

**Celebrating communal authorship:  
the Theological Declaration of the Belydende Kring (1979)  
and the Belhar Confession.<sup>1</sup>  
In honour of Simon Maimela and in memory of Chris Loff**

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*Abstract*

A Reformed Confession of faith represents the voice of a church as community of faith, and yet individual authors play a role in its formation. This article demonstrates that the Theological Declaration of the Belydende Kring (1979) had a formative effect on the Belhar Confession, which was drafted in 1982. The article analyses the similarities and differences between the two documents and concludes that “communal authorship” is the most appropriate term to describe the process that led to the formulation of the Belhar Confession.

### **Introduction**

Does it matter who wrote a Confession? In the Protestant tradition, particularly the Reformed strand of Protestantism, the writing of Confessions in ever new situations has played a significant (and contested) role. The Belhar Confession is no exception. In the case of the Belhar Confession, some of the controversy around its acceptability, particularly in the Dutch Reformed Church, had to do with its origin and authorship, as will be pointed out later. This article explores some aspects of the origin of the Belhar Confession by highlighting the role of the Theological Declaration of the Belydende Kring (BK) in August 1979 as one of the significant documents that were used by the authors of the Belhar Confession in formulating the Confession. I contend that this BK declaration, which has not been studied or reflected on in relation to the origin of the Belhar Confession,<sup>2</sup> is a highly creative – but also neglected and undervalued – theological statement. It represents one of the key tributaries that flowed into the stream that became the Belhar Confession. By using this metaphor of tributaries and stream, it is implied that a concept of communal authorship is the only appropriate way to consider the genesis of a confession. It is also implied that the notions of authorship and ownership of a confession are closely related.

This article is written in honour of my mentor and colleague, Simon Maimela, who played an important formative role in my theological and personal development. As Unisa colleague I learnt a great deal from him, first of all in our daily tea-time discussions in the Unisa cafeteria during the 1980s, when we reflected as a group of theologians on the theological, political, economic and personal dimensions of apartheid – and how to overcome it. On a more personal note, he introduced me to the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) in the early 1980s and was instrumental in getting me appointed to the ICT steering committee, where I met and worked with struggle theologians like Smangaliso Mkhatshwa, Albert Nolan, Frank Chikane, Sister Bernard Ncube, and many others. Later, Simon Maimela became the joint promoter, with David Bosch, of my doctoral thesis on Black Theology (Kritzinger 1988), in which capacity he gave me valuable academic guidance. As a Lutheran Black Theologian, Simon Maimela showed me by his words and deeds what the confessional “stance” of Martin Luther – “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me!” – was all about.

This article is also dedicated to the memory of the late Dr CJA (Chris) Loff, who passed away earlier this year. As it will become clear in this article, he played a key role in formulating a Reformed

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge the insightful comments from colleagues who read a draft of this paper: Revv. RW Nel, S Rieke-Kochsieck and LJ Bookholane.

<sup>2</sup> Naudé (2003) gives a very helpful survey of eight “antecedent church witnesses” issued between 1948 and 1982 that show theological coherence with the Belhar Confession, but unfortunately he does not mention the Belydende Kring or its Theological Declaration. Van Rooi (2008) discusses the BK Theological Declaration as an expression of the BK’s stand on church-state relations under apartheid. He calls it “without a doubt the most important document published by the BK” (Van Rooi 2008:178), and also signals the connection between the Declaration and the Belhar Confession (<<Author: Could you please indicate the year of reference? >>:180). Henriksson (2010:122f) mentions the BK Declaration but does not analyse it. He calls it “an important predecessor” of Belhar, which “provides much of the theological base for the Belhar Confession”, but surprisingly he does not substantiate this claim. I concur with his judgment, and this article is my substantiation for such a claim.

theology in opposition to racism and injustice in South Africa, which contributed significantly to the approach and the actual wording of the Belhar Confession. May we follow in his footsteps?

### Questions on the authorship of the Belhar Confession

Does it matter who wrote a Confession<sup>3</sup>? Does it matter that Guido de Brés wrote the Belgic Confession (1561) or that Zacharius Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus authored the Heidelberg Catechism (1563)? An official Confession is formally approved in the Reformed tradition by a specific church, on the basis of a well-established procedure involving local (church council), regional (presbytery) and national (synod) bodies. Once a Confession has been formally approved by a Reformed church, that *church* “speaks” or “confesses” in that particular Confession, not the individual authors who formulated it or the committee that proposed it to the church. It is communal authorship and ownership that is operative here.

Questions are hardly ever asked about the original authorship of the classical Reformed Confessions (cf. Botha & Naudé 2010:191) and, when they are, the answers have little impact on the interpretation or implementation of that Confession. When the contextual nature of those Confessions as European documents of the 16<sup>th</sup> century is considered, then the larger political, economic, intellectual and religious trends of the time are brought into play, not in the first place the personal histories of the individual authors.

With the Belhar Confession it seems to be different. One of the most influential negative views on the validity and acceptability of the Belhar Confession as a Confession that has been circulating in the Dutch Reformed Church is the opinion that it was “the work of Allan Boesak”, which made it unacceptable to many – due to Boesak’s controversial public image in Afrikaner circles. One version of the view of the Belhar Confession as “Boesak’s document” is that it is “liberation theology”, which makes it a “political document” unworthy of acceptance as a Reformed Confession. This version links a negative view of the Belhar Confession directly with the role of Boesak in its origin.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, this view is not limited to South Africa or the Dutch Reformed Church. Two influential Reformed churches in the USA, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), are presently debating the acceptance of the Belhar Confession as a Confession, and in those debates the “Belhar and Boesak” argument also plays a role. In a blog dated 7 June 2009, Paul Janssen counters this criticism by writing:

First, it is true that Dr Boesak was present and was one of the drafters of the Belhar Confession, it was not his brainchild. The Belhar arose from its own rather complex history, and was not the creation of simply two or three people, nor was it even from one communion, but three. Please do not imply that Boesak was the sole writer, or even the most important writer, of the Belhar (<http://heraldblog.squarespace.com/paul-janssen/2009/6/8/boesak-and-belhar.html>).

