

The (Non) acceptance of Belhar in the Dutch Reformed Church: Analysing Synodical Debates of 2011 and 2013

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Abstract

This article analyses the open session debates on the Belhar Confession at the 2011 and 2013 General Synod meetings of the Dutch Reformed Church. It identifies six key themes that repeatedly emerge from arguments made by delegates, namely: 1) accepting Belhar for the sake of the youth and future of the church; 2) Belhar as guide in the mission of the church; 3) Belhar as challenge to racism within the church; 4) Belhar and its relationship to liberation theologies; 5) the role of members in formal adoption of a new confession; and 6) adoption of confessions in ways which would not make them binding on all. From these themes three matters, which remain outstanding in terms of how the Dutch Reformed Church engages with the Belhar Confession, are raised: 1) the relationship between mission and racism; 2) the history of heresy and its implication for the present; and 3) the implication of and response to black and liberation theologies. These matters are identified as challenges given particular meaning in light of the emphasis on local congregations and members of the Dutch Reformed Church when discussing the Belhar Confession.

Keywords: Confession of Belhar; Dutch Reformed Church; General Synod

Introduction

The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (hereafter URCSA), the Dutch Reformed Church in Southern Africa (hereafter DRC), and the Belhar Confession (hereafter Belhar) are in each combination of these three entities intimately intertwined. The 25-year history of URCSA cannot be told without reflecting on the place of Belhar

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in this history, the reception of Belhar globally cannot be recounted without remembering the church that gave birth to this confession.¹ The longer history of URCSA cannot be told without remembering the mission history of the DRC, and the history of the DRC cannot be told without reference to its participation in a colonial and racial mission project, which gave rise to multiple churches across southern Africa, but in particular, in the end, to four churches along the racial lines of apartheid social organisation. The ongoing history of the DRC cannot be reflected upon without the mirror of URCSA reminding of an incomplete process of repair of a segregated Reformed tradition in South Africa—and most particularly, reminding of a white church that remains at a distance of this slow work of repair.² The history of Belhar is intimately intertwined with the apartheid theology of the DRC, emerging from the theological rejection of apartheid as sin and its theological justification as a heresy. However, the influence of Belhar on the DRC might require further reflection. How exactly is Belhar being received by and how does it inform the DRC? That Belhar continues to haunt the DRC seems to be quite visible in how multiple General Synods since 1986 have returned to it, and most probably will continue to return to it for many years to come.

The place of the DRC in the history of Belhar implies that the reception of Belhar in the DRC will always be a matter of particular concern, carrying a unique meaning. Yet how we read the reception of a confession can also mean different things. What should be our concern? Should it be the formal decisions of synodical meetings, or the lives of individual Christians? Must we contemplate the liturgical place of a particular confession, or its prominence in the life of ecclesial discernment?

The period from 2011 onwards occupies a prominent place in the reception of Belhar in the DRC. As outlined below, during this period the General Synod of the DRC initiated a process of formal inclusion of Belhar in the confessional basis of the church. This received overwhelming support from the General Synod, but in the process of broader approval by regional synods and congregations it was rejected. My concern is with this particular moment of support from the General Synod.

Within this I am, however, concerned with a very particular aspect of how Belhar was being interpreted within the DRC. My concern is not with the final decisions of the General Synod, but with the arguments that informed these decisions. I am concerned

1 I will not return to this point again, but in the argument below, I include an analysis of debates on church unification, not only debates specifically focused on Belhar. The reason for this is that when church unification is on the table, multiple delegates use this to speak about Belhar. In 2011, when church unification was on the agenda in the morning of the same day when Belhar was discussed in the afternoon, the moderator and assessor had to remind repeatedly that this matter was still coming. For many DRC delegates there was clearly also a fusion of question of church unification in general, the relationship with URCSA, and Belhar.

2 I do not wish to downplay the importance of various other churches in this incomplete unity, but the place of the white DRC and white theology in the construction of race and apartheid in South Africa continue to call for a particular focus on how the DRC is stepping into greater unity and working for repair of a disrupted community.

with the way in which the General Synod argued in favour of embarking on this process of accepting Belhar. What motivates this interest is the assumption that a single decision to adopt a confession can be motivated in multiple ways—it is these motivations that I seek to highlight below. I will argue that listening to the arguments being put forward in relation to Belhar, provides insight into understanding the DRC’s ongoing response to apartheid and its history of white racism.

The article proceeds by analysing recordings of the public synodical debates from the 2011 and 2013 General Synod meetings of the DRC, highlighting the main themes, which emerged in the debates which led to initiating this process of including Belhar in the confessional basis of the DRC.³ It should be noted that this is only a small, even if highly visible and final, aspect of debate and discernment. These debates are not only preceded by the work of task teams and committees in the years preceding General Synod meetings, but the General Synod meetings themselves provide space for smaller illuminating conversations preceding debates on contentious and important matters. Nonetheless, these final and formal debates do provide an important lens on how decisions are being motivated and interpreted, and it is this motivation and interpretation which is the concern below.

First I will provide a brief overview of the decisions taken in order to provide context for the analysis of the debates. Thereafter I highlight six main themes which emerged from these debates. The first is the emphasis on the relationship of the youth, the future of the church, and Belhar. The second concerns Belhar and mission, and the third Belhar and racism. I will interpret these two together to highlight different foci, but also to highlight a particular silence on the question of how to respond to the issue of a history of heresy. The fourth theme concerns Belhar and liberation theology, which will highlight a further angst in DRC theology. The fifth and sixth themes focus more on the arguments concerning the process of accepting Belhar, first on the process of congregational voting and the inevitable implication of the democratisation of the church, and secondly on the question of compromise where there is difference of opinion regarding Belhar as confession. The arguments in respect of process will assist in further illuminating the implications of the concerns noted in the arguments on Belhar itself. After providing an overview of these themes, I briefly discuss some implications by highlighting matters underlying these arguments, and focusing attention on what might be the challenges for the future beyond these arguments.

