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# Reformed Confessionalism and the Belhar Confession

## Abstract

The Belhar Confession is a modern confession that addresses issues of race, culture and socioeconomics. It originated from the Dutch Reformed Mission Church's rejection of apartheid theology and has been adopted by other Reformed denominations, in and beyond Africa, alongside the historical Reformed confessions of the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards. This article examines whether the Belhar Confession can be subscribed without conflict alongside these historical Reformed confessions. Three common positions taken on confessional subscription are outlined: non-, quia and quatenus subscription. Then, the propositional compatibility of Belhar with the historical confessions is analysed, and potential conflicts in ecclesiology, as well as the doctrines of reconciliation and poverty, are identified. These potential conflicts are realised with quia subscription but are avoidable with quatenus subscription.

**Keywords:** Belhar Confession; ecclesiology; reconciliation theology; Reformed confessionalism; quia and quatenus subscription

## Opsomming

Die Belydenis van Belhar is 'n moderne belydenisskrif wat kwessies rakende ras, kultuur en sosio-ekonomiese geregtigheid aanroer. Hierdie belydenis het ontstaan uit die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk se verwerping van die apartheidsteologie en is deur verskeie gereformeerde denominasies, binne en buite Afrika, aanvaar, naas die histories gereformeerde belydenisskrifte van die Drie Formuliere van Eenheid en die Westminster Standaarde. Hierdie studie ondersoek of die Belydenis van Belhar sonder konflik saam met die histories gereformeerde belydenisskrifte onderskryf kan word. Drie algemene benaderings tot konfessionele onderskrywing word onderskei: nie-onderskrywing, quia onderskrywing en quatenus onderskrywing. Vervolgens word die proposisionele versoenbaarheid van die Belydenis van Belhar met die historiese belydenisskrifte ontleed, en potensiële konflikpunte rakende ekklesiologie, betreffende die leerstellings oor versoening sowel as armoede, word geïdentifiseer. Hierdie konflikte kom na vore by quia onderskrywing, maar kan vermy word by quatenus onderskrywing.

**Kernbegrippe:** Belydenis van Belhar; ekklesiologie; gereformeerde konfessionalisme; quia en quatenus onderskrywing; versoeningsleer

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## 1. Introduction

The Belhar Confession (abbreviated hereafter as Belhar) is arguably the most far-reaching publication from an African Reformed church in the last century. As foreseen in its "Accompanying Letter", Belhar was to generate a storm of controversy on its release

as it attacked the theological justification of apartheid in all but name. Belhar, named after the suburb of Cape Town where the adopting meeting was held, was drafted in Afrikaans as a *status confessionis* by the coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in 1982. It was adopted as a confession in 1986 (Plaatjies van Huffel, 2013). At its adoption, one of its drafters was then part of the one-fifth of the DRMC delegates who voted against it. This delegate felt that Belhar had outgrown its original purpose. Since then, Belhar has contributed to the confessional basis for the merger of the DRMC with most congregations of the black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) as the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). Furthermore, the Confession forms part of their ongoing discussions for reunion with the largely white Afrikaans Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRC) (Modise, 2016). A conservative minority of the DRCA elected not to join the merger and has continued as the DRCA to this day. By 2008, Allan Boesak, another of the original Belhar drafters, was finding it to be as relevant to the promotion of sexual liberation as it had been to racial liberation (2015). In the United States, as affirmation against racism in the context of racial reconciliation, Belhar has been adopted as a full confession by the Reformed Church in America (RCA) (Reformed Church in America, s.a.) and the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA) (Presbyterian Church (USA), 2016:10.1-10.9). Amidst robust debate (Bierma, 2010; DeYoung, 2012), it has been given “contemporary testimony” status by the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) (CRC Communications, 2017). Yet many theological students in the URCSA are ignorant of Belhar and the Three Forms of Unity (Pillay, 2022:5). Others question whether its theological content is Reformed (Fortein, 2021; Modise, 2016; Du Plooy, 2010; Strauss, 2005) and debate its relationship to liberation theology (Fortein, 2021:9-14; Du Plooy, 2010; Van Wyngaard, 2019). Understanding the content of Belhar and its place in Reformed confessionalism is therefore important.