There may be various reasons for this controversy surrounding the origin and authorship of the Belhar Confession in particular. In the first place, the Belhar Confession is a contemporary document and its socio-political-theological origins are still fresh in public memory. In line with the very purpose of a Confession, namely to draw a sharp line between truth and falsehood in a situation where the very existence of the gospel is at stake, it divides the spirits. A Confession is not primarily intended to create unity, but to clarify what the gospel is, testifying against any teachings and practices that threaten it. The classical Reformed Confessions were no less controversial in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe than the Belhar Confession in 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa, but the Protestant-Catholic “fault line” in European Christianity that they highlighted – and opened up further – softened to some extent during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially due to Vatican II and various ecumenical initiatives to overcome – or at least ameliorate – the Protestant-Catholic divide. In South Africa, however, the DRC family of churches<sup>5</sup> is still divided and the Belhar Confession is one of the issues raised by DRC members as an obstacle to unification. The “fault line” between those who formerly justified apartheid theologically and those who opposed it is still in evidence. Since the Belhar Confession is a bone of contention in this

<sup>3</sup> I write Confession with a capital letter to refer to a formal statement of faith in the Protestant tradition, as apposed to a confession of sin as used in private devotion or public liturgy.

<sup>4</sup> Numerous letters to *Die Kerkbode* and other Afrikaans newspapers make this connection. For a more detailed statement of this Boesak-Belhar case, see Conradie (2005).

<sup>5</sup> The “family” of Dutch Reformed Churches consists of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, the Reformed Church in Africa, and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. This multiplicity of churches arose out of the mission work of the Dutch Reformed Church and they were initially based on racial distinctions (for whites, blacks, coloureds and Indians respectively).

encounter, questions keep on being asked about its origins and authorship, mainly in order to discredit it.

Secondly, the Afrikaans language media in South Africa – print, radio and television – went out of their way during the 1970s and 1980s to demonise the church leaders who were in opposition to apartheid. In the process they created extremely negative images of people like (then) Bishop Desmond Tutu, Dr Allan Boesak, and Rev Beyers Naudé. The last two were especially targeted because they were part of the DRC “family” of churches and were therefore viewed by the dominant Afrikaner theologians and politicians at the time as “traitors” to the “Christian-National” cause. When the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in August 1982 declared a *status confessionis* on the situation in South Africa and adopted the resolution that apartheid was sin and its theological justification a heresy,<sup>6</sup> and then elected Dr Allan Boesak as WARC president, many of the beleaguered and conspiracy-minded Afrikaners saw all of this as a “Communist-inspired” international plot to destroy Afrikanerdom and “true Christianity” in South Africa. When the Belhar Confession was drafted a month later in October 1982 by the DRMC synod to give meaning to the *status confessionis*, with the WARC president Boesak as one of its authors, the conspiracy picture (in their minds) was complete.<sup>7</sup> In fairness it must be said that many DRC ministers and members who did not believe in such conspiracy theories, nevertheless felt that the disciplinary action of the WARC against the DRC in 1982, which was presented to the world and implemented by Dr Boesak as WARC president, caused public and international shame for the DRC. It is to some extent understandable that such feelings of shame and exclusion in their minds were associated with the name Boesak, but that is no justification for the unhistorical statements and conclusions that some DRC members have drawn from this about the Belhar Confession.

In the URCSA, and in responsible theological circles within the DRC, it was always known and respected that the Belhar Confession was drafted by a committee appointed by the DRMC synod in October 1982. They were Prof Gustav Bam (coordinator), Rev Sakkie Mentor, Dr Allan Boesak, Prof Jaap Durand, and Dr Dirk Smit (Botha & Naudé 2010:191). This article starts with the assumption that there were different tributaries that flowed into the stream of the Belhar Confession and that the final authors worked within a uniquely South African Reformed tradition that had evolved over time and had produced theological ideas and documents that formed the basis for the formulation of the Belhar Confession in 1982. This article demonstrates that the BK Declaration of 1979 was one such predecessor of the Belhar Confession, which played a significant role in the shaping of this Confession. It sketches the diversified and inclusive origins of the Belhar Confession by highlighting the role of the Belydende Kring Theological Declaration of 1979, without in any way diminishing the role of the members of the drafting committee in the final product. This is to enhance the acceptance of the Belhar Confession in the whole of the URCSA by pointing out that it is not a DRMC or “Cape” or even “Coloured” document, but the result of a complex process that included theological input from a wide variety of ministers and theologians across the divides of language, culture and race. As all the theological developments “behind” the text of the Belhar Confession cannot be analysed, focus is only on the BK Declaration of 1979.<sup>8</sup>

### The Theological Declaration (1979) of the Belydende Kring

#### *The Belydende Kring (Broederkring)<sup>9</sup>*

The “Broederkring van NG Kerke” was established in 1974 in Bloemfontein by about 60 ministers and evangelists from the NG Kerk in Afrika (NGKA) and the NG Sendingkerk (NGSK). The initial

<sup>6</sup> For the full 1982 Ottawa declaration of the WARC and other documents related to it, see De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio (1983:168-172).

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note, however, that the idea of drafting a new Confession did not come from Dr Boesak or the WARC. That proposal was first made, to everyone’s surprise, at the DRMC Synod in October 1982 by Prof Gustav Bam, who was teaching Practical Theology at the University of the Western Cape at the time. He convinced the synod that a *status confessionis* required the drafting of a new Confession (of Botha & Naudé 2010:49-52).

