

BELHAR CONFESSION YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW: PROF S T KGATLA (MODERATOR)

Sisters and Brothers

Greetings in Jesus Name

On 26 September 2006 we are celebrating 20th anniversary of the 'birth' of the Belhar Confession. Exactly twenty years ago when the Church of Jesus Christ was confronted with a dark cloud of theological uncertainty God placed on our lips and in our hearts how to respond to the challenges. In Roman 10:9-10 we read: ***That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.***

Twenty years later we are still questioned as to whether the Belhar Confession is relevant. Time and again we hear statements and comments that the Belhar Confession is an obstacle to true reunification within the DRC Family, that it is outdated and irrelevant to present day South Africa, that it reminds people of emotional, historical and symbolic events of the past, and that some are even going to an extent of questioning whether we are trying to correct the past with a confession. An article in the Kerkbode of 28 June 2006 (pages 5-6) is a point in (view) here. There is sheer ignorance about the role the Belhar Confession has played, is playing and it will play (in future) within the DRC Family and the Reformed World as a whole. (More and more Reformed Churches are taking the Belhar Confession as one of their Confessions). In some instances the comments are shrouded with racism and indignation because the Confession did not originate from the dominant community, that is, those who are reputed to be sent by God to bring civilization and progress to world. But it originated from the underside of history and the black majority. The Belhar Confession is a homegrown statement of Reformed Faith emerged from African soil and context. Instead of building on our experiences as guided by God through the Belhar Confession we find ourselves going back and forward to make ourselves clear to those who do not want to accept this reality.

It is for these reasons that we are now and again compelled to state the obvious and repeat ourselves. It has never been too much for us to clarify the theological issues around the Confession because of our calling. We are well aware that, to some, issues raised in the Belhar Confession are difficult to comprehend. We will continue clarifying them with love and compassion until they too understand the spirit of the Belhar Confession. assuredly believe, regardless of what others may believe and regardless of the opposition, rejection, or persecution that may come to us for taking the stand we are taking. Christians are by definition people who make

their own confession known: 'Jesus is Lord' (Rom 10-9-10). The Christian Church, called and held together by Jesus Christ Himself, lives only through the continual renewal of this fundamental confession of faith. A confession of faith may thus be defined more precisely as a public declaration before God and the world of what a church believes. It is an officially adopted statement

When Christians make a confession, they say: 'This is what we most of what a community of Christians believes and wishes the world to know what they believe. A confession, a church affirmation of faith always has three reference points: God, The church itself, and The World. A confession of faith is firstly a solemn and thankful response to God's self-revelation, expressed with a sense of responsibility to be faithful and obedient to God. Secondly, in a confession of faith members of a Christian community seek to make clear to themselves who they are, what they believe, and what they resolve to do. Thirdly, Christians confess their common faith not only to praise and serve God, and not only to establish their self-identity, but also to speak to the world with a unified word that declares who they are and what they stand for and against.

The Time in which The Belhar Confession came into being

Throughout the history of the Christian era, churches have written confessions of faith because they were compelled to do so, not just because they thought it would be a good idea, or acceptable to the world. But they did so fully aware that the world would most probably hate and persecute them precisely because of the stand they were taking. In some instances, confessions of faith resulted from a sense of urgent need to correct some distortion of the truth and certain claims on the Gospel that threatened the integrity of the Church's faith and life within it (the church). The confession might result from some political or cultural movement outside the Church that openly attacks or subtly seeks to compromise the Church commitment to the Gospel. Sometimes the urgency to confess came from the Church's conviction that it has a great insight into the promises and demands of the Gospel that is desperately needed by both the Church and the World. In the case of the Belhar Confession all three scenarios played a crucial role in its genesis. There was a sense of urgent need to correct some distortion of the truth and the claim of the Gospel that threatened the integrity of the Church's faith and life on one hand. Apartheid ideology was eroding the fundamental truth of the Gospel. On the other it had been defended and justified by the Church that brought the Gospel to South Africa. South Africans, particularly Blacks were on the verge of forsaking and rejecting the Gospel because of what was being done to them. The white churches were involved in practising heresy because of their theological justification of the system. There was urgent need not only to correct the wrong teaching but also to provide Christian authentic witness to the world. We are, however, thankful to God because the DRC has publicly denounced apartheid and apologized to the South Africans.

The Belhar Confession was called for by the political and cultural movement, operating inside and outside the church, of the denial of human rights to the black citizens of the country. The church had to come up with a confession that responded to the challenges of the apartheid. The Church had a conviction that the promises and demands of the Gospel were needed by both those who propagated injustices against black fellow citizens and the victims as well.