The essay has a very specific scope. It does not purpose to explicitly answer whether Belhar is biblical or useful, although implications may be drawn on these matters. It simply purposes to determine whether Belhar harmonises with the historical Reformed confessions under different forms of confessional subscription. In the first part of the essay, headed “Confessionalism”, the purpose and forms of creed are briefly outlined. Hereafter, several forms of confessional subscription are presented; with this knowledge, the subscription positions of three Belhar-affirming churches are examined. In the second part of the essay, headed “Confessional theology and Belhar”, three areas of potential disagreement between Belhar and Reformed confessional theology are evaluated by using the most common Reformed confessions: among continental Reformed churches, the Three Forms of Unity, that is the Heidelberg Catechism (HC), Belgic Confession (BC), and Canons of Dort (CD); amongst Reformed churches with British roots, the common subordinate standard is the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and its catechisms, namely the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) and the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC).

## 2. Confessionalism

### 2.1 Forms of creed

Church history provides a plethora of formal ecclesiastical creeds. The church, as an organisation, declares its faith through its adoption of extant creeds or the publication of new ones (Dunlop, 1857:19-57; Trueman, 2012a). Creeds are distinct from the publications of individual Christians or groups of Christians who communicate their own ideas. Such individual or group publications are often preparatory to creeds, but they are not themselves creeds and thus do not carry formal ecclesiastical authority. Therefore, a Reformed church court cannot censure office-bearers for disagreeing with a passage of Calvin's *Institutes*, for example, but it can censure them if that amounts to disagreement with a church confession.

On the surface, “creed”, “confession (of faith)”, and “statement of faith” may appear to be synonyms. Historically, Reformed writers made no formal semantic differentiation between the words. Millar and Dunlop used “creed” and “confession” extensively and interchangeably

(Dunlop, 1857; Miller, 1824). AA Hodge (1869:19–32) mixed “creeds”, “confessions” and “standards” when discussing them as a concept whilst categorising them under “Ancient Creeds” and “Creeds and Confessions [...] since the Reformation”. Beattie (1896:13–24) categorised “creeds” as “ancient”, “medieval” and “Reformation”. Nonetheless, certain words were used more frequently in reference to ecclesiastical statements from different historical epochs. At the outset of his three-volume work on creeds, Schaff (1931:3–4) states:

A Creed, or Rule of Faith, or Symbol, is a confession of faith for public use, or a form of words setting forth with authority certain articles of belief, which are regarded by the framers as necessary for salvation, or at least for the well-being of the Christian Church.

Today, some continue this older usage, but increasingly, the semantic ranges of “creed” and “confession” are separated. “Creed” is commonly used with reference to the ecclesiastical statements of the Patristic Era (e.g., the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed), which are more limited in doctrinal scope. “Confession” is commonly used with reference to the ecclesiastical statements of Protestant churches from the Reformation Era and since (e.g. the Augsburg Confession, the Second Helvetic Confession), which are more diverse in size and doctrinal in scope (Clark, 2008:1–38; Fairbairn & Reeves, 2019:1–16). Additionally, a “statement of faith” is often adopted by specific denominations or organisations to state their creedal and/or confessional subscription, as well as theological distinctives not captured in them (Focus on the Family, Canada, s.a.; McGowan, 2024; Mukhanyo Theological College, s.a.). In the modern terminological framework, the Belhar Confession is true to its name. It is neither ancient nor catholic: thus, not a creed. It is not specific to a single church or organisation: thus, not a statement of faith. Rather, it is a document summarising several doctrines and used by a plurality of churches or organisations – a confession.

## **2.2 Forms of subscription**

### **2.2.1 Background**

Whilst subscription to the conciliar creeds is often a shibboleth of Christian orthodoxy (Schaff, 1931:8), debates over the nature and extent of confessional subscription have continued since the Reformation. Taxonomies of confessional subscription positions are largely from the resurgence of interest in confessionalism over the last half-century and necessarily involve some positional simplification. The taxonomy presented hereafter is largely a synthesis of the insights of Morton Smith, Carl Trueman, and Robert Gonzales (Gonzales Jr., 2021; Smith, 1993; Trueman, 2012b), plus the position papers given by Bryan Chapell, David Coffin, Tim Keller, and Joseph Pipa at a convocation prior to the 2001 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (Chapell, 2001; Coffin Jr., 2001; Keller, 2001; Pipa Jr., 2001).