<sup>8</sup> Some of the other documents and movements that created a base for the Belhar Confession are the Barmen Declaration (1934), the statement of the Cottesloe Consultation (1960), The Message to the People of South Africa (1968), the Christian Institute and its publications (1961-1977), a number of key synodical resolutions of the DRCA and DRMC since 1975, the ABRECSA Charter (1981), and the WARC statement on Racism and South Africa (1982). Naudé (2003) also includes a number of other South African documents, thereby painting the broader picture of theological developments “behind” the text of the Belhar Confession.

<sup>9</sup> The BK was initially a male initiative, but it changed its name to Belydende Kring in 1983 to indicate that the women who had become part of the BK “women’s desk” were full members of the movement. The change of name also helped the BK to shed its “clerical” image since a “broederkring” is traditionally a ministers’ fraternal. It thus made room for non-ordained members of the DRC churches to become active BK members.

stimulus for its formation came from an incident at the Black Renaissance Convention.<sup>10</sup> During the Convention a proposal was made that ministers of any of the Dutch Reformed Churches be excluded from the proceedings, along with the homeland leaders. The exclusion of Mangosuthu Buthelezi was approved by the meeting, but the NGKA and NGSK ministers argued that other homeland leaders should be allowed to stay. This was accepted, but not without a struggle. In the light of this experience, the ministers present met together and reflected on the fact that they were seen by the Convention as representatives of apartheid, mentioned in the same breath as homeland leaders. They realised the urgent need for a vigorous witness against social injustice and for the unity of the Dutch Reformed Churches. Out of this informal discussion at the Black Renaissance Convention the idea of the Broederkring van NG Kerke (BK) was conceived, initially as a group of ministers and evangelists of the black Dutch Reformed churches. It was born a few months later in Bloemfontein, and formulated the following aims:

- to proclaim the Kingship of Jesus Christ over all areas in church and in state, and to witness for his Kingly rule
- to achieve organic church unity and to express it practically in all areas of life
- to take seriously the prophetic task of the church with regard to the oppressive structures and laws in our land and to take seriously the priestly task of the church with respect to the victims and fear-possessed oppressors who suffer as a result of the unchristian policy and practice in the land
- to let the kingly rule of Christ triumph over the ideology of apartheid or any other ideology, so that a more human way of life may be striven for
- to promote evangelical liberation from unrighteousness, dehumanisation and lovelessness in church and state, and to work for true reconciliation among all people
- to support ecumenical movements that promote the kingship of Christ on all levels of life.<sup>11</sup>

As it can be seen from these aims, the BK was a black initiative for unity, reconciliation and justice, flowing from a Reformed theology that emphasised the Lordship of Christ over every area of life and upheld a high Christology of Jesus Christ as prophet, priest and king. Its blackness was inclusive in two senses: a) white ministers who had become members of the black DRC churches (but not the “missionaries” who remained members of the DRC and were merely “on loan” to a “daughter church”) and identified with these aims were welcome to become BK members;<sup>12</sup> b) the “evangelical liberation” that it propagated included priestly concern for “fear-possessed oppressors” as much as for “victims” of the “unchristian policy and practice in the land”, and therefore envisaged “true reconciliation among all people”. The wording of the Belhar Confession differs from these aims in a number of respects, but it would not be unfair to say that the central theological emphasis of the Belhar Confession, namely on unity, reconciliation and justice under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, is already clearly articulated in this BK vision from 1974.

The BK operated an office in Braamfontein, Johannesburg from where it organised its activities and published a quarterly magazine, *Dunamis*. It received funding from European partner churches and organisations, and was instrumental in encouraging and selecting ministers from the black DRC churches to do postgraduate theological studies in the Netherlands, mainly at the Theologische Hogeschool Kampen and the Free University of Amsterdam. The BK was controversial in the black DRC churches, since it was accused of being a “church within the church” that cultivated an alternative leadership structure alongside the elected church leaders.<sup>13</sup> The BK regarded the elected leaders of the black churches in the 1970s and 1980s as too accommodating and compromising towards the Dutch Reformed Church and the apartheid state, advocating a prophetic-priestly-kingly praxis that challenged the unjust status quo.

<sup>10</sup> The Black Renaissance Convention was held during December 1974 in Hammanskraal. For further detail of the origin of the BK, see Kritzinger (1988:69).

<sup>11</sup> I quote these aims from (Belydende Kring 1988:16), but they were formulated in 1974 at the inaugural meeting of the BK, originally in Afrikaans.

<sup>12</sup> The role of Revv. Beyers Naudé and Frikkie Conradie were important in this regard (see Govender 1984:4). The number of white members was always small, but the BK succeeded in anticipating the community of a new South Africa, where “African”, “Coloured”, “Indian” and “White” Reformed ministers became colleagues and committed friends around a vision of unity, reconciliation and justice.

<sup>13</sup> The controversy surrounding the BK was particularly intense in 1980, as can be seen from two issues of *Dunamis* (3:3 & 3:4/4:1), spanning the first three quarters of 1980. The criticism of the BK in editorials of *Die Ligdraer* and *Die Kerkbode* are reproduced, together with detailed refutations of those criticisms.

### *The BK Theological Declaration (1979)*

- The 1979 Annual BK conference

The BK held regular regional conferences and an annual “national conference” that moved from one region to the other. In 1979 the 4<sup>th</sup> national conference was held at St Peter’s Seminary in Hammanskraal. Rev CJA (Chris) Loff was invited to address the conference and his paper was entitled, “Predikant en teologie” (Loff 1979a).<sup>14</sup> His paper had three sections: a) The purpose of an effective ministers’ fraternal (“broederkring”) is to do reality-directed (“werklikheidgerigte”) theology; b) A sustained conversation with the fathers can prevent us from falling into group-centred speculation; c) The drafting of a theological declaration may prove helpful with a view to the immediate future.