3 The recordings of the debates on Belhar were made available by the office of the General Secretary for research purposes, and written permission was granted to use these recordings for research to be presented at the URCSA 25 conference at the University of Free State in April 2019. In quotations no names are presented, and comments positioning a delegate (e.g. mentioning that the delegate was an elder and not an ordained minister, or what the broader position was that a delegate was taking) are only presented where this is of significance to understanding the particular quotation. The recordings for the sessions on Belhar at the 2015 General Synod are unfortunately not available, so these could not be included in the analysis.

The Dutch Reformed Church General Synod Decisions from 2011 and 2013

Formally the process can be captured with reference to the following decisions taken during the 2011 and 2013 synods.

First, building on a proposal of the regional *Sinode van Wes-Kaapland*, the 2011 synod decided:

... om die Belydenis van Belhar op kerkordelike wyse deel van die NG kerk se belydenisgrondslag te maak en dra dit aan die Moderamen op om die nodige kerkordelike prosesse hiervoor in werking te stel. (Dutch Reformed Church 2011, 105)⁴

[... to make the Confession of Belhar part of the confessional base of the Dutch Reformed Church in a church orderly manner and instructs the Moderamen to proceed with the appropriate church orderly processes in this regard.]

The result of this was a proposal to amend article 1 of the DRC Church Order, which in 2013 was approved as to include the following formulation:

Die Belydenis van Belhar is deel van die belydenisgrondslag van die kerk, op so 'n wyse dat daar ruimte is vir lidmate, ampsdraers en vergaderinge wat dit as in ooreenstemming met die Woord van God bely, sowel as vir lidmate, ampsdraers en vergaderinge wat dit nie as 'n belydenisskrif onderskryf nie. (Dutch Reformed Church 2013, 16).

[The Belhar Confession is part of the confessional basis of the church, in a way that allows members, office bearers and assemblies of the church to confess it as in agreement with the Word of God, as well as members, office bearers and assemblies of the church that do not subscribe to it as a confession.]

However, changes to article 1 of the Church Order are subject to approval by the broader church. Of particular significance for the argument below is that this process itself was changed in the years leading up to 2013. The two points of main concern were, first and foremost, the following change to the Church Order finally accepted in 2013:

Die wysiging van die Belydenis kan alleen geskied nadat elke sinode afsonderlik met 'n tweederdemeerderheid én twee derdes van alle kerkrade elk met 'n tweederdemeerderheid ten gunste daarvan besluit het. (Dutch Reformed Church 2013, 16)

4 The minutes indicate an overwhelming majority in favour. Informal estimates from photos taken during the vote would place this at more than 95 per cent in favour, and according to some as high as 98 per cent.

[The amendment of the Confession can only be done after each synod has separately approved with a two-thirds majority and two-thirds of all church councils each with a two-thirds majority approved the amendment.]

The second point, but from the earlier 2011 synod, is the following:

Vir die wyse waarop die besluit van Kerkrade oor die verandering van die belydenisgrondslag van die NG Kerk hanteer word ten einde die approbasie (instemming) van ten minste tweederde van belydende lidmate van gemeentes met die besluit te verkry, sien Kerkorde 2011 Reglement 6 par 6.

[For the way in which the decision of Church Councils on the change of the confessional basis of the DR Church is dealt with in order to obtain the approbation (consent) of at least two-thirds of professing members of congregations with the decision, see Church Order 2011 Rule 6 par 6] (Dutch Reformed Church 2013, 120)⁵

While the particular formulations will not be discussed in detail, their significance for the arguments analysed will become clear. In brief, the implication was that the 2011 call to add Belhar to the confessional basis of the church was given concrete expression in a proposal that this should happen in such a way that there is the possibility that not all members and meetings of the church would consider Belhar as a confession of faith.⁶ However, this was done against the background of a process being approved where such a change would require the consent of every single synod, two thirds of church councils, and importantly, where church councils would require approbation from the members of the congregation. These details were of particular concern to how Belhar was being discussed.

While the data from the actual voting could be interpreted in different ways,⁷ the result of this was that only three of the 10 regional synods had the required two-thirds majority in support of the 2013 General Synod proposal, and less than a third of church councils approved this with the required approbation from members (Dutch Reformed Church 2015a, 5–7). However, as far as the General Synod itself is concerned, the support for Belhar was overwhelmingly positive. My interest is now to try and indicate the main

5 The focus of this article is primarily on the synodical debates. See Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2017, 60–63) and Modise (2017, 146–148) for a critical discussion of the changes to the Church Order and the final decisions taken through this process.

6 What is important, however, is that this formulation continued to insist that Belhar is indeed scriptural and theologically sound; it did not allow for difference of opinion on whether Belhar is “in line with the Bible and Reformed tradition,” even though there were instances where such a rejection was sounded from the synod floor.

7 The report to the 2015 General Synod emphasised that more than 50 per cent of the total delegates of the 10 regional synods voted in favour of the proposed amendment of article 1, and that 440 congregations had more than 50 per cent of members in favour of the amendment. These matters were in the report considered as signs of a positive reception of Belhar in a large part of the church, although it did not allow for the formal change to the Church Order (Dutch Reformed Church 2015a, 7).

elements in what was used as motivation for the decisions that the General Synod, in particular, took concerning Belhar.

