



The limited public good of a confession. A public theological reflection on enhancing the (public) good of the Belhar Confession in the Reformed Church family of South Africa

Brunsdon, AR
North-West University (Mafikeng Campus)
Alfred.Brunsdon@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

Public theology takes on many forms, generally seeking some public good by interpreting Scripture, trying to reveal the social relevance of the theological truth concerned. In this framework the Belhar Confession can arguably be deemed a public theological *tour de force* as it spoke out against, amongst others, social injustices based on wrongful Biblical exegesis. Speaking to different “publics” over the last three decades, the good resulting from this confession, ironically, seems extremely limited – especially in the Reformed Church family (public) of its native land, South Africa. It would even be safe to allege that this confession has had a polarizing effect, rather than a unifying one. As public theology is regarded as an intra-disciplinary venture, this article will reflect critically on the limited good of this confession and will ponder the notion of enhancing its good as a form of public theology by means of a public-theological reflection. It is suspected that several possibilities reside within a public-theological reading whereby the good this confession is capable of can be enhanced.

Keywords

Public theology, Confession of Belhar, Reformed churches of South Africa, Confessions of faith

1. Introductory remarks

Embedded in the topic of this research is arguably one of the most contentious current issues in the Reformed family of Churches in South

Africa¹, namely the Belhar Confession (Belhar). More than three decades after the historic Dutch Reformed Mission Church accepted the Belhar as a fourth confession of faith there is still little consensus about its confessional status within the family where it was born. At the time this research was conducted, the polarity surrounding this confession was accentuated by a proposed amendment of the first article of the church order of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) to include the Belhar as an optional confession within the confessional basis of the DRC. This proposal failed as the required two thirds majority of votes from regional synods could not be obtained (Jackson, 2015:5). An analysis of the voting process revealed that only 17.2% of DRC members took part in the process of which 10.1% rejected the proposed amendment. Only three of the ten regional synods managed to obtain the required two thirds majority which allows for the broadening of the current confessional basis. Effectively then, the DRC remains persistent in its non-acceptance of the Belhar as a fourth confession of faith.

Consequently the classical “quo vadis?” ensues. As it is indeed a legitimate question where the broader family of Reformed churches in South Africa will be henceforth going with the Belhar. This question requires on going reflection for a number of reasons. Firstly the Belhar remains one of the most precious convictions of the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa (URCSA) and should therefore, in the familial spirit of church unity, remain on the agenda of other members of the church family. Secondly, although the required two thirds majority of votes could not be obtained on the regional synod level of the DRC, a significant number of participants did vote in favour of the amendment. This is a clear indication of the diversity on this matter within the DRC. This necessitates further consideration in order to manage the growing diversity within its own ranks. But thirdly, and most importantly within the framework of this research, is the notion that the Belhar should be explored further as a theological document in order to keep it on the agenda of the family of Reformed Churches. Hence,

1 The Reformed family of Churches in this article denotes the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA), Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NRCA), Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa (URCSA) – previously Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA – denoting the re-formed DRCA in the Free State and Phororo) and Reformed Church in Africa (RCA).

this contribution suggests that the Belhar should be engaged as a public theological document to nurture an appreciation for its theological worth and the role that it potentially has in contemporary South Africa.

2. Rationale

This article will attempt to avoid a hermeneutics of suspicion (see Naudé 2010: 139), which became very characteristic of the debate surrounding the Belhar and will focus on the public theological character of the document within its historical context. Working with the assumption that the Belhar can indeed be deemed a valuable contribution to public theology, the seemingly public theological irony this document became to embody, will be articulated. An irony that manifests in the phenomenon that public theology sometimes result in little, or limited public good. The main thrust of this article will be to position Belhar as a public theological document in order to enhance the possibility of the public good that it can attain.

3. Public theology: A South African perspective

Since Martin Marty's 1974 use of the term "public theology"², a growing number of theologians internationally became involved in the shaping of the meaning of this term. According to Koopman (2009:410) there are currently twenty five research centres for public theology at institutions of higher education world-wide, all collaborating within a global network of public theology. Providing a generic definition of public theology, which will accommodate all notions associated with it, would therefore be hard to attain.