The Belhar Confession was an appropriate response by and a voice of the black Christians within the DRC Family in South Africa. It was a credible response to and critique of the ideologization of Christianity in the core beliefs of the white dominant culture of the time. It responded to the destructive experience of being dominated and the incriminating experience of being the one who dominated and benefited from the domination of the other. It brought necessary clarification to hard and pressing theological questions of the time. The Black Youth was demanding answers from their Christian parents why they were belonging to a Church of the oppressed. Black (reformed) parents were being criticized by their kids and other Churches for being so naïve and belonging to the white Dutch Reformed Church that supported an ideology of apartheid and in that way legitimized their own oppression. How on earth could these black Christians belong to a Church whose members understood them as God's chosen people with the divine right to dominate, cultivate and tame black 'savages?' They were openly being challenged by incidents such as the 1976 Soweto Students Uprising against the imposition of Afrikaans on them. Black and Reformed Christians were thus severely criticized and challenged by their children to justify their stay in the Reformed faith.

During the late seventies and early eighties prominent black theologians emerged who clearly questioned the authenticity of the Bible as a true word of God. They problematized the matter by coming up with Marxist axioms that suggested that the Bible needed to be liberated first before it could be considered a liberating word of God. They employed materialistic tools of interpreting the Bible and accused those who were faithful to the Bible as Biblicists and naïve. Still others came with a notion that the Bible was a lulling tool in the hands of the oppressor to domesticate the Blacks. They invented a popular notion that: When the white man came to South Africa, he had a Bible in his hand and Blacks had the land. He invited Blacks to a prayer and when he said Amen, he had the land and Blacks had the Bible. The logic of statements such as this is that in order for Blacks to emancipate themselves from white domination they should renounce the Christian Faith. Indeed many black Christians turned away from the Bible. The apartheid ideology and the role the white church played called for an urgent public witness. Something had to be done to correct the perceptions and refute the liars. It was in this milieu when there was a huge confusion that God intervened and blessed His Church with a gift of confession that will remain a guiding light forever.

These and other circumstances called the Church of Jesus Christ to confess and publicly state its stance in the face of the ideologies of the time. A statement from the Church that would restore the integrity of the Gospel, denounce ideologization of the Christianity, get involved in dialogue with fellow black theologians, point a way out for the youth who were on the verge of abandoning the Christian Faith, and correct those who were dehumanizing themselves by misusing the Gospel for their own narrow interests was clearly needed.

The Black Church found itself in a similar situation such as that of Job in the Old Testament. After hearing all debilitating news about the loss of his oxen, donkeys, sheep, servants, camels, sons, daughters and property, and in anticipation of bad advice from his wife and incriminating accusations from three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Shuhite, Job had to make his stance very clear. He knew very well how human nature reacts in a crisis. He had to lay a firm foundation for the interactions with all that would do some deductions on what had happened and give him wrong counsel. To him it was critically essential for the world to know where he stood in the midst of the confusion and suffering he was drawn in. Although it was not clear what would still happen to him he anchored himself in his confession and provided a basis on which he would interact with those who live by sight but not by faith. What was clear to him at that stage was that 'naked he came from his mother's womb, and naked he would depart and the Lord had given him all and the Lord had taken' (Job 1:21). Anyone who liked to engage him had to be very clear of what his stance was.

In the midst of ideological confusion, gaspers' dust and children's cries from South African townships, both the former DRMC and DRCA stood up and declared their stance so that when all is said and done, they may emerge giving testimony of God who liberates, reconciles, heals and restores. The Confession was not their invasion but their verbalization of what God was leading them to say. The Church confessed what it confessed out of gratitude and humility, but not out of arrogance, blame-portioning, condemnation, self-exaltation, holier-than-thou-attitude, or self-gratification, but out of hope for all (Black and White) in the country.

With the same urgency the Church had to take a stand in the midst of death and persecution and refute wrong teachings of the time and show the way. The Church needed courage and clarity from God what to say to the Black Christian masses who were on the verge of rejecting the Christian Faith because of the ideological underpinnings embedded with it. At that critical moment when the people of God did not exactly know what to say and to do God graciously gave those words in the confession of the Belhar Confession what to say in a way that made sense. When gasper military vehicles were roaming South African townships, the dust from their mega-wheels and gun smoke eclipsing the southern sun, when the Church was dump-founded because of the brutality that was going on God gave His Church a confession that led them through the night of agony.

The Belhar Confession offered the Church new hope and understanding of their social conditions in the light of God's revelatory word. Through the Confession of Belhar we were ushered into a new common human good that is warm, rich and self-correcting despite the pain we had to endure. The Confession gives us a new understanding of who we are and recognizing ourselves and each other in our common history, hoping, grappling with our collective pasts, struggling creatively for freedom, working, celebrating, worshipping, and welcoming all in our midst including those who benefited from our oppression without any hint of bitterness and arrogance.