In the first two sections of this interesting paper, Loff challenged the ministers present to develop the BK into an effective ministers’ fraternal by living in service of the Reign of God and seeking justice through doing good theology in their context. He referred to the members of the *Pfarrernotbund* (Ministers’ emergency federation) in Nazi Germany, who resisted Hitler’s racist ideology, produced relevant theology (like the Barmen Declaration) and shared their meagre resources to help those who suffered more than themselves.<sup>15</sup> He stressed the importance of ongoing reading of theological sources – the Bible and theological classics – in order to be able to see through the weak arguments of people who practiced “group-centred speculation” by defending or justifying injustice. At the same time he warned oppressed Christians and theologians not to fall into the same trap by using the Bible in the service of narrow group-centred interests.

However, it is the third section that I really want to emphasise because that is where he made the proposal that the BK should formulate a theological declaration for its context. He starts the section by talking about the act of confessing the Lordship of Christ in the early church and the need for the church in changing circumstances to keep on confessing its faith. Referring to the Barmen declaration once more, he points out “the enormous way in which that declaration gave direction in the times of increasing persecution and suffering” (own translation, Loff 1979a:21). He then continued:

In our situation it has perhaps become necessary for us as ministers’ fraternal to risk our hand at something like this. We are aware of the serious attempts to discredit our organisation. Deliberate impressions are created to make people believe that this is a movement with very dangerous aims, inspired by motives foreign to the Bible. We cannot pretend as if we do not bother about this smear campaign. The confusion and unclarity exists, and is even growing. It is in the interest of all of us not only to have our basic principles (aims), but also a theological declaration through which we may be able to answer in a compact way both our sincere and malicious questioners. Such a declaration need not be long or detailed. It also need not be a repetition, in another idiom, of the existing Confessions. In my opinion, it must contain certain specific elements; it should say something about God, his Word and his church ... Without being arrogant and without thinking that our little group can achieve too much, I am convinced that we should be able to say to ourselves and to our opponents what we believe (own translation, Loff 1979a:21).

After some discussion in the conference, the meeting agreed that a theological declaration could be drafted and a small committee was mandated to produce it overnight. Loff (2006) recalls how his initial proposal for the drafting of a BK Declaration was not greeted with much enthusiasm by the conference, but that the idea was reluctantly approved by the plenary. It was only months later, when it became known that Dr Lukas Vischer was compiling a book of contemporary Reformed confessions (later published as Vischer in 1982) and that the Declaration would be included in it, that BK members at large started becoming more excited about it.

- The Theological Declaration

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<sup>14</sup> Dr CJA Loff obtained his doctorate in Church History at the Theologische Universiteit Kampen in 1998. His thesis dealt with the history of the NGSK from 1881 to 1994 (Loff 1998).

<sup>15</sup> In my telephonic interview with Loff (2006), he said that he wanted to focus on what the German pastors in the *Pfarrernotbund* did for one another in a situation of great danger and deprivation, indirectly to critique the way that money was used in the BK, due to the availability of overseas funds.

Loff (2006) could not recall the names of all the members of the drafting committee, but he did remember that there were ministers from all three of the black DRC churches, DRCA, DRMC and RCA.<sup>16</sup> It seems that he was the only senior colleague in the committee, confirming that the meeting was not very excited about the idea. The draft declaration was presented to the plenary the following day (5 September 1979, see Vischer 1982:21) and adopted after some debate. The wording of the declaration is as follows:

- 1 We believe in the God and Father of Jesus Christ who upholds the whole universe by his Word and Spirit. He struggles for his own righteousness *which becomes visible in the obedience of people in their actions towards God and their neighbours. However, people have fallen into disobedience, which means the rejection of God's righteousness* with regard to God and fellow man. In this respect God chooses constantly for his own righteousness and consequently stands on the side of those who are victims of injustice.
- 2 We believe that God reveals Himself in his Word as the One who throughout history in his relationship to men binds Himself to his own justice in order to make the world a place to live in. His life-giving Word became man in Christ Jesus, through whom He breaks the power of injustice. By His Spirit He gives people the possibility to again live in obedience to his Word.
- 3 We believe that God gathers for Himself in this world a new people who consist of men and women whom He has liberated from oppressive powers through Jesus Christ. These people of God have the responsibility to live as one undivided body of Christ. As God's property the church must be busy standing where God stands, viz. against injustice and with those who are denied justice. To fulfil this task it is necessary that the church should constantly search after the truth of God's Word. This is true especially because we owe greater obedience to Christ than to human governments, power or ideologies.
- 4 In our SA situation, this means that we as part of the church of Christ in this world should unflinchingly persevere for establishing God's justice. The church may, in faithful allegiance to its Head, Jesus Christ, come into conflict with human authorities. If the church has to suffer in the process we know that this is part of the way of God's people through history and that the word of Christ remains in force, "I will never leave you or forsake you (Heb 13:5) (BK 1979:3)." <sup>17</sup>

- A text critical issue

Before commenting on the content of the Declaration, it is necessary to settle a text critical issue. The Declaration is printed side by side in Afrikaans and English in the *Dunamis* issue (BK 1979:3), and it is evident that the Afrikaans text was the original one, since its language is more fluent than the English text. Further evidence of Afrikaans priority is an omission of 29 words in the Afrikaans text from the English version of subsection 1. I have translated these into English and placed them in italics. The sentence in the English version reads "He struggles for his own righteousness with regard to God and fellow man", which does not make logical sense. Unfortunately Vischer (1982) also printed the English text in that way, without realising that there was a textual omission. The following diagram clarifies the nature and extent of the omission:

Afrikaans version (BK 1979:3)	English version (BK 1979:3)
Ons glo in die God en Vader van Jesus Christus wat deur sy Woord en Gees sy hele skepping onderhou. Hy ywer vir sy eie <b>geregtigheid</b>  wat uitkom in die gehoorsaamheid van mense in hulle handelinge teenoor God en hul medemense. Die mens het egter verval tot ongehoorsaamheid wat beteken	We believe in the God and Father of Jesus Christ who upholds the whole universe by his Word and Spirit. He struggles for his own <b>righteousness</b>  <i>which becomes visible in the obedience of people in their actions towards God and their neighbours. However, humanity has fallen into disobedience,</i>

<sup>16</sup> In my interview with Chris Loff (2006), he mentioned the names of Alex Bhiman, Frikkie Conradie and Shun Govender, but indicated that there could have been one or two other colleagues present as well.

