afrikaners was founded in 1875. In 1876 this was followed by publication of *The African Patriot* which by 1890 became a weekly newspaper. In 1882 A Huguenot Memorial School was established. Efforts began to have an Afrikaans Bible translation (finally accomplished in 1933).

In 1899, England sent 500,000 troops to crush the Boers, the white Afrikaans speaking settlers. The British put 200,000 Afrikaner men, women and children in concentration camps. Of them, 50,000 died because of the inhumane conditions. After 3 years of the Boer war, the British won and took over the diamond and gold mines. In peace talks the Afrikaners got concessions for white people. There was to be no vote for the black majority population and strict racial separation was employed.

However, in the early twentieth century, several African political organizations emerged. In 1912, the African National Congress, which later would become a leading voice for black Africans was formed. At first, these parties were led by Western-oriented middle class people. The founders of the ANC were mission-educated Christians who tried to persuade white people to resist discrimination.

In 1907, the Cape Colony, Natal, the Transval, and the Orange Free State formed the the Union of South Africa. In 1910 it was declared independent of Great Britain. Laws were passed ensuring that most of the land and the best jobs were reserved for whites. However, white Afrikaners remained poor relative to the English speaking whites who were dominant in government and society.

In 1914, Afrikaans was recognized as an official school language. In 1925 it became, with English, one of two official national languages. The Afrikaans language was a strong factor in the creation of a distinct Afrikaans community.

Since 1806, The British, and their English language, dominated, much to the frustration of those who considered themselves to be the indigenous (white) population. After decades of planning, much of it in secret organizations like the Broederbond, Afrikaners became involved at various levels in political life. In 1948, to the surprise of the the English-speaking leadership, their domination was ended. An Afrikaner-led government was elected. The National Party of Afrikaners won 70. mostly rural, districts. The Afrikaners had won a peaceful election in a country where they were no more than 12% of the population.

Now, devout Afrikaners could enforce what for many was their perceived mandate from God to order society on racial lines. Strict separation of the races followed. No interracial sex or marriage was allowed. All public facilities such as buses, schools, hospitals, beaches were segregated. People of color had to carry passbooks containing information on the holder. No colored person could live, work or travel without a passbook. It gave police an excuse to detain any person of color at any time. Afrikaans, rather than English, was now the official language.

After the election, all the white churches, except the Dutch Reformed, criticized apartheid. Racial segregation had long been practiced in most white churches. Now, four Dutch Reformed churches were recognized that corresponded to the racial categories enforced by the government. The dominant group was the white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). There was a Black Church, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA). There was an Indian Church, the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA). And there was the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) for the colored, or mixed race, population, especially in the Cape province. Ironically, despite the racial divisions, each of these church bodies shared Dutch Reformed theological roots and Afrikaner culture.

Also quietly, and in waiting, were members of the black African political parties. The ANC had changed from passively asking permission to participate in society to actively working to mobilize Africans to work for their freedom. In 1943, the ANC adopted a statement citing the Atlantic Charter calling for elimination of all discrimination. A youth league was founded that pushed for African self-reliance and unity. In 1949, in the face of the racist Afrikaner legislative win, three members of the youth league were elected to the national executive committee of the ANC. They were Nelson Mandela (bn.1918), Walter Sisulu (bn.1912), and Oliver Tambo (bn. 1917). They were all from Transkei, they had attended mission schools, they qualified as lawyers by correspondence with the University of South Africa. And they began actively to oppose Apartheid .

Reaction by the Oppressed

The rigid enforcement of Apartheid was effectively enforced by police power. However, in 1960 deep-seated resentment took organized form. On March 21, 1960 in Sharpsville, a township about 50 kilometers south of Johannesburg, blacks gathered to burn their passbooks. The Pan African Congress had requested permission to hold a public meeting on Sunday, March 21. The request was refused by government officials. Leaders then called on PAC members to gather at the Sharpsville Tennis Court grounds. By 1:00 a.m. a large number of people had gathered. At about 1:30 a.m. two cars of riot police arrived and started shooting in the air to disperse the crowd. A number of other armed white people began to appear.

The leaders began their march to the police station to make their protest and surrender themselves for arrest. Several thousand unarmed Africans gathered at the police station and witnessed their leaders being arrested. Suddenly, the white police began firing on the defenseless men, women, and children. Sixty-seven Africans were killed and 186 were wounded. More than 80 percent were shot in the back as they fled.

It became known as the Sharpsville Massacre. The government response was to tighten enforcement of Apartheid. The ANC and PAC were banned. The police arrested 12,000 and jailed 6800. In 1964, Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu were tried and given life sentences on Robben Island. During the rest of the 1960s and into the 1970s white rule seemed unchallengeable.

