

## **TO STAND WHERE GOD STANDS**

### **Reflections on the Confession of Belhar after 25 years**

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#### ***A rare and precious occurrence***

Twenty-five years ago, the church in which I serve, the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (now the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa), adopted a new confession called the Confession of Belhar. It was the first confession of faith to be formulated in 300 years within the Reformed family of churches and the first to come from a church in Africa in modern times. It is a rare and precious occurrence.

Like all true confessions, it was born out of the hearts of the faithful, and into a situation of deep despair and uncertainty, of trial and tribulation, of crisis and testing, a time in which the fundamental tenets of the gospel and the heart of our faith were under so severe a threat that no mere religious statement or even a theological declaration, no anxious repetition of doctrinal certitudes would suffice: the church could only turn to the rare and radical act of confession to proclaim the gospel anew. It was a moment of truth and of *kairos*, of being overpowered by the Word of God and being empowered by the Spirit of God. It arises in a specific situation, but like all true confessions, because of its rootedness in the Word of God, it speaks to a universal reality. Its necessity was parochial, its application is ecumenical. The gospel was at stake, our very lives were at risk and the testimony of the church was in jeopardy. We could only call upon the One who is the source of it all. Hence the Confession speaks to the human situation everywhere.

Like all true confessions, the Confession of Belhar seeks neither to attack nor defend, but to uphold and affirm; not to condemn or rationalize, but to testify and proclaim. Like all true confessions, it responds to heresy, that wilful and deliberate turning of the truth away from the light of the gospel into the shadow of human distortion and satisfaction. The rediscovery and recognition of that truth is not a moment of triumphal gloating, but rather a moment of profound and humble joy: the truth has found, recovered, and reclaimed *us*. We are not the light; the light

illuminates and leads us. Hence we do not *announce*, we *proclaim*; we do not pontificate, we *confess*. For that reason, joy is the most visible, sustained and enduring trait of the confession. "The joy of the LORD, it is your strength!" (Neh. 8:10)

That joy reverberates vibrantly throughout the Confession of Belhar. From the first sentence, "We believe in the triune God, father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church by God's Word and Spirit, as God has done since the beginning of the world and will do so to the end", to the last: "To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be the honour and the glory for ever and ever!". Joyfully we claim with all the saints the affirmation of the unity of God's people as gift and obligation, the message of reconciliation God has entrusted to the church and the truth that through Jesus Christ we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, called to be peacemakers. We celebrate the good news that God is a God who brings true justice amongst humankind and that the church as the possession of God must stand where God stands, against all injustice and with the wronged and that we are empowered to stand with the powerless against the powerful. We sing joyfully that we are called to confess all these things not through earthly power, arrogance or recklessness, but in obedience to Jesus Christ, even though it may provoke the wrath of earthly authorities and human laws, because above all we know: Jesus is Lord.

It was the joy the young students knew in that very year when they danced and sang around the police vehicle in which some of their friends were thrown as they emerged from a church service in my church in Bellville near Cape Town:

*Akanamandla, akanamandla, akanamandla uSatani!*

*Sim'swabisile, Alleluia!*

*Sim'swabisile, u Satani!*

*Akanamandla, uSatani,*

*Alleluia!*

*It is broken, it is broken,*

*The power of Satan is broken!*

*We have disappointed him (we are no longer afraid)*

*The power of Satan is broken!*

*Alleluia!*

Belhar proclaims the victory of Christ, and through him ours, over the power of sin and death and fear, for the power of Satan is broken, his claim on our lives forfeited. We shall no longer be afraid.

***From amongst the poor and the downtrodden***

To understand the power of this confession and the reason for our joy, one must understand something of the situation into which the Confession of Belhar was born. The crisis which moved us to the confession was both political and spiritual. South Africa was in the grip of a system called apartheid, a system of racial oppression, domination and economic exploitation that held sway over every area of our lives. It dehumanized black people while according an idolatrous status to whites. Skin colour determined everything: from education to employment, from the courts of law to the definition of human dignity. It caused immense suffering amongst millions. It was a system inherently violent and indescribably destructive, while ever more draconian laws and growing physical violence were constantly necessary to keep it in place.