<sup>17</sup> This Declaration was also printed in Vischer (1982:22), but I quote it from the original publication in *Dunamis* (BK 1979), without editing the language (capital letters, punctuation, etc.).

<b>die verwerping van Gods geregtigheid</b>  t.o.v. God en die medemens. In hierdie verband kies God steeds vir sy geregtigheid en staan gevvolglik aan die kant van mense wat die slagoffers van ongerechtigheid is.	<i>which means the rejection of God's righteousness</i>  with regard to God and fellow man. In this respect God chooses constantly for his own righteousness and consequently stands on the side of those who are victims of injustice.
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The eye of the translator slipped from the first occurrence of “geregtigheid” to the second, thus leaving out the major parts of two sentences. In text critical terminology, this is a case of *parablepsis* (“looking by the side”) due to *homoeoteleuton* (“similar ending”)<sup>18</sup> (cf Würthwein 1957:73; Metzger 1968:189).

- The significance of the omission

The question is: Does this omission change the theology of the Declaration in any significant way? In the full version the close correlation between divine and human initiative is emphasised. *God* “struggles for *his* own righteousness” but this becomes visible in what *people* do by living in obedience in their actions towards God and other people. Throughout the Declaration this delicate correlation between what God does and what believers do is upheld. This correlation is often described in theology as the inseparable link between the “indicative” and the “imperative” of grace. Some statement of the Declaration could be characterised in such terms,<sup>19</sup> but the full text of article 1 (without the omission) indicates a closer synergy between divine and human action than can be expressed in indicative-imperative language: *God’s exertion*<sup>20</sup> of Godself for God’s own righteousness is found in the obedient action of God’s *people* – towards God and others. Conversely, as the next omitted sentence states, the “fall” into sin is interpreted as a rejection of God’s righteousness in relation to God and neighbours. Sin is therefore not seen as an individual act of rebellion against a holy God, but as a refusal to participate in Gods’ work of “making the world a place to live in” (Article 2) or “struggling for his own righteousness” by “standing on the side of those who are victims of injustice” (Article 1). To add the two omitted sentences to the Declaration not only makes grammatical sense but also reveals something of the inner dynamics of this Reformed theology of social justice. The omitted sentences make it clear that what the BK stood for was not human (or even Christian) activism, but obedient and faithful participation in God’s work of establishing righteousness-justice<sup>21</sup> on earth. It is a real pity that these sentences dropped out of the official English translation.<sup>22</sup>

- The significance of the Afrikaans original

The fact that the Afrikaans text was the original one raises other interesting issues. In the first place it was not strange for a group of DRMC and DRCA ministers to hold theological discussions or to formulate documents in Afrikaans. Afrikaans was the dominant language of church meetings in both these churches until deep into the 1980s, when it gradually started to be replaced by English. The importance of Afrikaans was due mainly to the fact that it was the language of instruction at the DRMC Theological School in Wellington as well as the Stofberg Gedenkskool (1908-1959) and its ethnically divided successors<sup>23</sup> (1960-1993), where DRCA ministers and evangelists were trained.

<sup>18</sup> These two terms are jointly employed in textual criticism to describe the error of a copyist in the transmission of a biblical text: ‘When two lines in the exemplar from which the scribe was making a copy happened to end with the same word or words, ... his eye might wander from the first to the second, accidentally omitting the whole passage lying between them’ (Metzger 1968:189). The same error can be made by a translator, as is evident here.

<sup>19</sup> For example, in Article 2 it is said: a) God breaks the power of injustice, and b) God gives people the possibility to live in obedience to his Word. Likewise, in Article 3: a) God gathers a new people for himself, and b) people have the responsibility to live as the one undivided body of Christ. In Article 4: a) Christ has promised never to leave or forsake us, and b) we must persevere in faithful allegiance.

<sup>20</sup> The Afrikaans expression “Hy ywer vir sy eie geregtigheid” is difficult to translate. The rendering “He struggles for his own righteousness” is not a bad translation, but perhaps something like “God exerts himself zealously for his own righteousness” would convey the sense of the Afrikaans a bit better.

<sup>21</sup> It is a question whether the committee did well to translate “geregtigheid” mainly with righteousness instead of justice.

<sup>22</sup> The Afrikaans original is not easy to access. I could find it only in two issues of *Dunamis* (BK 1979; BK 1981); I reproduce the full Afrikaans version as an appendix to this article, to make it more easily accessible for further study.

<sup>23</sup> These were part of the grand design of apartheid and therefore placed in ethnic “homelands”: Dingaanstat (Kwazulu), Decoligny (Transkei), Witsieshoek (QwaQwa), and Turfloop (Lebowa). For some further detail on the history of the Stofberg Gedenkskool and its successors, see Kritzinger (2008).

