

Belhar, Liturgy and Life?

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Abstract

Celebrating 25 years of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) inevitably calls for further exploration of how to live and love the Belhar Confession. I shall argue that, within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), we have discussed the acceptance of the Belhar Confession at great lengths, with hardly any suggestions of prayer and worship with the Confession itself. Much has been written in academic literature on the relationship between the Belhar Confession, the rule of faith (doctrine), and the rule of life (ethics). Yet, it is surprising that there is hardly any literature on its relation to the rule of prayer (worship). Writing from a very specific social location, I argue and suggest that our deepest challenge and opportunity, at present, is to explore how to receive, embody and celebrate the Belhar Confession by exploring its rich and varied liturgical potential and use for Christian worship throughout the entire liturgical *ordo*. Bathing the liturgy in the joyous words of the Belhar Confession might help us find new impetus in discovering and receiving each other anew.

Keywords: Belhar; liturgy; worship; prayer; *ordo*; life

Foreword

Although this year we celebrate the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA's) young life of 25 years, it goes without saying that the older Belhar Confession is inevitably part and parcel of this history and celebration. As we know so well, URCSA is not without Belhar (cf. Platjies-Van Huffel 2017, 88). The story of the not-yet-completed reunification process within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) family of churches has, on numerous occasions, revealed how important the Belhar Confession is in the reunification with URCSA, because they are simply inseparable. Although each one is also on its own more than the other—Belhar is not merely the



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gift/possession of URCSA, but from the church to the church; URCSA is confessing not merely Belhar, but also the three other confessions—one of them is indeed the key to understanding the other’s identity. In short, although I am not a member of URCSA, but of the DRC—who unfortunately still struggles to perceive and accept this gift—I cannot as an outsider imagine how the celebrations will not also deal with and reflect critically and constructively on Belhar’s presence in this history.¹

Part of the challenge I sense in the critical reflection on this history is to unlock the yet underplayed and underdeveloped role of Belhar in the church’s worship and liturgy. Much has been written on Belhar, but strangely enough, hardly anything on its potential role and use within liturgy and worship. Obviously, the dogmatic, historical, ethical, pastoral, biblical discussion and (church!) debate on Belhar is important, as this history of the past 25 years reveals. However, I wonder whether a liturgical engagement and reframing of Belhar might not help readdress and resolve much of the current challenges we face. If Dirkie Smit (2010, ix), in his foreword to Piet Naudé’s *Neither Calendar nor Clock—Perspectives on the Belhar Confession*, states that “the theological interpretation of Belhar is an ongoing task, and much still needs to be done,” then I propose that we view and reframe this challenge specifically for now as our deliberate, conscious and creative liturgical task. What might be one of the significant stumbling blocks and factors responsible for the resistance to Belhar by (at least) the DRC, namely “worship itself as a theologically contested area” (cf. Naudé 2010, 142–144, 148), may also be our secret and key to helping the church to fully receive and embody Belhar. Belhar’s giftedness does not merely lie in the faith content it reveals and brings to the table; it also assumes and implies a sensitive ethical antenna *and* creative liturgical imagination. Stated differently: Belhar goes beyond a mere general interest in themes of living unity, real reconciliation and compassionate justice. There is more to Belhar than simply these three themes, even if we keep them together as we should, because, in grasping it, we perceive how it envisions renewed liturgy and life. In short, if we are truly interested in accepting and living Belhar, *then praying with Belhar* is not merely part of the equation and a wished-for outcome, but rather a good place to start and root the process.

However, before we do so, let us also admit that this take on “URCSA 25”; “the Belhar Confession”; and “the Liturgy/liturgy”; obviously begs for further qualification and motivation. Some might object and mention that the whole theological discussion of Belhar thus far was indeed about the liturgy. How often have we not heard that confessions, in general, and Belhar, in particular, are not about confession *per se*, the mere acceptance and official signing of Belhar, but essentially about embodiment and witness, *doing* Belhar, *being* Belhar, *living* Belhar (cf. Kritzinger 2017)? As Dirkie Smit mentioned on numerous occasions in his writings, it is about how to understand “liturgy *and* life?” (cf. 2008a; 2008b), “worship *and* civil society?” (cf. 2009a), or “worship *and*