But South Africa was not the only place in the world where racist oppression, social discrimination and economic exploitation were the daily bread of the poor and defenceless. What made our situation unique was the role of the Christian church. The policy of apartheid was in its essence the legacy of English colonial rule. It was, however, also the logical political outcome of the so-called "mission policy" of the Dutch Reformed Church. But it was more. It was presented to both white and black people as an all-embracing, soteriologically loaded, God-given solution to what was seen as "the race problem". It was not just willy-nilly presented as God's will; there was a complete theological rationale, a comprehensive "apartheid theology" for its biblical, moral and theological justification. As such it became more than just a political ideology and system or a socio-economic construct. It became in fact a pseudo-gospel, challenging and replacing the truth and the authority of the true gospel in our personal lives, in the life of the church as well as in the corporate life of the nation.

The church I am speaking of now specifically is the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa. That church was (and to a large extent still is) divided on the basis of race and skin colour. This is not to say that other churches did not, overtly or covertly support apartheid. That fact is hardly contested. But this is the church that came with the colonization of South

Africa, into which the first natives and the slaves who became Christians were baptized, and became members.

In time this church became more and more the church of the colonist and slave owner, the church of the white, "European Christian" (as distinct from the "heathen Christian") whose superior place in the political and socio-economic hierarchy in the colonist society had to be reflected in the church. More and more conscious of race, skin colour and social status, there was less and less room for those who were not white, who were considered "heathen" even though they confessed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. As political tensions rose, Christian fellowship declined. The strains of power and powerlessness, of enforced superiority and inferiority, of ownership and being owned, could no longer be hidden. As white Christians laid more and more claim to land, destroyed whole communities and people, slaves and native people began to reassert ownership of their land and to demand recognition of their human dignity.

In the end the contradictions proved too much. The same Bible that proclaimed childhood of God justified the subjugation and ownership of human souls. The bondage of slavery and the bonds of Christian love could not live side by side. The "slave-holding, the woman-whipping, the mind-darkening, the soul-destroying religion" to use the words of Frederick Douglas, could not share the same baptism, break the bread and drink of the same cup at the Lord's table, make the same confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, with those who sought that religion which is "first pure, then peaceable, then gentle, without partiality and without hypocrisy..." Could one rape a woman on Friday, then whip a man to death or lynch him on Saturday because he wanted his freedom, and on Sunday be witness to the baptism of his child and celebrate our oneness in Christ? Can the oppressor hear the psalms that sing of the God who will "protect the stranger and support the downtrodden, crush the oppressor" while standing next to the oppressed who are promised freedom, who lift their head high because they will be "lifted up from the dust of the earth"? Can the message of Jesus be heard while the cries from the slave lodge across the street cannot be drowned out?

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century these contradictions, embodied as they were in the very bodies and voices of the slaves, simply became unbearable. And since the church could not ignore them nor deny their existence, it sought to remove their presence. The church found it easier, even though they knew and acknowledged that the demand of the gospel was different, to first opt for separate baptisms and a separated

communion, then separate worship services altogether, then finally for separate, race-based church formations. Now the justification of slavery could be preached without the accusing presence of those whose pain constituted your wealth. Now communion could be served without the broken body of Christ reminding one of the broken bodies of slaves after "punishment". Now baptism would no longer be a reminder that we all, in equal measure, are sinners before God, and that through the redeeming grace of God, now belong to Christ. Now the "slave catechism" would be less embarrassing, and slaves could be taught that even though their lot is unjust, dismal and undeserved, "the things that seem unbearable to us are the will of God for our good; and that indeed, if they had stayed in their home country they would never have heard of the saving grace of our Lord and on dying would have been lost forever". (Rev MC Vos, minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century).