The other implication of the Afrikaans original is that it was probably Chris Loff who formulated the draft of the Declaration and submitted it to the committee for consideration. As indicated above, he was apparently the only senior member of the committee. My assumption that Loff was the primary author is confirmed by two further factors: a) In the next issue of *Dunamis*, Loff was asked to provide an explanation of the Declaration. It is therefore clear that the Declaration was seen as his brainchild. He called that article “Kantaantekeninge by ons ‘Teologiese Verklaring’” (Loff 1979b:13-14) and limited himself to some reflections on the need for the church to confess its faith in situations of new challenges and threats to the gospel. This paper did not add much to what he had presented in his paper “Predikant en teologie” at the Hammanskraal conference itself (Loff 1979a), but it pointed out that a Confession has both a pastoral and an apologetic function. One could regard his argumentation as an excellent justification for the drafting of the Belhar Confession three years later:

Situations may arise where people or a church feel that the existing Confessions are inadequate. The demands of the time require a special emphasis on certain aspects of the faith. A new formulation of faith need not replace the existing ones. It also does not mean that the whole field needs to be covered (own translation, Loff 1979b:14).

With reference to the Barmen Declaration (1934), he then continued:

The old confession that Jesus is Lord needed to be formulated anew. It became necessary to say to the church and the government what it means to be a Christian. The lordship of the triune God should be pre-eminent (own translation, Loff 1979b:14).

Unfortunately Loff did not provide any reflection on the content of the Declaration, as he had indicated in his introduction: “Secondly, I want to try and give closer attention to the four articles of our Declaration” (own translation, Loff 1979b:13).

If my conclusion is correct that Chris Loff was the primary author of the BK Declaration, then it was not the first time that something like that happened. Often when a committee is given the task of formulating a statement, one person writes a draft to speed up the process. This is also what happened with the drafting of the Barmen Declaration. Ten days before the synod of the Confessing Church at Barmen, Karl Barth and the two Lutheran colleagues who had been appointed to draft the declaration met in Frankfurt. While his two Lutheran colleagues went for an afternoon nap, Barth sat down and wrote the whole declaration in one sitting.<sup>24</sup> The text was later discussed and approved by the drafting committee, and ten days later by the synod (Busch 2004:12).

### **The BK declaration in relation to the Belhar Confession**

It is not possible to analyse the BK Declaration in depth. That could be the theme of another article. In this article, the main purpose is to show the influence that the BK Declaration had on the Belhar Confession. In some formulations one can show word-for-word identity between parts of the Declaration and the Confession; in other cases there are more general similarities, which one could describe as “echoes” or “influences”. In the latter cases it is possible, purely in terms of historical reasoning, that both the Declaration and the Confession could have been (independent of each other) influenced by the same sources. However, the few cases of verbal identity prove that the drafters of the Belhar Confession actually quoted from the BK Declaration, which makes it likely that the other “echoes” of the BK Declaration in the Belhar Confession are cases of actual influence.

*To stand where God stands ...*

The first, and clearest, influence is in article 4 of the Belhar Confession:

BK Theological Declaration (1979) Section 3	Belhar Confession (1986) <sup>25</sup> Article 4
As eiendom van God moet die kerk	Ons glo: dat die kerk as eiendom van God moet

<sup>24</sup> Busch (2004:12) points out that Barth based the six theses of the Barmen declaration on a document that he had drawn up earlier for the local confessing community in Bonn. So he too did not start with an empty page.

<sup>25</sup> The English version of Belhar that I use here is the new translation that was accepted by the URCSA General Synod in 2008 (URCSA 2008:522-524). The previous English translation is even closer to the BK Declaration. It reads: “We believe ...that the church *as the possession of God* must stand where he stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged.”

<p>besig wees om te staan waar God staan, nl. téén die ongeregtigheid en by die verontrechte mense.</p> <p>As God's property the church must be busy standing where God stands, viz. against injustice and with those who are denied justice.</p>	<p>staan waar Hy staan, naamlik teen die ongeregtigheid en by die veronregtes;</p> <p>We believe: that the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged;</p>
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The expression “to stand where God stands” – in the sense of opposing injustice and identifying with those treated unjustly – is a surprising and uncommon way of speaking. For that reason it seems clear to me that the drafting committee composing the Belhar Confession had the text of the BK Declaration in front of them and used sections from it. This is the only way to explain the verbal agreement between the two texts, which goes beyond mere allusions or “echoes”.<sup>26</sup>

There was a tense (and interesting) moment at the 1979 BK conference in Hammanskraal when Chris Loff, as coordinator of the drafting team, presented the draft Declaration to the plenary for approval. Dr Allan Boesak, who was the chairperson of the BK at the time, questioned the phrase “to stand where God stands”, since it was to his mind not dynamic enough. He suggested something like “to move where God moves”. However, Chris Loff insisted that the declaration should read as proposed by the committee – and the meeting agreed with him.<sup>27</sup>

#### *The willingness to suffer*

Another discernible influence of the BK Declaration on the Belhar Confession is in article 5:

<b>BK Theological Declaration (1979) Sections 3 and 4</b>	<b>Belhar Confession (1986) Article 5</b>
<p>3. This is true especially because we owe greater obedience to Christ than to human governments, power or ideologies.</p> <p>4. In our SA situation this means that we as part of the church of Christ in this world should unflinchingly persevere for establishing God's justice. The church may, in faithful allegiance to its Head, Jesus Christ, come into conflict with human authorities. If the church has to suffer in the process we know that this is part of the way of God's people through history and that the word of Christ remains in force, “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Heb 13:5) (BK 1979:3).</p>	<p>We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the Church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.</p> <p>Jesus is Lord.</p> <p>To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever.</p>

This parallel influence is not verbatim, but the decision to conclude the Belhar Confession with a reference to the cost that may be required of those who obey God rather than human authorities may very well have been influenced by the example of the BK Declaration.