Six Arguments on Belhar

Belhar and Youth Voices

One of the most common arguments used in support of accepting Belhar concerns a combination of reminders about the support for Belhar among the youth of the church, and an emphasis on the importance of accepting Belhar for the future of the church. The words of one delegate clearly illustrate this dual emphasis on the future and next generations:

Leierskap, dink ek, is mense wat die vermoë het om visionêr verder te loop as sy of haar vrese, ten spyte van hulle vrese. En ons praat van twee, drie jaar, my kop wil werk na 2050 en sê wat los ek vir my nageslag ...

[Leadership, I think, is someone who has the ability to go visionary beyond his or her fears, despite their fears. And we are talking about two, three years, my head wants to work towards 2050 and say what do I leave for my descendants ...]⁸

A delegate describing herself as representing the youth, and as part of a contribution mostly focusing on the future of the church, tells the synod that:

... die interessante ding wanneer ons met ons jongmense kontak maak, en ons gee hierdie belydenis vir hulle in die hand ... is dit die belydenisskrif wat hulle harte raak ... ons jeug is opgewonde oor Belhar.

[... the interesting thing when we make contact with our young people, and we give this confession to them ... is that it is this confession that touches their hearts ... our youth is excited about Belhar.]

Another delegate referred to a conversation with his children, in which he asked them what they would want the General Synod to decide:

... aanvaar Belhar sonder voorwaardes en vertrou ons met die implikasies.

[... accept Belhar without conditions and trust us with the implications.]

As a last example, one delegate connects the voice of younger people with the voice of God:

8 The author transcribed quotations from synodical debates. All translations of transcribed quotations were also done by the author, as well as translations of decisions not yet previously translated for formal communication purposes.

*Hier het jongmense uit ons kerk gekom ... en hulle het uit hulle harte uit gepraat. Is dit nie 'n teken, 'n verdere teken, dat die Here met ons praat nie?*⁹

[There are young people here who came from our church ... and they spoke from their hearts. Is it not a sign, a further sign, that the Lord is talking to us?]

In part, these arguments seek to portray a future which is inevitable, and through this, attempt to convince delegates to vote for a decision in the present, which will be judged positively by future generations.

One thread which was quite unique to the 2011 General Synod, were references to social media as argument in favour of moving forward on the acceptance of the Confession of Belhar. During the introduction of the reports on church unification and Belhar, the speaker explicitly called on delegates to listen to voices from social media:

Dat ons sal soek vir konsensus, ook met inagneming van die stemme van buite af, ook die sosiale netwerke se stemme wat van buite af na ons toe kom.

[That we will look for consensus, also taking into account the voices from outside, also the social networks' voices coming to us from the outside.]

At one point during the meeting the moderator told delegates that it was a historic moment as the DRC was then trending on Twitter, and another delegate referred to social media calls for a sign from the DRC—the sign being the acceptance of Belhar.¹⁰

Belhar and Mission

The period under discussion overlaps with the period in which the DRC processes around a formal repositioning in terms of missional theology reached a culmination

9 A single delegate referred to the youth as not being interested in Belhar, reminding that “the youth” can be drawn upon as rhetoric device for different positions. “*Jongmense wat nie van ‘ekke’ praat nie maar van ‘ek.’ Wat sê dat hulle in Johannesburg en in Pretoria in die bediening staan, en ses en sewe jaar met jongmense werk, en dat die jongmense nie 'n droom het om Belhar nou as 'n belydenis te aanvaar nie, maar dat hulle droom oor 'n NG Kerk wat 'n verskil sal maak in hierdie land*” [“Young people who do not talk about ‘ekke’ but about ‘ek.’ Who say that they are in ministry in Johannesburg and in Pretoria, and have worked for six and seven years with young people, and that these young people do not have a dream to accept Belhar as a confession now, but that they dream about a DR Church that will make a difference in this country.” Not only the reference to Gauteng, but also the distinction between “ekke” and “ek” (this is the same word in Afrikaans word meaning “me,” but “ekke” would typically be considered to be used only in the western part of the country) play into regional differences in the church, reducing the youth who would be calling for the acceptance of Belhar to the Western Cape.

10 The actual influence of social media on voting patterns within the synod is probably impossible to determine, but the more recent critical attention to how social media can manipulate political processes would probably allow far less optimism about the interaction between social media and church meetings, specifically about the way delegates should allow themselves to be influenced by social media.

point.¹¹ As heard in communication from church leadership after the 2015 General Synod, the language of “missional transformation” came to be of primary importance (Dutch Reformed Church 2015b).¹² Tied to this is the important place of arguments motivating the acceptance of Belhar for the sake of the contemporary witness of the church. I commence with a slightly longer quote that elaborately situates this.

... ek het opgewonde geraak toe ek besef het dat hierdie kerk, die NG Kerk, absoluut ideaal geplaas is om in die nuwe Suid-Afrika, die profetiese stem in Suid-Afrika te wees ... na 1994 moes ons daai mense gewees het, die NG Kerk kollektief, want ons het die outomatiese afstand gehad van die regering. Dit het nie gebeur nie. Ons is profeties stil in die land ... En ek wil net hê u moet besef, as ons hierdie belydenis nie aanvaar nie, gaan ons verskriklik moeilik, enigsins, ons profetiese stem kry. As ek na ons staatkundige toekoms kyk soos ek dit sien, kan ek net dink daai stem gaan verskriklik nodig raak, en ek glo nie net ons mense nie, maar suider-Afrika, verwag dit van ons.