The rationalisations abound: racial separation was "preferred" by the "heathen Christians"; it would be better for the "mission" of the church, it was "the more practical way", and as formulated in an official decision of 1857, the church did it to accommodate "the weakness of some" (white members.) This decision stands as the crucial moment in the history of the church in South Africa. Henceforth not faith in Jesus Christ alone, but race, culture and pigmentation would begin to define membership of the church of Jesus Christ in South Africa. This moment is, in the words of Dr Chris Loff, "the birth of a heresy". The painful consequences of that decision have been with us for 150 years now. But stripped of all pretence, this fateful decision was essentially the creation of a haven for a conscience that would not bend to the will of Christ.

These people of whom British scientist Robert Knox asked, "What signify these races to us? Who cares particularly for the Negro, or the Hottentot, or the Kaffir? ...Destined by the nature of their race to run, like animals, a certain limited course of existence, it matters little how their extinction is brought about", these people were our ancestors. Bereft of land, dignity and everything they held dear, they sought and found comfort and strength in the gospel even if, as blind African poet and catechist John Ntsikana confessed in 1884, that gospel was a "fabulous ghost" we sought to embrace in vain. Their struggles with the presence of evil and the absence of God are largely unknown. Neither have we much of a record of how they felt when they heard those slave-holding preachers tell them about the God of Jesus Christ or when they were told that they were no longer welcome in the church where they learned to know their Lord.

But the gospel asserts itself. Always. It might be manipulated and distorted, but its truth cannot be denied. It might be perverted, but it cannot be buried. Crushed to earth, that truth shall rise again. Here and there, almost as lost echoes down the dongas and valleys of our history, and in the stories handed down the generations, there is witness of those who found in the words of the prophets and the message of Jesus the power of the gospel, that Word of life that cannot be bound, that empowers and enables for justice and freedom, for dignity and peace. They spoke, and in their speech we, their children and their children's children, discovered the continuity with the prophets and Jesus of Nazareth. Carried and sustained by their faith, we walked the wilderness and drank the water from the angel's hand with Hagar; we climbed to the mountain top with Moses and slept under the broom tree with Elijah. We cried in the temple with Hannah and wept with Elisha for the coming destruction. Our voices rose with the psalmist, "How long Lord?" and with Isaiah and Jeremiah we heard, and believed, the promise of salvation and restoration. With Mary we sang the Magnificat and with Jesus we suffered on a cross made by human hands. In prison, we learned to sing with Paul and Silas, and with the ancient church we discovered that there is no power in heaven or on earth, not even death, that can separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ: Jesus is Lord.

And so, from amongst the poor and oppressed, the despised and the voiceless, the dejected and downtrodden, came the Confession of Belhar, and this is, perhaps, its most eminent, and to some, its most offensive characteristic. Its birthplace was not the palaces of the privileged or the halls of power. It gave voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless. Neither was it the child of esoteric academic debate; it emerges from the struggles of ordinary people with the presence of evil and the promises of God and it speaks with the eloquence of faith. It was not commissioned by the powerful for earthly power to be legitimated. It places earthly power under the critique of heaven and earth: of the outraged God and the suffering people. In its words pulsates a life, lived not under the protection of the throne but in the shadow of the cross. In it one will not find the arrogance of certitude; it is the trembling steadfastness of those who walk by faith, not by sight.

### ***Bending our will to the mind of Christ***

Belhar does not see the need to repeat the deep doctrinal truths we inherited from the ancient church, and some use that to argue that Belhar

is therefore not "a true confession". That, however, is a false argumentation. There are some revered confessions in the Christian tradition that are not at all only concerned with doctrinal matters. Besides, the first known confession of the Christian church, "Jesus is Lord", was made not as a doctrinal statement, but as living testimony over against an idolatrous state and claims of divinity from Roman Caesars. Our commitment to those truths has never wavered. That Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God was not the issue; rather the question: how seriously do we take God's incarnate presence in Jesus Christ? We were called to revisit, for our time again and anew, the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29), so well understood and asked again by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a time filled with pain and suffering and marked by painful contradictions: "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" That is the question with which we grappled. What value does it have to confess Jesus Christ when the church loses its way on the moral consequences of the gospel, and while confessing Christ the church makes common cause with the destructive powers of the world? When the doctrine is piously repeated, but the life of the church, even as it affirms the doctrine, denies the message of Jesus?