The Belhar Confession revives our old memories lest we forget them. It is from these memories and scars we carry in our souls that keep reminding us that we were 'oppressed' and we should never dare to oppress others. We are constantly reminded never to adopt a stance towards the future in which we place and interpret ourselves, our desires, our choices, our actions as the central subjects in the creation and destiny of a new united Church. We are reminded in the Belhar Confession never to use our memories to retaliate, or to ground our grudges or use them to promote our selfish agendas and subjugate the aspirations of others. We are constantly reminded to be vigilant against any in creeping ideology that feeds on racial prejudices. We are called to see in others the image of the liberating God who seeks to liberate others through us.

We are petitioned with the prayerful petition of the Lords Day 49 in the Belgic Confession 'your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heave.' The Belhar Confession reminds us that God's kingdom is founded on the conviction that the God, in whom we trust, is not indifferent to human history. He is immediately and imminently interested and is able, through His grace, wisdom and power, to intervene and transform our world. He has demonstrated this when the Word of God was incarnated and assumed human nature.

The Belhar Confession keeps on propping what sort of Church we are? What sort of Church we must become? It keeps reminding us to live authentically-that is, attentively, intelligently, reasonably, responsibly-under the dictates of the reign of God and guard against falling into the distortion and deformation of other people. It calls us to be a *united* uniting reformed church for we cannot be a uniting church without first becoming united ourselves. The Belhar Confession energizes us to pray to the Lord of Hosts to purge all disunity, strives and tensions that may arise among ourselves.

It takes us along the path of rethinking ways of being a Christian Church by constantly taking up a place before the Cross of Jesus of Nazareth. It is at the Cross where we grasp the enormity of the human suffering and oppression of the poor, exploited and marginalized of our society. We are constantly reminded to confess and repent of our ethnicity, sexism, cultural superiority, and marginalization of

others. We are called upon to beg forgiveness from those whom we have offended and commit ourselves to emancipate those who are oppressed and denied access to the wealth of this country regardless of who does that.

In the Belhar Confession we are challenged to reject and repent of our bureaucracy and complicity in those decisions and systems that have authorized the humiliation and exploitation of women, children, our domestic workers and our workers. The Belhar Confession stands out as a form of prophetic judgment of our Christian witness and praxis of the past, present and future. At the same time it conscientizes us to be humbly and self-critically attuned to our own cognitive, religious and moral praxis lest we unconsciously appropriate the attitudes, and tools of arrogance and domination.

In the Belhar Confession we are cautioned never to embrace tendencies that lead to utopia or romantic schemes. We are reminded to recognize ourselves and one another in our past, our hopes and to grapple with our collective efforts and struggle creatively for a common future which can be celebrated together. Never must we indulge in a selective interest that hides our evil intentions and presents us a picture of black or white innocence before one another. Our Christian journey remains sterile and routine gesture, unless we continually expose ourselves to the searching light of the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth where our racism, sexism, cultural superiority and marginalization of others are revealed and condemned.

The Belhar Confession cautions us never to be agents of any other force including the state— in spite of how convinced we might be of its programmes. We should rather grasp opportunities to cross all barriers to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth to all the people. It is in the Belhar Confession where we are reminded of the enormity of the true suffering of Jesus Christ and are oriented to commitment of emancipating ourselves to become agents of transformation. Far from us should be the temptation or complicity of distorting our experiences of the way Jesus taught us to love others as we love ourselves. We are exhausted to become a uniting Church that is purpose-driven according Biblical perspectives. The starting point in our mission is: Why do we exist? What is the purpose of our life? What is God's purpose for our lives?

The Belhar Confession helps us to answer these questions. We are a uniting church that strives for reconciliation and justice within reformed family of churches. It is in our discovery of our purpose that we will be revitalized and rejuvenated uniting church. We can become a hope to those who do not have hope. We know that if the purpose for which we exist is well articulated among our members it builds morale among our members and those who rub their shoulders with us. Our purpose helps us to focus and have greater impact on what we do. This is a new fertile ground we are challenged to explore as a uniting church.

En-route to re-unification of the DRC family, the Belhar Confession remains our guiding resource for cooperation, restoration, revitalization, and reconciliation. Thus the Belhar Confession can never become irrelevant to our existential issues.

May the King of kings be with us as we journey together with other members of the DRC Family into the new future of justice, wholeness, reconciliation and peace!

*Jesus is Lord.
To the one and only God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be the honour and glory
for ever and ever. Amen.*

Malibogwe.

PROF ST KGATLA