[... I got excited when I realised that this church, the Dutch Reformed Church, was absolutely ideally placed to be the prophetic voice in the new South Africa ... after 1994 we should have been those people, the DR Church collectively, because we had the automatic distance from the government. It did not happen. We are prophetically silent in the country ... And I just want you to realise, if we do not accept this confession, it will be very difficult, if at all possible, to find our prophetic voice. Looking at our political future as I see it, I can only think that voice will be very necessary, and I do not believe only our people, but also southern Africa, expect it from us.]

Within the arguments the relation between Belhar and the witness of the DRC can work in different ways. See for example these two quotes where one starts with knowledge regarding what this witness is about—which is what Belhar already articulates—and the other argues that indeed it is Belhar which would provide the resources for naming what this witness is about:

Sit Belhar eenkant en jy sien die Skrif is baie, baie duidelik oor wat van ons verwag word, en dit blyk dat mense sê hulle verstaan wat ons missionale roeping is, want ons roeping is ten opsigte van versoening en vrede.

[Put Belhar aside and you will see Scripture is very, very clear about what is expected of us, and it seems that people are saying they understand what our missional calling is, because our calling is for reconciliation and peace.]

11 In particular, an extensive revision of the Church Order to reflect what is seen as the DRC’s growing missional awareness occurred during this period. While this requires further critical study, the language of being a “missional church” is indeed one of the dominant discourses in the DRC during the period under discussion.

12 See Niemandt (2014) for an overview of this development on a policy level in the DRC General Synod, focusing on the developments into the 2011 General Synod.

Ons is 'n missionale kerk ... maar wat beteken dit? ... Vir die VGK en vir ander kerke is dit nie nodig om beleidstukke te neem om te sê hulle is missionale kerke nie want Belhar gee dit vir hulle, en kan dit vir ons ook gee.

[We are a missional church ... but what does that mean? ... For the URC and for other churches, it is not necessary to write policies to say they are missional churches because Belhar gives it to them, and can give it to us as well.]

In the final reply to the 2011 debate, this emphasis on the present, and on the task of the church in the present, is again heard:

Vriende, ek wil vra, daar is baie emosionele argumente oor 1986 en die NG Kerk, waarvoor ons vanmiddag staan; is nie die vraag of ons reageer op ander mense nie, die vraag is of ons hierdie dokument in die hand kan neem en hom kyk vir wat hy is, en sê, ons dink ons het dit nodig in 2011 ... dit is so, die wêreld hou ons dop, maar vriende dit is nie die diepste rede nie, die diepste rede is of ons regtig oortuig is dat eenheid, geregtigheid en versoening 'n ongelooflike belangrike saak in hierdie dag is, en dat hierdie dokument dit verwoord.

[Friends, I want to ask, there are many emotional arguments over 1986 and the Dutch Reformed Church, before which we are standing this afternoon; the question is not whether we respond to other people, the question is whether we can take this document in hand and look at it for what it is, and say, we think we need this in 2011 ... it is true, the world is watching us, but friends this is not the deepest reason, the deepest reason is whether we are really convinced that unity, justice and reconciliation are an incredibly important issue in this day, and that this document expresses it.]

While this argument can take on different forms, there is a clear trope linking Belhar with the witness of the Dutch Reformed Church.

Belhar and Racism

While not necessarily meant to be in opposition, or even exclusive of each other, the strong emphasis on the need for Belhar in the witness of the DRC is countered by another group of voices arguing for the need for Belhar in the transformation of white Afrikaner Christians and the DRC itself. The one focuses on the church looking out, the other on the white Afrikaner church looking in the mirror.

Within a longer argument on the role of Belhar in ideology criticism, one delegate states:

... ek het al baie keer gewonder of die geweldige reaksie teen Belhar nie tekenend is van die feit dat Belhar aan die ideologie van ons as Afrikaners krap, daar druk waar ons regtig weet ons het seer, daarom is daar so 'n geweldige reaksie daarteen.

[... I have often wondered if the tremendous reaction against Belhar is not indicative of the fact that Belhar is touching the ideology of us as Afrikaners, applying pressure where

we really know we are hurting, that is why there is such a tremendous response against it.]

A younger delegate draws together apartheid social formation, the context against which Belhar was written, and his ongoing personal transformation:

Ons het die Belydenis van Belhar nodig meer as wat ons dit beseef ... ek het so die helfte van my lewe in die ou Suid-Afrika geleef, en die tweede helfte van my lewe in die nuwe Suid-Afrika, en hierdie indoktrinasies van die skoolstelsel, van die gemeenskappe waarbinne ons geleef het, van die gesinne, van die kerk, is nog steeds hier binne, mens vergeet dit nie sommer oornag omdat jy nou verskoning gevra het nie. Ek het nodig, 'n belydenis, wat my kan help, wat sê as hierdie goed vorentoe kom in my gedagtes, van diskriminasie, en van ek dink ek's beter, en van ongeregtigheid, dan het ek nodig om te sê ek behoort aan 'n kerk, wat hierdie bely in die woorde van Belhar, wat gebore is in daardie spesifieke tyd.