We struggled with our Christian identity: what does it mean to be Christian in a situation when one of the most systematically exploitative and oppressive systems of the twentieth century is proudly claimed by the Christian church as its own? When, in blind and sinful submission to a race-obsessed society, race and skin colour, rather than faith in Jesus Christ alone, is made the criterion of membership of the church? Then the confession must be made that "true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of (the) church".

The divinity of Jesus is not denied, but the humanity of the poor is, and hence the good news for the poor that Jesus brought. The continued impoverishment of the poor is the result of deliberate policy and the church, rather than seeking the justice that rolls down like waters, and the righteousness that flows like a mighty stream, chooses to benefit from the exploitation of the poor and justifies their plight as God's will. In such a situation we are called to confess, boldly and publicly, "that God has revealed Godself as the One who brings justice and true peace amongst humankind, that in a word full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the poor, the destitute and the wronged; that the church must therefore stand where God stands: with the wronged and against any and all forms of injustice".

The church affirms Christ as mediator, but preaches the irreconcilability of people on the basis of race and culture and skin colour. The church administers the sacraments, but allows racist prejudices to disempower the efficacy of the sacraments. The church affirms the unity of the church, but insists on the division of the church on the basis of race. The church supports missions, but rejects the reciprocity of all-transcending love that should characterise the life of the followers of Jesus. Then we are called to confess that "we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name..."

The church confesses the sinfulness of all humankind, but in effect makes an idolatry of racial identity and denies the equality before God that that confession expresses. It rebuilds the walls of enmity that Christ has broken down with a political and theological deliberation and purposefulness that belie the affirmation of that central biblical truth. When this happens we are called to confess that "Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another, that that unity is therefore both gift and obligation for the church of Jesus Christ... and that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, hatred and enmity between people and groups is a sin which Christ has already conquered".

The church professes its dependence upon the triune God, but in reality relies on, and makes common cause with worldly power, political privilege, economic exploitation and military might so that the church itself becomes a powerful force in the justification and safeguarding of such a system and of its own power, privilege and survival. Hence we cannot but confess that in standing where God stands, "the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others".

Should some seek to hide behind the sinfulness of humankind and the brokenness of the world, we in turn remind them that "God's life-giving Word and Spirit, have conquered the powers of sin and death" and so made us all conquerors through Jesus Christ, and that God's life-giving Word and Spirit "enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world". And should we be reminded of the wrath of the state, the relentlessness of its violence, the wide range of its powers and the reach of its security apparatus, we in

turn remind ourselves that "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 may be the consequence." In this we do no more, but no less than echo the *Confessio Scotica* which calls upon Reformed Christians to "save the lives of the innocent, to repress tyranny, to defend the oppressed".

And then we said: "Jesus is Lord".

I should make one more important remark in this regard. As we made this confession, *even as we spoke*, many of us had been imprisoned without charge; many under false charges. Lives had been threatened, lost and otherwise destroyed. Many had disappeared. Our youth were on the streets of the nation in flaming protest, risking their lives every day in clashes with police and the army. The casualties numbered in the thousands. Security police, under the most draconian laws had free reign, harassed and tortured those who resisted by the hundreds, many were tortured, some to death. Parents saw their children flee without hope of ever seeing them again. By June 1987 at least 14,000 children would be held in detention without trial. We lived in daily fear of our lives. Trust in each other was destroyed: many were bought, or coerced into becoming spies for the police. Enmity, hatred, distrust, and fear were the most natural of responses. Our country was becoming less and less our mother and more and more our grave. Most churches in the white communities watched all this with a casual detachment that stunned the mind.