### **2.2.2 Non- or anti-subscription**

Within Reformed (as distinct from Lutheran or anabaptist) church history, the non-subscription position often first arises in the Adopting Act of the Synod of Philadelphia, but it had English precedent. In 1719, non-conformist Presbyterian and Independent ministers of the Salters’ Hall Synod in London debated the doctrine of confessional subscription (Drysdale, 1889:502–504). The majority of these ministers rejected subscription, arguing that only the Bible could determine the orthodoxy of doctrinal formulation. They believed that confessions written by men would create divisions in the church. This was because, they argued, it is easier to determine the meaning of Scripture than of confessional statements. The Non-Subscribers won the vote, whereupon the Subscribers withdrew from the Synod, and the English non-conformist movement thereafter contained both Subscriber and Non-Subscriber lines. Across the Atlantic – a decade after Salters’ Hall, in the publications around the Adopting Act of the Synod of Philadelphia – Jonathan Dickinson, representing the Non-

Subscribers, also expressed his concern that the Bible should be maintained as the supreme standard of the church and that ecclesiastical authoritarianism and partisanship should be prevented, even to the extent of attacking the conciliar creedal subscription of Nicaea (Webster, 1857:106–107). Yet, the motivation of the Non-Subscribing Party at the Synod of Philadelphia was not primarily theological latitudinarianism but the promotion of a strongly experimental spirituality in opposition to dry orthodoxy (Hart & Muether, 2018:43, 50–54). Whilst confessionalism was formalised in American Presbyterianism by the 1729 Adopting Act, latent non-subscriptionism continued and was one factor contributing to the Old Side – New Side Split in 1741. When the reunion occurred in 1758, it included a confessional subscription. The anti-subscription position then disappeared from the mainstream of Presbyterianism, and later, Reformed subscription debates were not explicitly over the propriety of subscribing to confessions but over the nature of subscription and the accommodation of confessional dissent.

### 2.2.3 Subscription

The change of subscription formula by the 1816 National Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church provides the Latin *quia* and *quatenus* as two heads under which positive positions on subscription can be arranged (Clark, 2008:119–152; Godfrey, 2018, loc. 1813; Janssen, 2009:6, 61). Prior to this, Dutch Reformed ministers were required to subscribe to the Canons of Dort *quia* (because) it is biblical doctrine; after this, they were required to subscribe *quatenus* (insofar as) it is biblical doctrine.

**Quia subscription** can be categorised into two forms: historical and strict. Historical subscription posits the subscription to the doctrines of a confession in the manner intended by its original authors without exception, thereby implicitly requiring knowledge of, and agreement with, their presuppositions insofar as they affect the confessional statements. Strict, sometimes called “full”, subscription posits subscription to all the points of a confession without exception. Knowledge of the original meanings of the confessional words is required explicitly by historical subscriptionists and implicitly by absolute and strict subscriptionists. The use of a word changes with time.<sup>1</sup> For example, WCF 1.8 requires that the Bible be translated into the “vulgar language” of every churched nation. The modern reader needs to understand the original meaning of “vulgar” – common – in order to know that the WCF is not prescribing Bible translation into profane language. This semantic point may be evident to many readers, but it highlights the importance of understanding what the authors meant by the words and constructions they used.

The apparent distinction between historical subscription, on the one hand, and strict subscription, on the other, is that historical subscription appears to posit subscription not only to the specific doctrines of a confession as they were initially intended but also to their underlying presuppositions. By contrast, strict subscriptionists require subscription to the doctrinal formulations as initially intended but without adopting the pretext of the text. Both historical and strict subscriptionists assert that a legitimate confession may be subscribed because it teaches the exact same doctrine as the Bible.