[We need the Belhar Confession more than we realise it ... I lived about half my life in the old South Africa, and the second half of my life in the new South Africa, and the indoctrination of the school system, of the communities in which we lived, of the families, of the church, are still inside me; one does not forget it overnight because you have now apologised. I need a confession that can help me, that says if these things come to the fore in my mind, of discrimination, and of thinking I am better, and of injustice, then I need to say I belong to a church, which confesses this in the words of Belhar, that was born in that particular time.]

All these contributions highlight that Belhar provides language for facing the white Afrikaner DRC itself. But the very last voice in the 2011 debate brings together opposition to Belhar and ongoing racism,¹³ while also raising the question of the function of the acceptance of Belhar in the Dutch Reformed Church:

Ons het glo apartheid bely as 'n sonde. Is ek reg of verkeerd? Het ons? As 'n kerk? Maar het ons dit met ons hart gedoen? Ek vra maar net die vraag, want om nie Belhar te aanvaar nie voel net vir my, dan het jy dit nie bely nie, nie met jou hart nie. Daarom wonder ek maar net, wat sit agter die feit dat daar vir jarre [sic] heen en weer gekarring word ... ek vra jou, of rassisme nie agter hierdie ding is nie?

[We allegedly confessed apartheid as a sin. Am I right or wrong? Did we? As a church? But have we done this with our heart? I am just asking the question, because to not accept Belhar just feels to me, then you did not confess it, not with your heart. So I am just wondering what is behind the fact that for years we are going back and forth ... I ask you whether racism is not behind this thing?]

13 That the rejection of Belhar could be associated with racism is heard in counterarguments from those opposed to its inclusion in the confessional basis of the church as well. For example, one of the most strongly worded rejections of Belhar was introduced by a delegate stating that there are “coloured” children in their Sunday school and that his stance could therefore not be equated with a racist position.

This particular contribution to the debate raises a key question in the Dutch Reformed Church's arguments regarding Belhar. Historically, the DRC acknowledged apartheid first as a mistake, and later a sin. The history of the emergence of the Confession of Belhar is no secret. In fact, according to some analysts and church leaders it is the very fact that the accusation of heresy against the DRC is associated with the Confession of Belhar, which calls forth the emotional rejection of Belhar (De Beer and Van Niekerk 2009, 52, 60).

It is noteworthy that the public synodical debate on the Confession of Belhar at no point explicitly engages the question of heresy. We should be hesitant to read too much into these debates: the silence does not imply that the classification of apartheid as heresy would be objected to by the General Synod, but it could possibly highlight that a response to this history of heresy is not an argument that would have been considered as having a favourable impact on the vote—regardless of the vote that was hoped for.

One delegate, a woman elder,¹⁴ comes closest to making the connection between Belhar and the question of a history of heresy in the DRC:

Vir my gaan dit nie daaroor om te verstaan hoe kon ons verkeerd gegaan het nie, vir my gaan dit daaroor om te verstaan teologies waar het ons verkeerd gegaan ... hoekom ek vanoggend wil praat is om vir die VGK dankie te sê, hierdie dokument help vir ons.

[For me it is not about understanding how we could go wrong, for me it is about understanding where we went wrong theologically ... the reason I want to speak this morning is to say thank you to the URC, this document helps us.]

The answer to this question—on where things went wrong theologically—could take on multiple forms,¹⁵ but the point here is that the history of the emergence of Belhar should call for particular attention to specifically the *theological* problem of apartheid, and even more specifically how this relates to the theological history of the DRC.

The Dutch Reformed Church and Theologies of Liberation

Underlying the various arguments on why Belhar would be important, is an obvious assumption that Belhar is indeed theologically acceptable. As others have indicated, and

14 It is significant that the question of a fundamental theological problem in the church's history of racism is most explicitly named during these debates on Belhar by a non-ordained delegate.

15 Without exhausting the debate, the 1983 publication *Apartheid is a Heresy*, closely related to the Ottawa decisions, contains voices noting the pseudo-soteriological character of apartheid (Boesak 1983), an ecclesiological focus on the heresy, closely tied to the history of DRC mission (Bosch 1983), and an analysis of the anthropological heresy contained in white theology (Maimela 1983).

as any study of DRC responses to Belhar would indicate, this is seldom a matter of debate—at least for the General Synod.¹⁶

In the introduction to the 2011 discussion on church unification and the Confession of Belhar, the person introducing the report says:

Die NG Kerk het reeds die teologiese inhoud van Belhar aanvaar, en as u baie mooi kyk in die stukke van die moderamen, het die moderamen die Belydenis van Belhar as 'n rigsnoer vir hulle eie optrede aanvaar. Ek dink dit is 'n belangrike ding wat 'n mens miskien kan mis ...

[The DR Church has already accepted the theological content of Belhar, and if you look very carefully at the documents of the moderation, the moderation accepted the Belhar Confession as a guide for their own actions. I think it is an important thing one might miss ...]

As a refrain, countless participants would repeat that they accept Belhar; that they consider Belhar to be in line with the Bible (whether or not they would argue that it should be considered a confession of faith); or that they belong to groups who agree with the Confession of Belhar. There was, however, at this discussion a single trope that questioned the theology of the Confession of Belhar.

A small number of participants argued against Belhar on theological grounds. In each instance the argument would be that Belhar represents black and/or liberation theology. One participant clearly indicated that indeed the early critique of the DRC itself against Belhar was based on this very point:

... dis 'n dokument wat verwerp moet word omdat dit 'n onaanvaarbare horisontalistiese eksegeese bevat wat eie is aan die teologie van bevryding.

[... it is a document that must be rejected because it contains an unacceptable horizontalist exegesis that is typical of the theology of liberation.]