From a South African perspective though, public theology denotes a strand of theology that creates space for the church to theologically reflect, speak on and engage with public life. According to Smit (2003), public theology is a privilege that must be theologically grounded, speaking to different "publics" and, according to the circumstances, through different channels such as congregations, denominations, interest groups, verbally, but also

2 It is widely accepted that the term "public theology" was introduced by Martin Marty's article titled: Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience which appeared in the *Journal of Religion*, Vol 54, No. 4 in October 1974.

through action. Koopman (2009:415) and Lategan (2012:357) both contend that (all) Christian theology can, in the broad sense of the word, be regarded as public theology, also lending it an intra-disciplinary character. This happens when public theology is understood as a “specification” of the three classic areas of Christian theology that refers to the contents of the Christian faith, the rationality thereof and the implications of Christian faith for life. To be specific, theology becomes public when focusing on any of the following three issues and its meaning in concrete situations (Koopman 2009: 415): the inherent public nature of God’s love, the rationality of God’s love for the world and the meaning and implications of God’s love for every facet of life.

In the narrower sense of the word, public theology refers to theology that focuses especially on the third question. In this narrower sense, contextual issues immediately come into view. These can include matters concerning liberation, gender issues, human rights and ecology. “Public theology demands of us a developing expertise in other disciplines of knowledge matched by a commitment to participate in conversations and exercises beyond the borders of a congregation” (Le Bruyns, 2011).

4. The different “publics” of public theology

As mentioned, public theology addresses different “publics”. Smit’s (2007a) elaborate discussion on the various “publics” shows that public can point to the public sphere where public opinion is formed or to public life in general or to a public determined by the theologian. The specific character of the theology concerned, defines the “public”. In this regard, it can be said that the primary public which this research wants to address, is the main stream Reformed churches in Southern Africa as the topic at hand reflects directly on them. This does not mean, though, that the influence will be restricted to the public this research has in mind. This ought to suggest that “publics” are both interconnected and not fixed.

5. The (public) good of public theology

This research departs from the assumption that public theology will or must have public or common good as a result. Public good, also interchangeably used with common good, is a highly fluid term. It is also a controversial

term as the many derivatives it accrued over centuries in different contexts obscured a singular meaning (Hartman, Kelley & Werhane, 2009: 254-256). Historically the notion of the common good is traced back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* that argued that human life becomes good through the pursuit of ends that are inherently good. One of the most significant conclusions drawn from Aristotle's argument was that a true good life is orientated towards sharing the individual good with others resulting in the so-called common good (Hollenbach, 2002:3).

A more recent and generic notion of common good is closely related to political theory that suggests that good governance must be in the best interest of all concerned. Drawing on the classical Ciceronian analysis of the relationship between the good (*honestum*) and the useful (*utile*), the common good should be pre-eminent in all spheres of politics (Miller 2004:6). The notion of common good in this regard becomes a benchmark against which public or societal functions like the economy and education should be measured. Stiltner (1999: 4) therefore denotes the common good as “society's overall well being” and suggests that for common good to exist conditions must be such that it will “benefit every member of society in some way”. Although this may seem like a simple notion, it is highly contested, as much difference exists regarding what “common” and what “good” actually entails. What is deemed good by some, can at the same time be to the detriment of others, making “good” both exclusive and uncommon. It is therefore philosophically, economically and politically a highly evocative term.

While the notion of common good is present in most world religions, including the Islam (Eickelman & Salvatore, 2004: 3), different religious traditions furnish this notion according to their own religious texts. In Roman Catholic theology the term was revived by Pope Leo XIII in the late 1800's cyclical *Rerum Novarum* which was essentially a reaction to address the inequities of the new industrial world (Crouch, 2012: 3). In following *Rerum Novarum*, common good within Catholic thought denoted the “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily” (Crouch, 2012:3). Common good in this sense reflects the inevitable social dimension of the Christian faith.