Yet in the midst of all this the Confession of Belhar, constantly giving account of the hope that is within us, and having grounded itself in the tradition and faith of the ancient church, calls first and foremost upon Christ's work of reconciliation, proclaiming to those who suffer oppression not to be tempted by hatred, enmity and self-justifying revenge but to remember "that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another, (since) we share the one faith..." In South Africa at the time, whites and blacks were enemies. In politics, talk of reconciliation was considered premature, if not traitorous. And even though most of our members were crucially engaged in the struggle for liberation, it was not the call of politics that had to dictate our conduct, but the call of the gospel. The reality of our oneness in Christ overrode the political necessity to see the other as an enemy, even if there was blood on the streets. Here popularity with our struggling masses was not the issue, our obligation to Christ was. It remains a

source of pain that so many in the Dutch Reformed Church to this very day remain incapable of understanding that.

Also, note that the obligation of worship, reconciliation, unity, and standing with the poor are firstly directed to those who confess, and only in second instance to those who might listen. Furthermore, those who are called to confess are also called to obedience. The act of confession is an act of commitment: it allows for no arrogance, disengagement or sense of spiritual superiority. And it is this humble submission to the Word of God, this bending of our mind and will to the obedience of Christ that strengthens and emboldens us to say what follows next: "Therefore, we reject..."

That act of rejection does not mean the spiritual elimination of a person or group; far from it. The rejection does not stand on its own; it is embedded in the obligation to love, forgive and reconcile. Without this obligation it is invalidated. We must have, said John Calvin in his *Institutes*, the humility to realize that we stand and are upheld by God alone, that "naked and empty-handed we flee to his mercy, repose entirely in it, hide deep within it, and seize upon it alone for righteousness and merit". In Jesus Christ, he goes on, God's face shines in perfect grace and gentleness, even upon those who profane God's name, betray God's trust, and dishonour our baptism.

It is in that spirit that Belhar was written, discussed, and finally adopted as a fourth confession in our church. For that reason we have asked that the accompanying letter should be read before one reads the Confession. And it is in that spirit that we have offered it to the ecumenical church. And once offered thus, it no longer belongs to the Uniting Reformed Church. It cannot be used to judge, humiliate or annihilate the other. It cannot ever be the measure of *our* spiritual superiority, neither can it be cross upon which the other is nailed, and kept hanging. In doing that we would crucify Christ all over again. It is not a weapon to brandish, it is a staff on which to lean. Belhar symbolizes, indisputably and sublimely, the merciful and loving embrace of Jesus the Messiah. All notions of exclusivity, in whatever shape or form, are alien to it.

There are encouraging signs that a significant number from within the DRC are ready to embrace fully the Confession of Belhar, i.e. they are ready to move beyond even the decision by the 2004 General Synod that Belhar should be part of the confessional basis of a re-united church. They intend not to be accidental, but purposeful inheritors of the confession. The impact on the unification process within the Dutch Reformed church

family could be profound. Even more profound would be if that meant the emergence of a new community of faith, based upon renewed theological convictions and convergence of understanding, a different understanding and interpretation of Scripture and the Reformed tradition. This would be a community beyond the boundaries of race and culture, beyond the resurgent "identity politics" which is threatening to drag South Africans back to the vagaries of ethnic mobilisation and the dangerous undercurrents of racial stagnation. It will not matter if the whole of the church throughout South Africa does not immediately follow this course of action. The church shall be known, and judged, not by the reticence of the many but by the faithfulness of the few. Not by the hesitations of its legions, but by the courage of its prophets.

### ***Standing where God stands***

The Confession of Belhar helped us then, and it helps us now, as we face the new challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