1 This article was presented at the URCSA 25 Seminar held at the University of the Free State, 12–13 April 2019.

identity?” (cf. 2013). For instance, in “worship and civil society,” Smit (2009a, 465) refers to John de Gruchy’s revealing title in one of his collections of sermons, namely as *Seeing Things Differently*, because “[i]n hearing, we learn to see. Through sermons, we learn to see differently.” Echoes of *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex convivendi*—the rule of prayer is the rule of faith is the rule of life (together)—are often between the lines or under the surface in much of what Smit writes in this regard. Smit is not only sensitising us to be aware of a dynamic interchange and relation between prayer (liturgy), faith (doctrine) and life (ethics), but also telling us that we should guard against the reverse order being or becoming the norm. In fact, some might already point out, in this instance, that Belhar exposes precisely this idea (heresy!) of *the way we lived became the way we believed and eventually the way we prayed*; or in the words of Smit:

Worship is perhaps the primary place where many of us learn to see with Christian eyes—or not. This is what was at stake in apartheid history ... In reality it is often more a reflection of society than a critical and creative interruption of society. Worship often legitimates society instead of subverting and interrupting it ... In short, one could argue that what was at risk in the apartheid story was nothing less than the very nature of Christian worship itself. (Smit 2009a, 469–471)

Jaap Durand (2016, 87–89) tells in his memoirs of how he and his students (in particular, Russel Botman, Leonardo Appies, and Nico Botha) gradually became aware, at the beginning of 1977, of how the actual problem with apartheid was not only its rottenness from a political, economic or social perspective, but also that it functioned as a theological doctrine (read: heresy) that believed in the irreconcilable nature of humanity (most specifically different cultures and races at that stage). At a most basic level, the Belhar Confession wanted to expose and unmask not only this heretical teaching and doctrine, but also this particular false way of living that served (and drew from) a particular way of praying and worshipping. In short, although it is not always framed and phrased as such in the literature, I am of the opinion that it is important to note how the Belhar Confession is, at a very basic and fundamental level, concerned with *the liturgy of life, and the life of liturgy*.

Imagining the nature and scope of worship and preaching among these lines is also encountered in good introductory theory on preaching and worship. Sally Brown and Luke Powery (2016, 17–22) mention that, besides the core rhetoric in Christian preaching that is concerned with, and focuses on declaring “Divine promise,” we also “rename and re-narrate the world through cross and resurrection” and “imaginatively rehearse for public witness.” In her excellent introductory textbook on Christian worship, Ruth Duck (2013, 8–14) also makes this point when she provides the five “R’s” of Christian worship, which we constantly need to keep together, namely ritual, revelation, response, relational, and *rehearsal*. Referring to rehearsal, she states: “Worship [is] as a way of practising love, justice, and peace in preparation for life in the world” (Duck 2013, 14). The same kind of idea is found in the apt title of Ruth Meyers’s *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission*. Her imaginative argument covers the

entire fourfold ecumenical liturgical *ordo* of the church throughout different chapters. My impression is that the depth of her insight probably lies in the chapter on the significance of intercessory prayer within Christian worship for the world as such. In this simple yet profound line, Meyers (2014, 112) states: “[T]he world comes to worship in those who gather ... intercessory prayer is certainly one such moment, for in the intercessions, the assembly gives voice to its concerns and the needs of the world.” This is the place and moment where and when we learn to speak not only for ourselves, but also for the world. The world’s sin and salvation are then viewed through Christ’s cross-and-resurrection as we name and express in, through and with Christ on its behalf. In his clearly influential, well-known and often referenced work in this particular discourse, James Smith refers in this regard—following Charles Taylor—to the “social imagination” of the liturgy. “[I]t is an understanding of the world that is precognitive and pre-reflective: it functions on an order before both thinking and believing, and it is ‘carried’ in images, stories, myths, and related practices (Taylor)” (Smith 2009, 133); with the significance and implication that “[d]octrines, beliefs, and a Christian worldview emerge from the nexus of Christian worship practices; worship is the *matrix* of Christian faith, not its ‘expression’ or ‘illustration’” (Smith 2009, 138). Closer to home, Cas Wepener (2015, 5) indeed helps us when he speaks in this regard of *bodily based epistemology* when doing ritual-liturgical research. A good and classic example in this regard is Calvin and those who propose and argue why children should also partake in the ritual of the Lord’s Supper so that they may also “understand” the sermon, the service of the Word of God. We learn and sense to understand things only after we have started to do them through ritual, our senses and embodiment. Ritualisation, participation and embodiment is (precious!) learning. Or, in the words of Don Saliers (2012, 297): “The study of worship understands that the body remembers long after the mind may be dimmed.”