#### *Divine initiative*

The third discernible influence of the BK Declaration on the Belhar Confession is in articles 1 and 2:

<sup>26</sup> I agree with Naudé (2003:157): “Like a responsible hermeneutics of the Bible requires some understanding of the world ‘behind the text’ as well as the possible layers in the text and its formation, it would be wise to investigate some of the important texts historically ‘underlying’ the Belhar confession”. In the case of this expression I believe we should go further than pointing out a “theological coherence” between the two documents (as Naudé does) and admit the actual use of this document by the drafters of the Belhar Confession.

<sup>27</sup> This information is based on personal recollection, since I attended the 1979 BK conference in Hammanskraal.

BK Theological Declaration (1979) Sections 1 and 3	Belhar Confession (1986) Articles 1 and 2
<p>1. We believe in the God and Father of Jesus Christ who upholds the whole universe by his Word and Spirit.</p> <p>3. We believe that God gathers for Himself in this world a new people who consist of men and women whom He has liberated from oppressive powers through Jesus Christ. This people of God has the responsibility to live as the one undivided body of Christ.</p>	<p>1. We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who through Word and Spirit gathers, protects and cares for the church from the beginning of the world and will do to the end.</p> <p>2. We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.</p>

Here too, a one-to-one correspondence cannot be demonstrated, but perhaps only a general tendency. What the two statements have in common is the strong emphasis on God's gracious initiative in history to gather the church as a new community that is not controlled or determined by human barriers and divisions. The common use of the phrase "by (his) Word and Spirit" may not point to direct influence since this is a very common way of speaking in Reformed theology. What is interesting is that the BK Declaration paints on a larger canvas by referring to God's upholding of the whole universe, while the Belhar Confession concentrates on God's action in relation to the church.

#### *God revealed as willing justice on earth*

The fourth echo of the BK Declaration can be found in article 4 of Belhar:

BK Theological Declaration (1979) Section 2	Belhar Confession (1986) Article 4
We believe that God reveals Himself in his Word as the One who throughout history in his relationship to men binds Himself to his own justice in order to make the world a place to live in.	We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth;

An echo of the BK Declaration can be viewed in two ways in the Belhar Confession. It is viewed as follows: a) the confession that God has *revealed* Godself as a God of justice; b) the emphasis that God's will has to do with human life and human community *on earth*. The first emphasis is to anticipate the common accusation from the side of some church members, and from apartheid politicians at the time, that the origin of this view is in political ideology rather than in Christian faith, and therefore represents an illegitimate "politicisation" of Christianity. To counter this accusation, both documents state clearly that it is the Bible that has brought them to this conclusion.<sup>28</sup> After this statement, the Belhar Confession proceeds to list a number of biblical passages to "celebrate" this God of justice, in a cumulative sequence that Smit (2008 [1984]:280) aptly characterises as "almost doxological".

The second echo emphasis is on the *earthliness* of God's work. To counter the common "verticalisation" of Christianity as "the way to heaven", God is confessed as the One who wants *this world* to be "a place to live in", since God's will is "justice and true peace on earth". The Afrikaans original of the Belhar Confession speaks of God as "die Een wat geregtigheid en ware vrede onder mense wil bring", which is perhaps softened a bit in the English translation: "who *wishes* to bring about justice and true peace". The BK Declaration is stronger, using the remarkable expression that God "binds Himself to his own justice to *make* the world a place to live in".

#### *Conquering the power of injustice*

The fifth echo of the BK Declaration can be found in article 3 of the Belhar Confession:

BK Theological Declaration (1979)	Belhar Confession (1986)
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<sup>28</sup> Smit (2008 [1984]:280) insightfully comments as follows on this opening phrase of article 4 of Belhar: "In the confession that God 'revealed' Godself in this way, there is implied an unspoken reference to Christ and the Scriptures and therefore a denial that this is a matter of natural theology, group projection or an ideologically and arbitrarily constructed view of God". That is also an apt description of Section 2 of the BK Declaration.

Section 2	Article 3
His life-giving Word became man in Christ Jesus, through whom He breaks the power of injustice.  By His Spirit He gives people the possibility to again live in obedience to his Word.	We believe: that God's life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity;  that God's life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;

Once again, even though there is no verbatim correspondence, a very similar tone and approach is evident, which could point to an actual influence of the BK Declaration on the writing of the Belhar Confession. If the BK Declaration actually influenced the wording of this article of the Belhar Confession, then the latter broadened the language of “breaking the power of injustice” into “conquering” the “powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity”. If that is what happened, then the BK Declaration played the role of prototype, on which the Belhar Confession could build and expand.

#### *Unity, reconciliation and justice?*

A final comment on the relationship between the two documents: The BK Declaration, with its twin focus on righteousness, justice and unity, does not mention reconciliation explicitly, whereas in the Belhar Confession a whole article is devoted to it.<sup>29</sup> This is strange at first glance, given the prominence of reconciliation in the BK’s aims. Perhaps one reason for this omission in the BK Declaration is the fact that it was drafted only two months after SACLA (South African Christian Leadership Assembly) in July 1979, with its central emphasis on reconciliation, driven by a reconciliation agenda that most BK members found unacceptable, since it separated itself too much from the justice agenda, especially due to the participation of significant number of evangelical, Charismatic and Pentecostal Christians in SACLA. However, one could say that reconciliation was central to the BK Declaration as well. When it called all Christians (not only black Christians, and not only men) to participate in God’s work of justice and to live as the “undivided body of Christ”, it implied that some serious “homework” needed to be done. Since reconciliation can so easily become an individualist concern, focused on attitudes and personal remorse, cut off from structural and institutional divisions between people, “innocently” ignoring the chasms of privilege and power that divide people, it may be helpful to keep seeing reconciliation not as a separated theological concern but as the necessary “homework” in order to live in unity and work for justice. That seems to have been the “tenor” of the BK Declaration in September 1979. However, three years later in the DRMC synod (1982), it was precisely the threefold emphasis on unity, reconciliation and justice that served to unite the different theological-political tendencies in the DRMC behind the Belhar Confession (cf Botha & Naudé 2010:48-53).