Then, on June 16, 1976 there was an uprising in Soweto, a shanty town outside Johannesburg. A law had been passed that all colored school children would be taught only in Afrikaans. Many teachers did not know Afrikaans and were fired. Students refused to write papers in the language of the Apartheid government. They were suspended from school. About one quarter of a million children were out of school. A

demonstration was planned for June 16. Children began to assemble at 7:00 a.m. in many areas. As various groups converged they were met by 50 policemen. First, the police used tear gas. Then policemen fired machine guns, first in the air, and then into the crowd.

A five year old girl and a 9 year old boy were killed instantly. A picture of the boy, Hector Peterson, being carried in the arms of a fellow student was widely seen and became a symbol of the struggle. The government said that 95 people were killed in 3 days of rioting. Unofficial estimates were closer to 500 killed. Protests continued. Winnie Mandela, wife of the jailed African National Congress leader, Nelson Mandela, declared, "This is only the beginning." On June 19, the United Nations Security Council condemned the South African government and Apartheid. This led to increasing international pressure with boycotts by sports teams and businesses. In 1977, the United Nations voted a mandatory arms embargo against South Africa.

A Theological Response

In Cape Town in the second semester of 1978, two years after the tragic events on the streets of Soweto, students in the DRMC theological seminary were struggling to make theological sense of the resistance to the apartheid regime. The professor of systematic theology, Jaap Durand, challenged them: "You have been quite explicit about the legal, sociological, and political science reasons for your judgment on apartheid. I want to challenge you to find the theological essence of the judgment on apartheid."

One day in the spring of 1978, the class came to a conclusion. Apartheid is grounded in the irreconcilability of people of different racial groups. It is thus against the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is grounded in the doctrine of reconciliation. In October of that year, the Synod of the DRMC, with Allan Boesak and others in the leadership, considered this theological conclusion. The Theological Commission of the Synod affirmed this judgment and took it to the Synod. The conclusion was that "Apartheid was anti-evangelical." Racism was a structural and institutional sin.

Allan Boesak was a minister in the DRMC. He was a liberation theologian, a vigorous critic of the Apartheid government, and well known in North America and Europe through his writing and speaking at conferences. In 1982, in Ottawa, Canada, Boesak was elected the president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). At that time WARC represented some 200 denominations and 75 million Christians with roots in the Calvinistic reformation. Boesak asked this international organization to declare apartheid a heresy. The WARC Assembly did so, and then suspended from membership, the white, South African DRC and another smaller white denomination for supporting apartheid with biblical and confessional arguments. For WARC, this was a "Status Confessionis." If this theological justification of apartheid was not abandoned then the DRC ceased to be a true church. The 1.2 million member white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa was stung by this exclusion.

The Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) had its next General Synod in the spring of 1982. The theological judgment of the DRMC Synod in 1978 had now been confirmed by an international theological body. The judgment that support of apartheid was idolatry and heresy was no longer just the opinion of a colored Reformed church on the southern-most tip of the Cape of Good Hope. For many at the DRMC Synod, the action of WARC had affirmed their identity of being both colored and authentically Reformed.

The DRMC Synod appointed a committee led by Russel Botman and Dirkie Smit to draft an appropriate expression of their judgment on apartheid. Within a few days, the committee presented a draft confession. It became known as the Confession of Belhar, for the suburb of Cape Town where the Synod was meeting.

The Confession of Belhar

Apartheid is the human context for the Confession of Belhar, yet it is never mentioned in the confession. Rather, Belhar lifts up the heart of the Gospel as a bringer of hope for the human condition. Belhar presents a Christian view of racism, separation, and suffering by those who had experienced the realities of these evils. It demonstrates that confessional affirmations can arise from social ethics.

Belhar has three central points: Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice. It is structured like the Theological Declaration of Barmen. There is a biblical affirmation followed by a rejection of false teaching. Excerpts from the text are cited below.

UNITY

We believe

... that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ;
 ...that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the Church and must be resisted;
 ...that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;
 That true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this Church;

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;

...which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;

which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.

RECONCILIATION:

We believe

that God has entrusted to his Church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ;

...that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;

that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

which, in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

JUSTICE

We believe

that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;

...that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged;

that God calls the Church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;

...that the Church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology

which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

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 be the consequence.

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. be the honor and the glory for ever and ever.

One of the primary authors of the Belhar Confession, Russel Botman, commented: “The scandalous absence in the Three Standards of Unity is a confession on justice. The significant contribution that Belhar adds, in complementing the existing Standards, is its explicit confession of faith in the God of Justice. The confession of Belhar closes a loophole in Reformed confessions by coming to terms with the revelation of God about the realities of social justice.... God is, in a special way, revealed as the God of those who suffer, especially of those who suffer as a result of poverty and injustices.”

Botman concluded: “Finally, the Confession of Belhar embraces the central notion in the Barmen Declaration: Jesus is Lord. With this confession, Belhar confirms that no one but Christ may lord over us and over our church.”