**Quatenus subscription** is subscription to a confession insofar as it corresponds to Scripture. Again, two forms are common: system and substance subscription. System subscription requires candidates to adopt the entire system of confession while permitting exceptions to clauses that, in the judgement of the church, do not constitute a departure from the system. This judgement is necessarily somewhat subjective, but common exceptions in system subscription include the responsibility of the civil magistrate to suppress false religion in BC 36 (Clark, 2013; Van der Merwe, 1969) or the establishment principle in WLC 191 (Puritan Board, 2005). Substance subscription posits subscription to the central doctrines of a confession. Within substance subscriptionists, some define what is central with

1     Rightly or wrongly: Did Babel fix the semantic range of words?

reference to evangelical theology, resulting in a narrower subscription; others define what is central more broadly in reference to the Christian faith, resulting in a more latitudinarian subscription. Large variation exists within the *quatenus* subscription spectrum: some arrive at the same practical position as *quia* subscriptionists – that is, unreserved subscription to a confession – whilst others arrive at the same practical position as non-subscriptionists.

### 2.3 Subscription in Belhar-affirming churches

Belhar was written and adopted as a confession by the coloured DRMC and retained when it united with the black DRCA to form the URCSA. The adoption of Belhar is a precondition set by the URCSA for merger with the largely white DRC in South Africa, which has moved towards Belhar over several synods but has so far stopped short of formal subscription. Outside of Africa, it is a confession of the United Protestant Church in Belgium (UPCB), the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA), as well as a “contemporary testimony” of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). With respect to confessional subscription and Belhar, some of these denominations occupy similar ground. The URCSA stands distinct as the originator of Belhar; the RCA and PCUSA are similar mainline American denominations with similar substance subscription, and the DRC and CRCNA share a similar background and have similar conservative and liberal wings. Therefore, studying the confessional subscription of three representative churches in which Belhar subscription is either affirmed or being considered – the URCSA, the DRC and the PCUSA – can be used to illustrate the ways in which Belhar fits within their different subscription positions.

The URCSA subscribes to Belhar alongside the Three Forms of Unity, which it has historically confessed as part of the Dutch Reformed Church family in South Africa, with the four confessions having a formal parity of authority (Modise, 2016:34–35). However, at the time of writing this essay, the URCSA website listed only Belhar under their “Confessional Documents”, as shown in Figure 1. Of itself, one may not read too much into this, except when one notices that the latest documents uploaded to the URCSA’s “Documents” page are from 2016. Current 2024 news can be found on other pages of the website, so the website as a whole is not dormant. The fact that the other confessions of the Three Forms of Unity have been omitted from the confessional subscription list on the URCSA’s official website for eight years without remedy rather suggests that they are either not in very active use in the URCSA or are not, in practice, held with the same importance as Belhar. This is corroborated by the fact that the proposed reunion between the URCSA and the DRC has been inhibited by the DRC’s current hesitancy over Belhar, whilst discussion on the extent to which the understanding of subscription to the Three Forms of Unity is harmonised in both denominations appears to be absent. URCSA publications on their Reformed church identity are limited. Boesak’s earlier work interacts with Reformed confessional subscription to a limited extent. In demonstrating the legitimacy of civil disobedience in the case of a tyrannical ruler commanding disobedience to God’s Word, he appeals to Article 14 of the Scots Confession (Boesak, 1984:92–94). He emphasises the importance of maintaining Reformed confession to the lordship of Christ, but also warns not to “accept everything in our tradition uncritically” conscious that it has been in “the grip of the mighty and powerful who have so shamelessly perverted it for their own ends” (Boesak, 1984:95). He suggests the remedy to be for black Christians to “formulate a Reformed confession for our time and attention in our own words” that involves not only doctrinal acceptance but concrete action (Boesak, 1984:95–96). For Boesak (1984:96), “some Reformed expressions [...], for many redundant [...], can provide us with both prophetic clarity and pastoral comfort”; he cites HC 1 as one such example. Overall, Boesak’s argument is for distance from certain aspects of the Reformed confessional tradition whilst acknowledging the usefulness to the Christian faith of other aspects: features of a *quatenus* substance subscription. Since the URCSA’s more recent confessional publications focus exclusively on Belhar, the extent to which Boesak’s (1984) position represents the mainstream of contemporary URCSA opinion on Reformed confessionalism is unclear. Ergo, the subscription position of the URCSA and how it expects the Three Forms of Unity to interact with Belhar is therefore yet to be articulated.