#### **Conclusion**

In one sense it doesn’t matter who formulated the Belhar Confession, since the DRMC – and later the URCSA – formally endorsed it as a Confession so that it now represents the voice of this church as a confessing community. In another sense it does, since there have been critics of the Belhar Confession who have spread unfounded rumours and allegations about its authorship that have discredited it in the eyes of many. For this reason it is necessary to “set the record straight” by tracing the complex intertextual dynamics behind the text of the Belhar Confession.

The purpose of this article is not to downplay the role played by Dr Allan Boesak or the other members of the drafting committee in the formulation of the Belhar Confession. Without Gustav Bam, Dirkie Smit, Jaap Durand, Allan Boesak and Sakkie Mentor, the Belhar Confession would not have existed – and would not been what it is. The purpose of this article was to highlight the role of one neglected factor in the origin of the Belhar Confession, namely the 1979 BK Declaration, and also to the creative, but undervalued, theological role of the late Dr Chris Loff. There is a need for a concept of communal authorship to do justice to the process by which the Belhar Confession came into being. It is hoped that this article will stimulate further research on the intertextuality of the Belhar Confession, to explore other written sources and theological processes that shaped it.

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<sup>29</sup> Van Roi (2008:181) also highlights this fact

There are reasons to be worried about the ownership and internalisation of the Belhar Confession by members and congregations of the URCSA. The ongoing “reception” of official church documents among church members is a complex matter, requiring creative and consistent strategies of teaching and communication. If this article is to be of any practical value to enhance ownership of the Belhar Confession in the URCSA and the broader DRC family, it may be by stimulating a grateful celebration of its communal authorship. The Belydende Kring was a creative space where ministers of the three “black” DRC churches met together as equals and colleagues, on their own terms and according to their own agenda, becoming close friends in their joint struggle for unity, reconciliation and justice in South Africa. Out of that creative engagement emerged a Reformed theology of celebration, resistance and struggle that produced a number of doctoral theses, various other publications, and a transformed Christian praxis in many congregations. Out of that interaction there also emerged in 1979 a theological declaration that aimed (as a pastoral statement) to encourage God’s struggling people and (as an apologetic statement) to give an account of the hope that was driving that movement.<sup>30</sup> It is not surprising that this evocative confessional statement, which we owe mainly to the creativity of the late Dr Chris Loff, was “owned” by the Belydende Kring (1979), noticed and made known to the world by Lukas Vischer (1981), taken up into the draft Confession of Belhar by the DRMC drafting committee (1982), owned by the vast majority of church councils and presbyteries of the DRMC in the ratification process (1982-1986), owned by the congregations of the DRCA in the process of forming the URCSA (1986-1994), and now being owned further afield as other churches worldwide debate the Confession of Belhar and adopt it as a formal Confession. A notion of communal authorship and ownership can help us to describe this creative and unifying process. It should move us to celebrate the communal authorship of the Belhar Confession, giving due recognition to each of the persons, congregations and institutions that helped to shape it. Such a celebration could also enhance its communal embodiment in the DRC family today.

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<sup>30</sup> For this dual purpose (pastoral and apologetic) of the BK Declaration, see Loff (1979b:13).

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## Appendix

### *The Afrikaans version of BK Declaration (1979)*

- 1 Ons glo in die God en Vader van Jesus Christus wat deur sy Woord en Gees sy hele skepping onderhou. Hy ywer vir sy eie geregtigheid wat uitkom in die gehoorsaamheid van mense in hulle handelinge teenoor God en hul medemens. Die mens het egter verval tot ongehoorsaamheid wat beteken die verwerping van Gods geregtigheid t.o.v. God en die medemens. In hierdie verband kies God steeds vir sy geregtigheid en staan gevolglik aan die kant van mense wat die slagoffers van ongeregtigheid is.
- 2 Ons glo dat God homself in sy Woord openbaar as die Een wat deur die ganse geskiedenis heen in sy verhouding tot die mens Homself verbind aan sy eie reg en geregtigheid ten einde die wêreld bewoonbaar te maak. Sy leweskeppende Woord word mens in Christus Jesus deur Wie Hy die mag van die ongeregtigheid verbreek en deur sy Gees aan mense die moontlikheid teruggee om opnuut in gehoorsaamheid aan sy Woord te lewe.
- 3 Ons glo dat God in die wêreld vir Homself 'n nuwe volk vergader wat bestaan uit mense wat Hy deur Christus bevry het van die onderdrukkende magte. Hierdie gemeente het die taak om as die onverdeelde liggaam van Christus te lewe. As eiendom van God moet die kerk besig wees om te staan waar God staan, nl. téén die ongeregtigheid en by die verontregte mense. Ten einde hierdie taak uit te voer is dit nodig dat die gemeente steeds soekend sal vra na die waarheid van die Woord van God, temeer so omdat ons groter gehoorsaamheid aan Christus verskuldig is as aan aardse regerings magte of ideologieë.
- 4 In ons Suid-Afrikaanse situasie beteken dit dat ons as deel van die kerk van Christus in die wêreld volhardend ons moet beywer vir die geregtigheid van God. Dit mag gebeur dat die kerk uit trou aan sy enigste Hoof Jesus Christus in stryd kom met die aardse gesagdraers. Indien die kerk in hierdie proses lyding moet verduur weet ons dat ook dit deel is van die weg van Gods volk en dat die Woord van die Here van krag bly, nl. Ek sal jou nooit begewe en jou nooit verlaat nie (Heb 13:5). (BK 1979:3).