- First, Belhar helps us to see the value of the tradition within which we stand. In an age of amazing arrogance, when a new Christian fundamentalism disengages itself completely from the heritage of the early church, finds refuge and legitimacy in alliances with worldly powers and measures itself and its success by its acceptance by those powers, Belhar reminds us of the true meaning of the confession that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is Lord. Not Jesus and our struggle, or Jesus and our national pride, or Jesus and our economic prosperity, or Jesus and our patriotic fervour. That is the very first confession of the Christian church and it stood over against the imperial claims of absolute power, over against the claims of divinity by the Caesar, and over against the belief that true power lies in military might. It rejected the idolatry that that military might can be a handmaiden of the Cross and that it may be exercised in the name of Jesus. It binds us with the early church who understood that true power lies in the powerlessness of the Cross, in the willingness to give one's life for the sake of others, and in the love that overcomes evil.
- Second, Belhar refocuses us on our inescapable bond of and call to unity - its source the triune God; its reality the one, visible body of Christ; its life: sharing and receiving the gifts of the Spirit; its driving force the love of Christ; its goal: "so that the world may

believe". It destroys our sense of self-sufficient, opinionated, self-deluding isolation. It seeks to engrave upon the faces of the brothers and sisters the face of Christ, so that, to speak again with John Calvin, "none (of them) can be injured, despised, rejected, abused or in any way be offended by us, without at the same time inuring, despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do... that we cannot love Christ without loving him in the brothers (and sisters)...for they are members of our (own) body..."

- Third, Belhar helps us to understand that in standing where God stands, the church in a particular situation, however pressed or isolated, never stands alone. We are ensconced in the womb of the church universal, bound together by the Spirit of the Lord in a solidarity and love that knows no borders – cultural, political, or physical. In rediscovering the heart of the gospel, we discovered the communion of the saints and found ourselves opened for their listening, correction, support and love. There were few things in those dark and dismal days that strengthened us more than the knowledge of ecumenical solidarity. And there were few things more humbling than the realisation that our words, spoken in our suffering, pain, hope and faith, were words spoken into the heart of the universal church. In our powerlessness we empowered the church to respond and do bold things in the name of the Lord.
- Belhar helps us, fourth, to find our voice and place globally, as we face the momentous changes and challenges globalization is forcing upon our countries and peoples; as we struggle with new idolatries and with the immense temptations of imperial alliances confronting us today. In our globalizing world with its powers and myths of power, its distortions of reality and neglect of truth, Belhar helps us to discern the difference between gospel and ideology, between genuine good news and propaganda, between truth-telling and myth-making, between the dictates of so-called "political realism" and the reality of the kingdom of God. It helps us to distinguish between half-hearted vacillation and commitment, between obedience and Christian solidarity. In the Bible, "standing where God stands" was the guarantee for the prophets to distinguish between the myths of the idols, the demands of the palace, and the "whispers" of the LORD. And as we ourselves have discovered, while it is by no means the safest place to stand, it is without doubt the *right* place to stand. It is the

only place from where we can make the affirmation to which the Confession of Belhar clings: "Jesus is Lord".

- Fifth, Belhar helps us because it affirms that unalterable biblical truth that the God of Jesus Christ is in a special way the God of the poor, the weak, the destitute and the wronged. This is the claim of the exodus, of the Commandments, of the prophets and the song writers of the Hebrew Bible; and this is the song of Hannah, of Mary in the Magnificat, and the message and life of Jesus of Nazareth. Next, it helps us to understand that the poor are not poor because of some historical accident, genetic traits or because it is the will of God. The poor are poor because they are *wronged*. They are poor because of injustice. They are victims, not of an act of God, but of deliberate historical, political and economic decisions through which injustice was done to them, in a systematized and systemic fashion. These decisions were and are still made by human beings in positions of power who fully understand the consequences of their actions.
- To stand with the poor means in the first place to stand up and be counted. To stand not just *where*, but *as* God stands: not just in front of, in protection; but alongside, in solidarity of struggle. Not just in sympathy with, but in empathetic identification with them. In Matthew 25 Jesus *becomes* the poor, the prisoner, the naked, the hungry. What we have done to them, is done to him. In not doing what is right we wrong God. What we do for and with them is done for and with him. The cry "how long, Lord", John Calvin again reminds us, as it emanates from amongst the poor and the downtrodden, who know that "this confusion of order and justice is not to be endured", actually comes from the heart of God. "It is", Calvin asserts, "the same as though God heard Himself when he hears the cries and groaning of those who cannot bear injustice".
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer has taught us yet another truth which illustrates how intimately Belhar reflects our understanding of John Calvin on this point. To stand where God stands does not only mean to stand with the poor and the destitute. It means, he says, to "stand with God in the hour of God's grieving". We must be "caught up in the way of Christ". It is not our religion that makes of us believers and followers of Christ, but our participation in the sufferings of God. We are called to share the sufferings of God at the hands of a hostile world. That, Bonhoeffer maintains, is what