### The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa's Confessional Documents:

- [Belhar History](#)
- [Belhar Belydenis](#)
- [Belhar Confession](#)
- [Boipolelo da Belhar](#)
- [Isivumo SaseBelhar](#)
- [Confession De Foi De Belhar](#)

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**Figure 1: Screenshot of the official URCSA website as of 12 June 2024 listing only the Belhar Confession in their confessional documents (Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, 2017)**

From its inception, the DRC has subscribed to the Three Forms of Unity. Today, the nature of subscription is debated within the church, with both stricter and more liberal subscription positions advanced. The DRC continues to confess the Three Forms of Unity in accordance with Scripture (Kerkorde van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk [Church Order of the Dutch Reformed Church], 2023:1). Still, confessional subscription is not part of the form of ordination to the ministry of the Word in either the Afrikaans or English versions (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk [Dutch Reformed Church], 2016, s.a.). Strauss (2017:4–5, 2018:8–9) argues that the DRC formally accepts the Three Forms of Unity but fails to apply them normatively in the life of the church, and provides several examples to support this claim. Dirk Smit (2006:143–144), one of the main authors of Belhar, argues in favour of *quia* subscription; his argument is not that confessions are beyond correction as new light is shed on the Word, but that the authority of a confession rests on its complete correspondence with the teaching of Scripture. Therefore, its authority over the church does not depend on an individual's personal judgement. As the Spirit and the Word operate in the church in new times with new challenges, new confessions, such as Belhar, are needed (Smit, 2006:144–148). He observes some limited ways in which Belhar is derivative of the BC, such as its ecclesiology (Smit, 2012:332), whilst acknowledging controversies over the status of some doctrines of the BC in the church today (Smit, 2012:329–330).

However, whilst synod deliberations in 2011 and 2013 were cautious endorsements of Belhar, it is not a confession of the DRC. On the one hand, the DRC recognised Belhar's missiological importance and its anti-racist societal message. On the other hand, it approached the confession with caution due to its possible orientation towards liberation theology and, as Van Wyngaard (2019) suggests, perhaps its reluctance to regard apartheid as heresy. Instead, its "essential content" is accepted by the DRC, and its compatibility with the Three Forms of Unity is asserted (Kerkorde van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk [Church Order of the Dutch Reformed Church], 2023:231).

The PCUSA's subscription position is well-documented. The 2016 *Book of confessions* of the PCUSA contains 12 confessions from the Nicene Creed to Belhar (Presbyterian Church (USA), 2016). The confessions are preceded in the volume by the "Confessional nature of the church report", which explains the nature of confessional subscription in the PCUSA. Several confessional statements conflicting with the current position of the PCUSA are



expressly repudiated, including the anti-Roman Catholic statements of the Reformation-era confessions and the prohibition on women elders in the Scots and Second Helvetic Confessions. Office-bearers are required to subscribe to “the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church” (Presbyterian Church (USA), 2016:xx), with the identification of these “essential tenets” devolved entirely to Presbyteries and Sessions (Presbyterian Church (USA), 2016:xx-xxi).

### 3. Confessional theology and Belhar

Belhar emerges from within the professing Reformed community, and yet some Reformed theologians have expressed reservations about the compatibility of Belhar’s theology as a Reformed confession. Three main areas of reservation are observed: the church, reconciliation, and justice and the poor (Hartney, 2011). This latter reservation is often discussed in the context of liberation theology (Fortein, 2021:9–14; Du Plooy, 2010; Van Wyngaard, 2019). However, this essay is not asking whether Belhar is a system of liberation theology; the question at hand is: Is Belhar Reformed in the historical confessional sense? Hence, this section investigates whether these reservations are valid by comparing the doctrinal propositions of Belhar in these areas with those of the historical Reformed confessions. This comparison is drawn through a simple *prima facie* reading of them while purposely not interacting with non-confessional writings on these doctrinal propositions.

Reference is made to the official English text of Belhar produced by the URCSA in 2008 (Belhar Confession, 2008). Unlike the official Afrikaans text from 1986, the 2008 English text uses gender-neutral language, replacing, for example, “Homself” (Belydenis van Belhar, 1986:4.1) with “Godself” (Belhar Confession, 2008:4.1). It is divided into four numbered sections. These sections are further divided into propositions by way of a paragraph break, although these propositions are sometimes only clauses in much longer sentences. Furthermore, these propositions are not numbered in the official text, but in order to locate them easily, their number from the top is used. In this paper, reference is made in the format Belhar [section number].[proposition number] to enable accurate location of a proposition. For example, the proposition beginning “We believe that Christ’s work of reconciliation [...]” is referenced as Belhar 2.2.