Within Reformed theology, with its strong emphasis on the notion of *Sola Scriptura*, common good or social responsibility can be expected to be both implicitly and explicitly present in theology due to the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Christian faith. Love for God is equated to love for the fellow man (cf. Mt 22:37-39). Love for God also have specific social consequences – as Paul stipulates in Romans 12. However, although the notion of common good is implicitly present in Scriptures and should supposedly be part of a Scriptural theology, common good is not always to be taken for granted. The Southern African Reformed heritage is unfortunately a point in case. Under the guise of Reformed theology, the issue of common good was for many years muted by Scriptural support for the exclusive social engineering project of *apartheid*, making social and personal fulfilment impossible for many (Saayman, 2007:70). No theology, including Reformed theology, should however succumb to the temptation of using its tenets in support of any ideology. It should remain a transcending agent seeking the full will of God for all spheres of life, actively seeking the common good.

In the light of the above it becomes feasible to align public theology with Reformed theology. In this regard Dirkie Smit's (2007:38) reference to the phrase coined by the late Heiko Oberman to describe Calvin's use of Scripture is especially relevant. For Oberman, *sola Scriptura civitate interpretata* indicated that Scripture remained the final authority for Calvin, but in a qualified way, namely that the Scriptures had to be “read and interpreted with a view to the city, with a view to public life, to the questions and issues, the challenges and crises of society” (Smit 2007:38). Public theology thus ensures that the Gospel of God's salutary love is translated into public good.

6. The Belhar Confession

Following the declaration of a *status confessionis* on apartheid by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in 1982, a draft Confession of Belhar was accepted as a confession by the general synod of the DRMC in 1986. The confession in its final version consists of five sections or articles. The first article declares faith in the Triune God who called the church into being. The second, third and fourth articles focus on the role of the church in the world, which includes the unity of the church (second article),

reconciliation in the church and society (third article) and promoting peace and justice in society (fourth article). The fifth article appeals to believers to embody the confession, even in the face of adversity and persecution. A brief doxology concludes the document.

The Belhar Confession was accompanied by a letter (referred to simply as “The Accompanying Letter”) that served as an important explanation or further clarification of the Confession’s content. In a sense the Letter provides a hermeneutical key to unlock the meaning and to put the confession into perspective. It addresses four issues in four paragraphs, namely the seriousness of the confession, the authority thereof (as it is derived from the Bible), a false doctrine as the focus of the confession and the implications thereof, namely reconciliation and unity.

7. A public theological reading of the Belhar Confession

The Belhar Confession falls in the literary and theological genre of a confession – more specific – a Reformed confession.³ Confessions are inherently public in nature as they are addressed at someone (e.g. Belgic Confession / *Confessio Belgica*) or something (e.g. Canons of Dordt). Even if a confession primarily serves the purpose of summarising the faith or Biblical truths in order to preserve and convey it (e.g. Heidelberg Catechism), it remains public as it addresses a collective public. This public nature deepens and even becomes more so when a confession is aimed at a theological evaluation of – and proclamation of Scriptures against – a practice or ideology that is public in nature (e.g. The Barmen Declaration). If Belhar is read against the specific historical context in which it originated, it clearly is a public theological document.⁴

3 See Koopman (2011:32) on the Reformed character of the Belhar Confession: “It (the Belhar) resides in the Reformed expression of this multi-denominational religious tradition.”

4 During the seventies and eighties in South Africa resistance against *apartheid* became apparent in most spheres of society. In this light it is meaningful that the DRMC, under the guidance of Allan Boesak, put the theological legitimacy of *apartheid* to the test at the World Alliance of Reformed Church’s (WARC) General Assembly in Ottawa, Canada, during August 1982. Following the negative account by Boesak of racism and *apartheid*, the WARC stated: “We declare with the black Reformed Christians of South Africa that *apartheid* (separate development) is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the Gospel and, in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy.” (See the full account of this history as it is posted on

When measured against the three questions used to clarify the notion of public theology above (the inherent public nature of God’s love, the rationality of God’s love for the world and, the meaning and implications of God’s love for every facet of life), one finds that Belhar speaks to all three, and most definitely to the third, which refers to the meaning and implication of Gods’ love for the different facets of life – again reflecting the Confession’s public-theological nature.