The Consequences of Belhar

The Synod of Belhar finished the confession quickly. It was then sent out to the DRMC congregations and to the white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). The Synod proposed four years of discussion with potential adoption in 1986. During this time some of the writers of the confession suffered. Russel Botman was jailed and tortured. Supporters of apartheid attacked the Belhar Confession as a communist document. The writers had no expectation in the mid-1980s that the apartheid regime would end. Dirkie Smits, a writer of the confession, said of the regime: “It was too totalitarian, too powerful.” Dialogue with the white DRC proved ultimately fruitless. So, in 1986, the DRMC adopted Belhar as its confession of faith.

Then, changes took place in South Africa that no one could have anticipated. Nelson Mandela had been imprisoned for 27 years as the head of the banned political party, the African National Congress. In 1985, President P.W. Botha offered Mandela release based on conditions that Mandela could not accept. In 1989, Botha had a stroke and was replaced as President by F.W. de Klerk. De Klerk apparently decided that change was coming and that he should negotiate from a position of strength. On February 2, 1990, de Klerk removed the ban on the ANC. On February 11, Mandela was freed with no conditions. The whole world watched on television as Mandela spoke of justice and equality for blacks and reconciliation with the white minority.

In 1993, Mandela and de Klerk jointly received the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1994, the first democratic elections took place in South Africa in which people of all races could vote. Mandela was elected president and established a government of national unity. He appointed F.W. de Klerk and Thabo Mbeki as Vice Presidents.

Also in 1994, the DRMC joined with the DRCA (the black Reformed church) with Belhar as their founding confession. These formed the new Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). This new denomination invited the DRC to unite with them, but that offer was rejected.

In the early 1990s, WARC set conditions for the readmission of the DRC. In 1997 a DRC theological commission stated that apartheid was a sin. In 1998 the General Synod of the DRC adopted the report of its theological commission and repudiated its former support of apartheid. The DRC was then readmitted to WARC.

In 1999, Mandela retired as president and Thabo Mbeki became President of South Africa.

Adoption of the Confession of Belhar

In addition to the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa, several churches in other nations have adopted Belhar as a confessional standard. The Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa in Namibia (ERCA) adopted Belhar in 1997. The United Protestant Church in Belgium adopted it in 1998.

In the United States and Canada, two historically Dutch Reformed denominations have moved to add Belhar to their traditional Three Standards of Unity. The Reformed Church in America, headquartered in Holland, Michigan, after 24 years of study, voted in General Synod in 2009 to add Belhar as their fourth confession. Following that decision, more than the necessary two-thirds of the 46 classes (presbyteries) voted approval. On June 10, 2010 the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America formally accepted the Belhar Confession as its Fourth Standard of Unity.

A similar pattern of action has been followed by the Christian Reformed Church in North America. After a two year study, in 2009 the Inter-church Relations Committee of the CRCNA recommended adoption of the Belhar Confession as part of the basic confessional standards of the CRC. After considerable study initiated in 2007, General Synod will vote on the adoption of Belhar in 2012,

In 2004, a task force studying the issue of reparations commended the Belhar Confession to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A). The Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC) asked the General Assembly Council's Office of Theology and Worship to prepare materials to facilitate churchwide reflection and study. It urged that each presbytery and all congregations undertake a study of the Belhar Confession prior to its being presented to the 2008 General Assembly. In addition, it directed the Office of Theology and Worship to receive responses and report results to the 218th General Assembly in 2008, together with possible recommendations.

Citing lack of staff, the Office of Theology and Worship did not present any study documents to the church until early in 2008. No presbytery or congregational study appeared to have been done. Nonetheless, the 218th General Assembly in 2008, without discussion, approved the addition of Belhar to the Book of Confessions by a 76% positive vote. The Assembly then called on the Moderator in consultation with two former Moderators, the Stated Clerk, ACREC, the Peacemaking program, and the Office of Theology and Worship to appoint a Committee of Fifteen to review the Confession of Belhar and report to the next General Assembly.

After a year's study, the Committee of Fifteen reported unanimous approval of the addition of the Confession of Belhar to the Book of Confessions. The General Assembly then submitted the proposal to the vote of the 173 presbyteries of the denomination. Approval required a two-thirds "yes" votes by the presbyteries. Belhar garnered a majority vote in the presbyteries but failed by just 8 presbyteries to achieve the necessary two-thirds needed for final adoption into the Book of Confessions.

What will Allan Boesak, Russel Botman, Dirkie Smit, and others who wrote the Belhar Confession, at risk to their lives and well-being, think of the PCUSA's failure to adopt it?

What has prevented our ability to make it better known and to generate enthusiasm for it? Did the conservative critique that alleged that Belhar subordinated the Lordship of Jesus Christ to unity, and that Belhar could be used to support justice for gay and lesbian people, gain traction with people, many of whom who had not studied Belhar?

Will the PCUSA add other confessions to its present Book of Confessions? What issue could be sufficiently compelling and what process of preparation could be adequate to bring about such a result? Should the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopt the Belhar Confession?