#### 3.1 Ecclesiology

The doctrine of the church is central to the motivation and theology of Belhar. Much of what it asserts is uncontroversial. The church is gathered, protected and cared for by God through all ages (Belhar 1). There is one holy, universal Christian church, which consists of saints from the entire human race (2.1). Christ’s work of reconciliation is manifested in the church (2.2), which is to be a loving, joyful and blessed community (2.5). True faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership in this church (2.7).

However, some propositions are more challenging. Belhar 2.4 states “that this unity [of the church] must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity, and hatred between people and groups is sin, which Christ has already conquered”. Yet the historical Reformed confessions state that there are legitimate reasons for which people and groups may separate from others. We are to flee from idolatry and superstition (HC 94) and avoid attempts to worship God in ways other than he has prescribed in Scripture (HC 96, WCF 21.1). BC 29 requires the separation of the true church from the false church. To maintain its unity, the church must exercise excommunication and discipline (BC 32, WCF 30.4). Church censures are, on the one hand, for unity (BC 32) and “reclaiming and gaining offending brethren” (WCF 30.3) and, on the other hand, “for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump” (WCF 30.3). This is indeed the stated purpose of the Canons of Dort: to “shut the mouths of the calumniators of sound doctrine” (CD, “Conclusion”).

### 3.2 Reconciliation

As with Belhar's ecclesiology, there is much on the theology of reconciliation in Belhar that is uncontroversial. Christ's work of reconciliation involves the reconciliation of believers with God and with one another. This is manifested in the unity of the church (2.2) by the working of God's Spirit and yet not in such a way as to absolve Christians of personal responsibility to pursue it (2.3). This reconciled unity carries manifold spiritual privileges and responsibilities (2.5, 2.6).

However, Belhar provides few clues regarding the soteriological nature of this reconciliation. The saints are "called from the entire human family" (2.1), which echoes HC 21 and posits two things. Firstly, if they are called, then salvation is not Pelagian. Secondly, there remain unreconciled humans, so Christ's work of reconciliation is not universal. So far, the historical Reformed confessions agree and, although they go into much more specificity, Belhar's lack of detail cannot itself be read as a deviation from them. The problem, again, arises in Belhar 2.4: "[...] separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered". By stating that Christ has conquered sin "between people and groups" in general, Belhar 2.4 conflicts with Belhar 2.1. Here, it is also in conflict with the historical Reformed confessions, which are very specific that only God's saints have had their sins conquered by Christ (BC 16, 17, 20-24; CD; WCF 3.5, 8.5); thus, the unregenerate remain under the power and condemnation of their own sins (BC 14, 15; CD; WCF 3.7, 6.3-6.6). This discontinuity could be resolved by a rephrasing that specifies for whom Christ has (and, by extension, has not) conquered sin: not for "people and groups" generally, but for his own people specifically.

Belhar 3.2 states "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 [...]".

Yet, as observed in the section on ecclesiology (above), there are things to which the church must rightly be irreconciled. As Belhar 2.2 notes, Christ's work reconciles believers with God and with each other, but not all things to all other things. The Christian is to hate, war against, and flee from sin and pursue righteousness (HC 56, 87; BC 21; WCF 13.2-13.3), and the reprobate shall remain eternally irreconciled from the elect and God (HC 52; BC 16, 37; CD; WCF 3.1, 6.6, 23.2).

### 3.3 The poor

Belhar is in concord with the historical Reformed confessions in its care for justice and the poor. Its doctrine that God brings justice to the oppressed, supports the downtrodden, protects strangers, and helps orphans and widows – through the ministry of the church (4.1) – is also found in the historical Reformed confessions (HC 103, 122; BC 30, 36; WCF 23.1, 26.2). This is diaconal care, not only for the poor in spirit, but also for the temporally poor, and for the exaction of just judgement without respect of persons.