The public nature of the Belhar is also emphasised by the prominent South African theologian Piet Naudé, long-time protagonist of Belhar. In his *Neither Calendar nor Clock* (2010), Naudé extensively works out the contemporary (public) relevance of this Confession in different chapters on Unity (chapter 7), Reconciliation (chapter 8) and Justice (chapter 9). Naudé convincingly shows how Belhar appeals for these three themes to be worked out in a postliberation South Africa, making it relevant, not just for the church (-public), but for the South African society as a whole. Interestingly, Naudé shows that these themes remain as relevant now, as they were in 1982 – albeit on different levels, showing that the public relevance of the Belhar has endured history thus far. All indications are that South Africa will need a growing theological clarity on these issues in the years to come, as unity, reconciliation, justice as well as similar issues, still need to be resolved.

In a shorter account of these issues at the beginning of his book, Naudé also points to the so-called “no!(s)” of the Belhar (Naudé, 2010: 45-47), in which the public nature (or as Naudé calls it, the contextual nature) of the Belhar, emerges. In this regard, for example, the racial segregation to which the Belhar says “no”, implies unity in church and society (cf. article 2: “... we reject any doctrine which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people...”). The forced separation to which the Belhar says “no”, implies reconciliation among all (cf. article 3: “...we reject any doctrine which in the name of the gospel or of the will of God sanctions the forced separation of people...”). The social and economic injustice to which Belhar says “no”, implies social and economic justice (cf. article 4: “...we reject any ideology that legitimates forms of injustice...”).

the the website of the URCSA, www.vgksa.org.za). In reading Belhar as a public theological document, this statement is of obvious importance.

Naudé discusses these themes exhaustively⁵, but the public or contextual nature of Belhar is also apparent in an ordinary theological evaluation of the confession. This becomes evident in Smit's (2012) theological evaluation of Belhar in a post-apartheid South Africa. Amongst others, Smit claims:

- That the whole of Belhar is theologically carried by the belief that “Jesus is Lord” (article 5) and that faith in Him (article 1) leads to action, i.e. “to do all these things” (article 5).
- That Belhar appeals for a “living unity” (article 2). Unity amongst believers is a gift from God through the Holy Spirit. Believers have no choice in the embodiment of this unity – a unity that must be expressed as part of their witness to the world, not denying diversity, but also not using diversity as an excuse not to embody this “living unity”.
- That Belhar calls for “true reconciliation” as opposed to “shallow reconciliation” as “[t]rue reconciliation is not about forgiving and not forgetting, but reconciliation that deals with the past and rely on the work of God through the Holy Spirit to bring a true reconciliation between people (article 2).
- Finally, Belhar calls for compassionate justice. Believers should approach justice like the compassionate God of the Old and New Testament did by taking the poor and the desolate into account. Taking their side, as it was, to eradicate all forms of injustices (article 4).

A further argument for the public theological character of Belhar is to be found in the public or social application of it in recent church history and life. Here, especially, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) comes to mind as it employed the Belhar as a resource for studying and combatting the enduring issue of racism in its own context. Although not accepted as part of their Book of Confessions, Belhar played an important role in understanding the social phenomenon of racism (McGarrahan 2010:6).

It is evident that Belhar constitutes a document that is anchored theologically in the person and actions of the Triune God and that it calls believers to act accordingly towards one another and the world. Every article of the Belhar has practical and public implications. The expression of a living unity, for

5 See also Naudé 2009: 616-618.

instance, surely has implications for how congregational life is expressed. Reconciliation cannot happen if people do not move closer to one another, getting to know the other better as compassionate justice implies actively seeking justice for the downtrodden.