Two others would reiterate the theological problem of Belhar in terms of its association with liberation theology. However, in itself this is not of particular importance. These voices were a clear minority, and at least as far as the General Synod was concerned, clearly did not convince any significant number of people. Nevertheless, the responses to this criticism raise a far more complicated picture.

The debate on Belhar has embedded inside of it an interesting non-debate on the DRC's response to theologies of liberation. One influential participant in the debate, while

16 I have previously outlined the process which led to the first theological evaluation and approval of Belhar in the Dutch Reformed Church, in 1988, ratified in 1990.
<https://ngkerk.wordpress.com/2015/02/09/belhar-en-die-bybel-n-lyn-in-die-sand/>.

providing an overview on the theological contribution that the Confession of Belhar makes to the tradition of Reformed Confessions, states:

Ek dink daar is so vyf vereistes waaraan 'n belydenisskrif in ons tradisie behoort te voldoen. Dit behoort die kernwaarhede van die evangelie in fokus te bring. Ons het goed gekyk na die Belydenis van Belhar, ons dink dit doen dit baie goed. Om net te sê dis swart teologie, dis ... dis ... ons verskil net daarvan, in liefde, ons verskil daarvan.

[I think there are about five requirements that a confession should fulfil in our tradition. It should focus on the core truths of the gospel. We looked closely at the Belhar Confession, we think it does that very well. To say it is black theology, that is ... that is ... we just differ from it, in love, we differ from it.]

Stated more strongly in the final reply before voting, the delegate proposing the initiation of the formal inclusion of Belhar in the confessional basis of the church, argued the following:

Daar is een of twee sake wat my ongemaklik maak ... dat daar goed op die tafel kom wat doodeenvoudig 'n halwe waarheid of selfs 'n onwaarheid is ... die eerste is die opmerking daaroor dat Belhar bevrydingsteologie is. Vriende, net in kort: dié van u wat vir Dirkie Smit ken, wat eintlik instrumenteel was in die skryf van hierdie belydenisskrif, een van die mees gerespekteerde Gereformeerde sistematiese teoloë in ons land, in sy eie klas. Om te sê dat hy 'n bevrydingsteologie [sic] is, ek wil net vanmiddag sê dat ek kan nie vir 'n oomblik dink dat dit waar is nie, dat die dokument wat so op die tafel gekom het, dat dit daaraan voldoen nie.

[There are one or two things that make me uncomfortable... that there are things put on the table that are quite simply only partly true or even a falsehood... the first is the comment that Belhar is liberation theology. Friends, just briefly: those of you who know Dirkie Smit, who was actually instrumental in writing this confession, one of the most respected Reformed systematic theologians in our country, in his own class. To say that he is a liberation theology (sic) is, I just want to say this afternoon I cannot think for one moment that it is true, that the document that came on the table in this manner, that it conforms to that.]

On the one hand this presents itself as an argument about the theological influence of liberation theologies on the Confession of Belhar. It could be understood as a mere

difference on how to understand what informed Belhar,¹⁷ but this point is an ongoing concern throughout the DRC reception of Belhar: since its first reports, the DRC has expressed concern about the influence of liberation theology on Belhar.¹⁸ What these debates do is to embed inside it an idea that—whatever the position on Belhar might be—all sides retain a tacit agreement on the rejection of black theology and liberation theology. The consistent response to the accusation that Belhar is an expression of black and liberation theology within the General Synod debates, is that this criticism is based on a misreading of Belhar, never that the criticism itself should be interrogated: meaning, it never proposes that the assumption that such theologies of liberation are fundamentally flawed, even heretical, or at the very least outside of a Reformed tradition, should be interrogated.¹⁹

Obviously such arguments should be interpreted within the political dynamics of delegates seeking to convince a meeting to approve or reject a particular decision. However, what it does bring to the fore is an underlying unresolved theological matter. While Belhar emerges from ecumenical Reformed opposition to apartheid, and formally named the faith that the *status confessionis* called forth, the theological critique against apartheid found some of its most articulate and sharpest expressions in black and liberation theologies. What this dynamic emergence on the floor of synodical debates

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- 17 My point is not to make a case for a clear statement such as “Belhar is liberation theology.” Liberation theology is simply too broad a category to try and reduce these two streams to each other, and even the question of what exactly would be included in the category “liberation theology” is not immediately obvious. However, it should be noted that such a clear separation is not tenable either. For example, Kritzing (2010) argues in detail for how the 1979 Theological Declaration of the *Belydende Kring* informed Belhar. On the other hand, Smit (2012) recalls how proposals to change the formulation to a more explicit alignment with liberation theology were rejected by the 1982 synod. The question of the influence of liberation theology on Belhar is a complicated one, requiring clarity on how we see influence and how we define “liberation theology” and “black theology.” But to completely separate these concepts in the way those arguing for the acceptance of Belhar did during the 2011 synod, would clearly be an overstatement. The point here is, however, that the exchange on Belhar and liberation theology in DRC debates is not an attempt at clarity on the theological genealogy of Belhar, but rather a window into how the DRC responds to a broader tradition of theologies in protest of colonialism, apartheid, white racism, and global economic oppression.
- 18 Russel Botman provides an overview of this argument in the DRC, among other things indicating how the General Synodical Committee considered this very fact a stumbling block to members (Botman 2006, 242–244).
- 19 The one minor exception to this is a participant who attempts to dislodge the argument slightly by stating that “... *vir die broers wat so praat oor die bevrydingsteologie, ek ken geen ander teologie as 'n bevrydingsteologie nie. Want anders verstaan ek nie wat Jesus sê as hy sê die waarheid sal julle vrymaak nie.*” [“... for the brothers who are talking about liberation theology, I know no other theology than a liberation theology. For otherwise I do not understand what Jesus says if he says the truth will set you free.”]