distinguishes us from pagans. It does not distinguish us from people of other faiths, but from pagans. But here Bonhoeffer criticises not the pagans, but the Christians for whom their religiosity, their symbols and their rituals have become the hallmark of their life. They who think that it is more important to be religious than to be followers of Christ.

- We are disciples of Christ when we stand by God in the hour of God's grieving. The grieving of God is not in the pain of God for God, but in the pain of God in the suffering of humanity. That pain inflicted by people on people, is inflicted upon God. When Bonhoeffer speaks of the pain of God, he does not look toward heaven, but around him, at the pain of people created in God's image. When we fail to stand with them, we fail to stand with God. We do not ask whether their pain is the pain of heathen or pagans or enemies. *That* is the pagan within us who asks. We stand by them because their pain is the pain of a grieving God. That is discipleship, because it is being caught up in the way of Jesus Christ. It is for that reason that the Confession of Belhar is embraced by Palestinian Christians as well as North American Christians who are marginalised, poor and voiceless, and by those who hear their voice. It will give comfort to the suffering people of Iraq as it will to those brave fighters for democracy in Burma, as it does for us still.
- We are disciples of Christ, caught up in the way of Christ, says Bonhoeffer. We are the possession of God, says Belhar, and therefore driven by God's love and compassionate justice. Belhar helps us to continue to remember this, to continue to remember who we are and what we are called for; to reclaim in our life and work that spirituality without which we cannot face the challenges before us, to bring about the transformation that reaches out for justice, human dignity and freedom; for the responsibility for the earth, for the very things most necessary in our global reality. It is a spirituality that is not captive to triumphalism, not dependent upon earthly powers to gain acceptance in the world. It is not locked up in a desire to escape the realities of this world, a privatized, inner experience of God while shutting out the voices of pain. It is the trembling of the soul before God, so that we are sent out to seek the glory of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of life. It leaves us open to the woundedness of others and makes us take the risk of vulnerability ourselves. It is sharing

the pain of God in the pain of humanity, but it is also sharing the rage of God against injustice and all forms of inhumanity.

Two years before the Confession of Belhar was written, I realised something that is truer today than even then. It was a dismal and difficult time, our struggle seemed in vain, death and terror was all around, it was as if all humanity had fled. I was tired, bereft of hope sometimes, called to lead a people when I feared I could not trust myself. My life was under threat on a daily basis and sleep was a prolonging of the fears of the day. I discovered then in the ancient Reformed confessions something that provided me with prophetic faith and pastoral comfort. It comes from the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day One, in answer to that most crucial question, "What is your only comfort in life and death? The Catechism answers:

That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for my sins and delivered me from all the power of the devil, and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, wherefore by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth, to live unto him.

I said then and I believe it now, that this is a revolutionary spirituality without which our being Christian in the world is not complete, and without which the temptations that are part and parcel of the liberation struggle will prove too much for us. The "authoritarian audacity" I ascribed then to the powers in South Africa is once again seen in the destructive powers that today are rampant the world, who speak of the "market" as if it were a god, who speak of human life as if it is easily expendable, of people as if they do not matter but profits do; who claim with totalitarian arrogance a place in our lives that only God can – then, as now, it is of vital importance that we never forget to whom our ultimate allegiance and obedience are due. I said then and I believe it now, that our lives have meaning only when they are in the hands of the One who has given his life for the sake of others. And although he is the Lamb who is slaughtered, for those who call him Lord, he is also "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth".

It is to this Jesus that Belhar testifies. It is this Spirit who empowers us. It is this God whom it calls us to worship. To this God be glory and honour and praise for ever and ever.