8. The limited good of the Belhar Confession – a case of public theological irony

In the light of the above, it would be fair to expect that the Belhar should have had a notable impact on the different publics of South Africa over the last thirty years, primarily, of course, on the public of the church. As argued before, public theology should impact positively on both church and the broader society as it articulates the social implications of Scripture. The legacy of the first three decades of the Belhar, unfortunately and ironically, to a large extent, bears witness to the opposite.

In order to articulate this irony and put it into perspective, two remarks need to be made. First, a historical remark. In broader societal terms, the acceptance of the Belhar in 1986 by the DRMC fell within a crucial timeframe in terms of the liberation struggle against the political and ideological system of *apartheid* that gained specific momentum in 1976 with the well-known Soweto unrests. During this time, there were many other forces at work in the country – politically as well as economically – that forced the government of the day into a new direction. The DRMC's own struggle against the anomaly of *apartheid* and the acceptance of Belhar, became one of the many voices crying out for change in a restless country – which resulted in the transition to a democratic (new) South Africa in 1994.⁶

Second, a remark on the significance of Belhar for the DRMC. The significance of Belhar for the DRMC needs to be understood for what it is, namely as a defining point in its history and being. For the DRMC

6 A question which often arises is what role Belhar played in the dismantling of *apartheid* and the march towards democracy. Although it would be difficult to produce an accurate response, it is safe to say that the DRMC echoed theologically what was said politically at the time – and in this regard strengthened the collective voice against the social order of the time.

acceptance of Belhar was not just a *kairos*-moment,⁷ but *the kairos*-moment. It was a decisive, definitive moment on which their future rested. Maybe the words of Botha (2010:81-82) express the significance of Belhar best when he points out that Belhar is not just a confession of URCSA (DRMC), but that URCSA *became* Belhar. URCSA is the embodiment of Belhar. As such, no distinction between church and confession is possible. This is how significant Belhar was for the then DRMC, and remains so for URCSA today. The relevance of these remarks is that it puts the Belhar into a historical context – as no confession is ever without context. However, it also puts into perspective the fact that for URCSA, Belhar and the process of unification became intertwined to the extent that no distinction can be drawn between them. URCSA is Belhar and Belhar is the unification process.⁸

Since the acceptance of Belhar, the DRMC departed on a new journey seeking like-minded brothers and sisters in faith, first knocking on the doors of its “own family”⁹, and later on the doors of “relatives” further afield.¹⁰ At first the journey was pleasant as the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) united with the DRMC in 1994 to form the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, thus also accepting and sharing the convictions expressed in Belhar. The joy of finding like-minded brothers and sisters would however be short-lived, as shortly thereafter, certain congregations of the former DRCA had a change of heart and contested the unification. To convey the details of this change of stance is not all possible within the limits of this article. This history (journey) is also well documented (cf. Du

7 A moment of truth.

8 Indeed did URCSA made it clear over the years that unification within the family of Reformed Churches implies acceptance of Belhar as fourth confession of a unified church (see Du Toit et al, 2002: 174, Botha & Naudé, 2010:82).

9 During this time a general distinction existed between the “black” Reformed church family and the “white” Reformed church family. The white Reformed churches were (and are still) known as the “sister churches”. The black Reformed churches included the DRMC (Coloured), the DRCA (Black) and the RCA (Asian) and were known as the “daughter churches” after their separation from the original Dutch Reformed church in 1857, when worship became separated on the grounds of racial differences. Within the framework of racial segregation even the terms “mother, sister, and daughter churches” became problematic as it emphasised not only the differences between believers, but also suggested some kind of hierarchy.

10 Belhar has been introduced in several Reformed churches outside of South Africa, for example, the Reformed Church of America.

Toit et al., 2002; Gaum, 2002; Botha & Naudé, 2010; Naudé, 2010, Plaatjies Van Huffel, 2013). It is, however, central to the argumentation in this article as this signalled an unexpected turn in the unfolding history of the newly formed URCSA. An unexpected turn which would eventually constitute the public-theological irony of the Belhar Confession.