reveals is in part how one theological critique against apartheid is taken up, but done under the tacit agreement that another is either rejected or ignored.²⁰

Confession and Church Democracy

At some point most churches vote. Who votes, how they vote, and what is open for voting at which time, differ widely—but churches vote. For the DRC to include Belhar in its confessional basis, will require a vote. My concern here is not with the legal or church polity arguments concerning the particular process of voting on confessions that the DRC agreed on. However, the 2011–2015 debates on Belhar, and possibly the post-2015 debates and decisions on same-sex unions, occurred amidst a change in DRC understanding of decision-making and discernment. The key function of arguments around the relationship between the General Synod and the members of the DRC in the debates on Belhar need to be noted if we attempt to understand the General Synod debates around Belhar.

Without here repeating all the arguments, multiple delegates publicly opposed to accepting Belhar as a confession argued that a General Synod decision on Belhar in 2011 would be premature, since there had not yet been sufficient consultation with members of the church. In response to this, those proposing a 2011 vote repeatedly reminded the meeting that the particular proposal on the table was in fact exactly that: initiating a process of seeking the consent of the membership of the church.

Towards the end of the debate, a delegate widely known for his strong opposition to incorporating Belhar as a confession, argued in favour of the proposal in front of the synod:

Ek het nooit gedink dit sou gebeur nie, maar ek pleit nou ten gunste van Wes Kaap se voorstel. Al wil ek Belhar nie as belydenisskrif aanvaar nie—dit is my persoonlike opinie—is ek oortuig daarvan dat ons nou moet voortgaan op 'n pad, en daardie pad beteken dat ons nou by ons gemeentes, by ons ringe, en by ons sinodes moet gaan hoor “waar staan julle?”

[I never thought this would happen, but I am now pleading for the Western Cape’s proposal. Although I do not want to accept Belhar as a confession—that is my personal opinion—I am convinced that we must now proceed on a road, and that road means that we now have to go to our congregations, to our presbyteries, and to our synods to hear “where do you stand?”]

20 Daniel Migliore notes that the ecumenical church has only begun to explore the implications of liberation theologies (Migliore 2014, 18). The point is, however, that the influence of what came to be known as liberation theologies during the 20th century can be seen in multiple examples in various ecumenical bodies, and a growing engagement in the Roman Catholic Church. This agreement between those arguing in favour and those arguing against Belhar in the DRC, highlights a question that cannot yet be engaged within church theological reflection.

Thus, at the time of voting, the synod seemed to have been clear that what was on the table was indeed the initiation of a process of voting within the church.²¹

Yet behind this there is also a legal matter. In the middle of debates and decisions on church unity and Belhar, the General Synod also had to approve a decision that congregations must by way of approbation affirm a church council's vote on a change in the confessional basis. One delegate, while acknowledging that there is no legal way around this, and admitting that the synod should indeed approve this proposal, formulated the problem as follows:

... dat ons nie meer werk, regtig, in die essensie, met 'n Christokrasie of Teokrasie nie. En die hartseer is: Dit gaan die kerk skeur. Dit gaan maak dat lidmate wat ons dalk nou net begin regkry het om mekaar in die geloof te aanvaar, al verskil ons en al stem ons vir verskillende politieke partye, dat ons net weer op 'n punt gaan kom waar ons teenoor mekaar gaan staan ...

[... that we no longer work, in reality, in essence, with a Christocracy or Theocracy. And the sadness is this: It will tear the church apart. It will mean that members who we may just have started to get them to accept each other in faith, even if we disagree and we vote for different political parties, that we will just come to a point where we are standing against each other in opposition ...]

What this does, and what the process that resulted in the rejection of the General Synod proposal highlights in particular, is that questions of confession in general, but of Belhar in particular, are brought to the table of congregants in local congregations. This could be evaluated in different ways, but it points to the place where the General Synod directed the ongoing conversation on Belhar to all synods and church councils, and to the communal discernment of the members of local congregations.

Compromise and Confession

While there are references to more difficult debates in smaller sessions, by the time Belhar was on the table of the public debate of the 2013 synod, there were repeated arguments on how the General Synod should find a way to make room for all. The effect was consensus on a formulation of a change to the Church Order, which will allow room for both those who accept Belhar as a confession of faith, and those who do not. For example:

... ons gedagtes het gegaan na hoe mense wat anders as ons dink oor Belhar 'n gawe vir ons is. En die feit dat die Here hier by hierdie sinode ruimte skep waar ons regtig met mekaar kan praat, en mekaar kan help om 'n pad te vind, sodat die tafel kan oop bly.

21 Nonetheless, immediately after the decision some delegates used twitter to communicate that Belhar was already accepted, and the Afrikaans daily newspaper Beeld ran with the headline "Reuse-ja vir Belhar" ["Huge yes for Belhar"].

[... our minds went to how people, who think differently than us about Belhar, are a gift for us. And the fact that God is creating space at this synod where we can really talk to each other, and help each other find a way so that the table can stay open.]

One prominent opponent to the inclusion of Belhar as confession emphasised that:

... ons leef in 'n tyd waarin ons mekaar moet vashou ... ons praat van 'n tegemoetkom van mekaar, 'n akkommodering van mekaar.