However, two reservations arise with another clause in Belhar 4.1: "God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged [and] calls the church to follow him in this". Firstly, the clause is written in such a way that the reader can easily conflate the identities of the destitute, the poor and the wronged, as if they form a single group, which is to say that someone destitute *is* poor and *is* wronged. This conflation may be unintended, but it is discordant with the historical confessions. WLC 141 requires the following:

justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to every one his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the right owners thereof [...] and an endeavour, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own.

Hence, a person may, by following the proposition of WLC 141, be wealthy and yet be wronged if his goods are unlawfully detained from him. A poor person may indeed be wronged by others using unjust and unlawful means to further their own wealth. However, a person may also be poor because of their own sin if they fail to use just and lawful means to further their



own and their neighbours' wealth. This sort of conflation is repeated in Belhar 4.3, which enjoins that "the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others". A *prima facie* reading concludes that the powerful and privileged are conflated with the selfish and controlling. A sympathetic reading may conclude that the Belhar writers intended not to mean that the powerful and privileged *are* [italics: mine] selfish and must be witnessed against, but that those who are powerful *and* [italics: mine] privileged *and* [italics: mine] selfish must be witnessed against. However, if that was the intended meaning, it still means that only the powerful, privileged and selfish must be witnessed against, whilst the powerless, unprivileged and selfish do not need to be witnessed against. Either way, Belhar requires powerful and privileged people to be treated more severely than powerless and underprivileged people. Selfishness is indeed condemned in the historical confessions (HC 107, 110, 111; WLC 142). Nevertheless, it is not conflated with power or privilege. God has appointed magistrates, and it is the responsibility of all people to subject themselves to, obey, honour, respect and sustain the magistracy (BC 36, WCF 23.1). The Fifth Commandment requires the "performance of those duties which we mutually owe in our several relations, as inferiors, superiors, or equals" in our social hierarchy (WLC 126-133). There are specific sins against which the powerful must be warned (WLC 130), but there are also sins of inferiors to superiors (WLC 128).

The second reservation arising from Belhar 4.1 is the assertion of partiality to the poor, that "God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged". God is, therefore, not "in a special way" the God of those with ample means or the rich. Unhelpfully, Belhar does not define what is meant by God being God to specific groups "in a special way", but the plain meaning of the phrase denotes some form of partiality. And yet, the historical confessions do acknowledge a form of partiality in God: God demonstrates partiality by setting his free grace and love on his elect only and no others (BC 16; CD; WCF 3.5). The historical Reformed confessor may, therefore, say that God is – in a general way – the God of all men, and – in a special way – the God of his elect. However, that God shows this partiality based on the created characteristic of poverty is expressly repudiated in WCF 3.5: it is according to the "good pleasure of His will" and not because of anything "in the creature".

## 4. Conclusion

One of the preeminent features of Belhar is that it is a work of passion, forged in the heat of ecclesiastical and social controversy. Yet, perhaps partly because of this, it does not exhibit the same doctrinal precision as the historical Reformed confessions, and this inhibits its effectiveness as an ecclesiastical constitutional document. In some cases, it is difficult to determine whether apparent conflicts between the historical confessions and Belhar are due to inaccurate phraseology or reflective of underlying doctrinal difference. It is also not the task of this essay to determine this. The plain reading of Belhar reveals several discontinuities with the historical Reformed confessions. Therefore, it cannot consistently be adopted alongside them under any form of *quia* subscription. Ergo, so long as the DRC continues to assert *quia* subscription to the Three Forms of Unity, it cannot logically adopt Belhar. It could be adopted under a system-type *quatenus* subscription with additional documentation explaining, at each discontinuity, whether the church subscribes to the historical confessional formulations, to Belhar, or to something else. It could also be adopted under a substance-type *quatenus* subscription, such as practised in the PCUSA, in which individual Presbyteries and Sessions are left to determine the places in which the "essential tenets of the Reformed faith" are found in Belhar. It is logically possible to identify as a *quia* subscriptionist and, if one argues that Belhar and not the historical Reformed confessions correspond to biblical truth, subscribe to Belhar only and reject the historical Reformed confessions. However, it is logically impossible to identify as a *quia* subscriptionist and subscribe to both the historical Reformed confessions and Belhar. At the discontinuities, either the Bible teaches the doctrine of the historical Reformed confessions, or Belhar, or something else, but it cannot teach contradictory propositions.

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