In cursory and eclectic fashion this irony will be articulated by highlighting certain historical landmarks on the journey of the URCSA and Belhar. In this historical overview two trajectories become visible: Positive responses to the Belhar that resulted in public good and negative responses that resulted in polarisation, limiting the public good of Belhar. While these trajectories can critically be regarded as not comprehensive and disregarding a deeper level of hermeneutics, it serves to provide a framework for illustrating the perceived public theological irony.

The highlighted positive responses referred to above are conveyed below in chronological fashion:

- 1986 – The DRMC accepts Belhar as a fourth confession of faith.
- 1986 – The DRC accepts the document *Kerk en Samelewing* (Church and Society) in which membership of the DRC was declared open for all races, the Biblical justification of *apartheid* was rejected, mixed-marriages were no longer denied on biblical grounds and the importance of church unity was stressed.
- 1990 – The DRC declares that Belhar is not in conflict with the other confessions of the family of Reformed churches.¹¹
- 1990 – The late Prof. Willie Jonker recognises the sinful nature of and confesses guilt in supporting *apartheid* on behalf of himself and the DRC and begs the forgiveness of those who suffered as a result of it.
- 1994 – The DRMC and the DRCA (re)unite to form the URCSA. Belhar becomes part of the confessions of this united church.
- 1997 – Rev. Freek Swanepoel, then moderator of the DRC, witnesses before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, committing the DRC to reconciliation in South Africa.

11 Fifth point of the 1990 Synod of the DRC's reaction on the Belhar. The confessions of the Reformed Churches are the Belgic Confession / *Confessio Belgica*, Canons of Dordt and Heidelberg Catechism.

- 1998 – A survey conducted by the official paper of the DRC, the *Kerkbode*, shows that 40% of respondents who studied the Belhar felt “positive” about it.
- 1998 – The General Synod of the DRC again declares that the Belhar is not in conflict with the other confessions of the family of Reformed churches.
- 1998 – The General Synod of the DRC rejects *apartheid*. This, in part, aligns with the theological spirit of Belhar.
- 2001 – A “Convention for Unity” with representatives from circuits of URCSA and the DRC in the Cape region convenes in Wellington to discuss the issue of unity between URCSA and the DRC. In this model of unity Belhar would form part of the confessions of a unified church. This Cape Convention for Unity requests the regional synods of the Western, Southern and Eastern Cape to accept Belhar as part of the confessional heritage of the Reformed Church.
- 2004 – A second Cape Convention for Unity convenes in Brackenfell and reaffirms that the inclusion of Belhar in an envisioned united church is not negotiable.
- 2004 – The General Synod of the DRC proposes that Belhar is accepted as fourth confession in a united Reformed church. The Synod worked with the assumption that the content of the Belhar is widely accepted.
- 2006 – Leaders from URCSA and the DRC meet in Esselenpark and commit themselves to unification within the next three years, where the Belhar is no longer a prerequisite for unity, although it will still be accepted as a fourth confession in a unified church.
- 2006 – Leaders of URCSA, the DRC, DRCA and RCA meet in Bloemfontein as an extension of the Esselenpark meeting. The notion of re-unification comes to the fore. This was based on the decisions of the DRC in 1857. It was now argued that the Reformed church in South Africa had a longer history of unity than it had as a segregated church and that a positive approach of re-unification should rather be followed.
- 2006 – Near the end of this year another meeting of all four churches took place at Achterberg (near Krugersdorp in Gauteng). This

meeting was characterised by much optimism about re-unification and a positive declaration in this regard was accepted.

- 2011 – The General Synod of the DRC adopted a proposal that “the Synod, as a church meeting, adopts the Belhar and therefore requests the General Synod to make the Belhar part of the confessional base of the DRC...”¹²
- What public good resulted from the aforementioned positive responses? The most obvious should be the corrective the DRC made in terms of their stance on the so-called *apartheids*-theology. The rejection of “any doctrine which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutizing hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the Church or even leads to the constitution of separate Churches” (article 2) most certainly provided stimulus to the DRC’s revision of its theological support of *apartheid*. Consequently it also brought the DRC into a restorative, reconciliatory conversation with fellow South Africans, in so far as they confessed the role they played under *apartheid*. It also engaged the DRC in a constructive conversation about unity.