[... we live in a time when we have to hold each other ... we are talking about making room for each other, of accommodating each other.]

A small voice of protest did emerge from the floor, but by the time of the public debate this no longer resulted in any formal alternative proposal.

Ek wil net begin deur te sê ek het ontsettende diep begrip vir dat ons as mense verskil ... so ek dink dis verskriklik belangrik dat ons 'n manier kry hoe ons mekaar ... kan akkommodeer en omhels en ondersteun op hierdie pad. Maar die voorstel wat nou op die tafel is maak my bietjie benoud, en dit maak my benoud omdat ek die gevoel kry dat ons daardeur die boodskap stuur dat Belhar nie vir ons belangrik genoeg is nie ...

[I just want to start by saying that I have a deep understanding that as people we differ ... so I think it is very important that we find a way ... to accommodate and embrace and support each other on this path. But the suggestion that is currently on the table makes me a little distressed, and it distresses me because I feel we are sending the message that Belhar is not important enough to us ...]

Stated more strongly, one delegate put her finger on the dark side embedded in the strong discourses of unity:

... ons praat van mekaar vashou, en ons moet mekaar in hierdie besluit vashou, maar op die ou end hou ons mekaar vas en sluit ons mense uit wat ons nog altyd uitgesluit het. So hoe lank moet ons mekaar vashou voordat ons ons arms breër oopmaak?

[... we talk about embracing each other, and we have to hold on to each other in this decision, but in the end we hold on to each other and exclude people we have always excluded. So how long should we hold on to each other before opening our arms wider?]

While some argued that the final decision was not a compromise; not a proposal where everyone had to give up something in order to find the lowest common denominator, but rather reflected the consensus, the discourse from delegates often revealed that there is a divide within the DRC which is impossible to bridge, and that it will require commitment to keep this community together in spite of these differences.

Below and beyond Dutch Reformed Church Arguments in Favour of Belhar

The place of Belhar in the Reformed theological struggle against apartheid, both locally and globally, and the history of the DRC with apartheid, inevitably imply that a discussion on Belhar within the DRC must deal with its history of racism and apartheid, and its ongoing relationship with Afrikaner ethnic organisations and the formation of a particular form of whiteness in South Africa. Three important points, which highlight potential work required in the DRC, emerge from the analysis.

1. Reading the emphases on mission and racism together, it is noteworthy that the problematic question of the relation between these is not raised. While the current discourse on mission takes on new tones, the historic connection between race and colonial mission has been discussed repeatedly, and the particular prominent history of mission in the DRC is deeply intertwined with its history of racism (Saayman 2007, 7). The questions of mission and racism, both drawn on when arguing for the acceptance of Belhar, require a far more critical engagement for how these related historically, and how they relate in the DRC in the present (Van Wyngaard 2014).
2. In the midst of strong support for acceptance of the Confession of Belhar, argued both in terms of witness to the world and transformation of the self, the conversation on a history of being accused of heresy, and what that would imply, might be one aspect which remains difficult to reflect on in the DRC today. While the theology at the height of apartheid will never be defended, the question posed by the elder quoted above, “where did we go wrong *theologically?*” is not something opened up in arguing for the acceptance of Belhar. This is, however, exactly what focuses attention on the heart of the problem.
3. The inability to engage with a liberation theology trajectory within these synodical debates should be noted. At the 1982 General Synod a proposal was put forward that a formal study be made of a theology of liberation, but the proposal was rejected (Dutch Reformed Church 1982, 1382). This engagement remains outstanding, and its effect is seen in the easy consensus from voices on opposite sides of the synodical debate that Belhar should be clearly separated from black and liberation theology. Looking in the mirror of this critique is, however, inevitable if the DRC is to engage its history of apartheid in full.

If these points set a potential agenda for what needs to be engaged more explicitly in ongoing discussion on Belhar in the DRC, then the last two themes emerging from this analysis raise the important point of where this discussion should go. While the clear democratisation of the DRC and its implications for confession, church polity, and ministry will require ongoing reflection, the process opted for clearly highlighting where it is that Belhar should be grounded if it is to be grounded in the DRC: in the life of the local congregation. The more difficult challenge would then be not only how the

above points are engaged in the ongoing debates of the General Synod, but what it would mean to assist local congregations and congregants—many of whom strongly insist that they will not accept Belhar as a confession of faith—to engage these sensitive questions of how mission and racism intersect in the DRC, how to engage the history of racism, and how to hear the most critical voices against apartheid theology, white racism, and colonialism.

Conclusion

Church unification continues to be on the agenda of the DRC. That Belhar will, in some way, be part of a future united church was already approved by the DRC. The history of apartheid will continue to haunt the DRC for many decades to come—probably for as long as the DRC continues existing as the DRC, and then for quite some time thereafter.²² However, the critical examination of how mission and racism intersect, and potentially continue to intersect, the question of a history of heresy, and the theological critique of black and liberation theologies that the DRC may still need to face, could potentially be key places in which the DRC can deepen its engagement with its history of white racism, how it impacts on the present, and indeed what would need to be done so that the youth of today can live in a southern African context where the history and ongoing reality of race and racism is being dismantled. In the DRC, the Confession of Belhar potentially, or perhaps inevitably, continues to raise these questions.

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22 A recent interview with the current moderator, Rev. Nelis Janse van Rensburg, where he recounts the way in which the 2015–2019 leadership of the DRC is actively pursuing work of repair, and acknowledges the ongoing need for apologising for the history of apartheid, is evidence that this knowledge remains formally alive in the DRC (Kiewit 2019).

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