The negative responses on Belhar will not be conveyed in a strict chronological manner, as specific occasions where Belhar were opposed or rejected are not that easily distinguishable. Rather the main theme here is the fact that for the last thirty years there was no resounding positive reaction. Nor was there a clear acceptance of Belhar or a move to make it a part of the public life of the Reformed churches in Southern Africa. In this regard the late Russel Botman (2000) observed that it remains a mystery why the first Reformed confession conceived on African soil received so little, if any attention. Herein lies the biggest irony of all concerning Belhar. In fact, there were also reactions that ascribed to the notion that Belhar had a polarising effect on the church public.

The mere idea of abandoning the biblical justification of *apartheid* lead to much dissatisfaction among members of the DRC. Although not a direct reaction to Belhar, it was rather a reaction to *Kerk en Samelewing* that concurred with the notion of the *status confessiones* and the resulting

12 See Plaatjies Van Huffel 2013: 195.

Belhar Confession (Van der Merwe 2002: 425). A group of DRC members started with protest meetings during 1986, opposing the new direction which the DRC took.

On June 27, 1987, the so-called *Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk* (Afrikaans Protestant Church) was formed out of protest against the DRC's abandonment of *apartheid*. The exact number of this breakaway group seems difficult to determine. According to Van der Merwe (2002:428), approximately 8 000 members and 30 ministers joined this new church, while according to Gaum (2002), 20 000 members and 100 ministers left the DRC. According to Naudé (2010:138), this number of members may have been as much as 40 000!

Although the DRC declared in 1990 that Belhar is not in conflict with the other confessions of the family of Reformed churches, it simultaneously pointed out that are some formulations in the confession that are not beyond reproach, for example article 4 where it is stated: "...He (God) is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged..." This was to become one of the biggest points of contention in a critical analysis of Belhar and placed it under serious suspicion of supporting liberation theology. While this objection was later withdrawn (Celliers 2012:117), the perception remains for many to this day (cf. Danzfuss 2012 a: 42-52).

Arguably, one of the biggest votes of no-confidence in the Belhar and actions resulting from it, must have been the court cases between the newly founded URCSA (1994) and some of the previous congregations of the DRCA (Free State and Phororo Synods of the DRCA). As some congregations wanted to retain their previous name and confessional basis after the unification of 1994, these congregations were challenged by URCSA in court. When the DRCA lost this case in 1996, they appealed. This ended in an appeals-court case where it was found in 1998 that the decisions taken by the synod of 1991 were *ultra vires*. The DRCA could indeed just remain that, as they did in practice since talks on unification began in 1990. Of significance, too, must be the fact that these two regional synods of the DRCA already decided in 1996 that the Belhar should be removed from their confessional base, making them the first and only church in the world to have done this with the Belhar (Corrie 2012:96).

Another point of concern that needs to be raised here, is the lack of reaction from other Reformed churches in South Africa. It seems that the acceptance of the Belhar by the DRMC simply failed to get the attention of other members of this church family. In general the Reformed Church of South Africa regards Belhar as an “issue between the DRC and the URCSA” (cf. Du Plooy 2012). The Netherdutch Reformed Church, still battling with the fundamental issue of the theological legitimacy of *apartheid*, reminded the DRC that an acceptance of Belhar can negatively influence the agreements between themselves and the DRC as the unity between these two members of the Reformed family is a confessional one (cf. Van Wyk 2012). Although these churches took due note of the Belhar (and also respects the position the URCSA holds on the Belhar), no formal positive stance was taken by themselves.

A very similar approach is noticeable within the RCA, although a stronger negative stance is distinguishable. According to Moodley (2012), the RCA will conditionally accept Belhar after unification between URCSA, the DRCA, DRC and RCA has been established. This will, however, only be because URCSA already has Belhar as part of their confessional base. It should, however, not be imposed on members, but should retain its optional character. The RCA also does not recognise Belhar as being on par with the classical confessions of the Reformed family of churches. As the RCA, according to Moodley, already has the Laudium Declaration that deals with societal issues and in light of the recent formulation of the Accra Confession, no pressing urgency for the acceptance of Belhar by the RCA exists.

But what about the public that this article is concerned with – the very members of the Reformed churches in South Africa? From the very formulation of Belhar and its acceptance by the DRMC, extreme polarisation was visible. The political climate of change and the feelings of insecurity experienced by the white minority (that constituted the DRC) at the time was not at all conducive to the acceptance of a confession. Many, in fact, regarded it as the work of anti-*apartheid* activist and liberation theologian Alan Boesak. It would be fair to remark that Belhar was from the very beginning regarded with suspicion in a significant part of the DRC (despite the fact that surprisingly few DRC members are actually familiar with the exact contents of the Belhar). During 2012, a significant book on

Belhar, *Belhar Geweeg*,¹³ was published by antagonists of the Belhar which argued against its confessional status. The publication attempted to prove that Belhar cannot be imposed on the DRC by its synod structures.

The polarising effect of the Belhar is also regularly reflected in the official paper of the DRC (*Kerkbode*), where fierce opposing arguments have been characterising the debate on Belhar from the start.

The limited public good that resulted from this situation should be evident. In spite of the Belhar's public theological potential, in some circles, for thirty years, it has never been treated as more than a symbol of division. In this process the confession was not yet allowed to speak for itself. None of its articles on justice or unity were further explored on the home soil of congregations – resulting in a public theological irony of note.

9. Enhancing the (public) good of the Belhar in the Reformed Church family of South Africa – concluding remarks

This article argued that for the Belhar Confession to remain on the Reformed church agenda of South Africa, alternative readings of the confession should be offered. In this article a case was built to consider Belhar within a public theological framework. It was shown that much public-theological potential resides within the confession that can be applied toward promoting the common good within the current South African context. The irony that transpired over the last three decades – that Belhar polarized the Reformed church public, rather than to be recognized for its public theological potential – was highlighted. This was done in an effort to motivate the church public to re-evaluate Belhar within the framework of public theology.

In the light of the above, this article concludes with two recommendations. First it is recommended that the Reformed church public reconsider Belhar within alternative theological contexts as done in this research. A public-theological reading has shown that Belhar has potential of promoting common good by addressing some relevant issues in the volatile South African situation. As the DRC is being accused of never making a thorough

13 See *Belhar geweeg* edited by Theron (2012) from which different chapters were cited.

theological evaluation of Belhar at General Synod level (cf. Danzfuss 2012 b: 135), this is an opportune time to theologially engage this confession. Hopefully the same theological engagement can still happen on the congregational level of the Reformed church public as well. Given the latest regional synod decisions as well as the local congregational narratives (see Naude 2010: 146), this will be no easy task as there seems to be no collective will to do this. This fact is supported by the marginal participation in the recent voting process in the DRC in most regions. It should thus come as no surprise that Belhar has also never been considered in alternative theological contexts such as the one suggested earlier in this contribution.

Second, if the public good of Belhar indeed wants to be enhanced, it is recommended that the values and principles it offers need to be internalised and lived out among members of the Reformed church public. It is after all true that no confession or declaration in itself liberates. It is only the God to which our confessions witness, that does this (see Koopman 2011). Not surprisingly, Van Leeuwen (2006) notes that the most powerful form of public theology is in the hands of the people who live it. Surely only then will Belhar reach the goals of justice, unity and reconciliation, irrespective of its confessional status or its suspected theological shortfalls. Only then will the public good of this confession become more visible. However, this calls for a collective will to look anew at a confession that is in the process of being lost for the generation that conceived it.

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