Against this background, it is clear that, in the worship services, we already sense some form of embodiment (“embodied knowledge”) that imagines and views reality anew. If Belhar is really concerned about what happens in the liturgy after the liturgy, how we embody and witness Belhar’s unity in freedom, real reconciliation and compassionate justice in both church and society, then surely praying (also!) with Belhar on “the eighth day” in worship might renew our liturgical lives, as we worship and witness to the fact that “Jesus is the Lord” (Article five of the *Belhar Confession* 1986). Stated differently: To continue with the ongoing theological interpretation of Belhar’s significance for the church, I would like to suggest that we start to live *as we pray with Belhar* as a potent liturgical resource that already shows some signs on a Sunday of being ritualised, witnessing to revelation, spurring our responsiveness to the Gospel, stimulating our relationships with one another and the world, and rehearsing the embodiment/longing of unity in freedom, the celebration of real reconciliation and the pursuance of compassionate justice. It is thus assumed that, speaking from my own social location, we do face a strange gap of knowledge in this regard.

I am well aware of the limitations and suspicions in the current and dominant political climate of identity politics, and that I need to take cognisance of my own epistemological dislocation/displacement in taking on this endeavour. On numerous occasions, the DRC responded to Belhar (and those who truly confess its witness) in shocking ways such as when in 1990, they mentioned “*that the content addresses issues that are of particular concern to the DRMC*” (Naudé 2010, 144), as if to say that the issues you are concerned about are your issues and not ours, and thus suggesting that we are believing in a different God and gospel. (Naudé’s [2010, 144–5] tongue in cheek remark in this regard is that clearly the “Armenian heresies in Dort,” or the “Marcionism, Arianism, Epicureanism, and Pelagianism [issues dealt with in the Belgic Confession], are closer to the heart of the DRC’s faith than a contemporary expression in simple language about unity, reconciliation, and justice.”)

Or, to recall another so-called controversial issue in the “reception” of Belhar by the DRC: if God “is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged” (Belhar Article four), then “what about us? Are we now excluded?” (cf. Smit 2009b, 337ff; Naudé 2016, 38). Besides the fact that such a reading is partial and selective, as it ignores the rest of the formulation, namely “that He calls his church to follow Him in this,” it actually misses the radical inclusive nature of the Gospel coming to the fore in this special way (cf. Conradie 2017, 159–160). Stated differently: God stands by the poor not because they are poor—as in a class struggle—or, in a particular way, the God of the working class, but rather *with them because there is no injustice in Himself* (Naudé 2016, 17). What makes this last response even more lamentable and tragic is that it truly struggles to consider not only other people’s lived reality and experience, but also most significantly missing our—or even more to the point their “own”!—theological and baptismal identity as being immersed into a one new family within the one body of Christ. Then, of course, I do not even want to go to the extremely problematic and deplorable proposal of having an optional confession and thus once again revealing a real contradiction and lack of living knowledge of Belhar’s content.

The motivation behind these arguments that we need to ensure and guard against schisms in the church is strange, because it does not acknowledge and lament the actual schism already present within the church. Despite popular belief, Belhar longs to re-establish and re-unite us. In addition, it is worth noting that in the so-called “schism,” we actually cannot lose people we never had, and moreover will receive sisters and brothers of the living, real and visible church in the process.

Against this background and from my particular locality, I sense the need to be extremely sensitive and careful with such a liturgical text and resource that want to neither imprison nor paralyse creative liturgical proposals and embodiment, nor empower one to be prescriptive, knowing better, proposing and speaking a last and final word for others on their behalf. Either extreme contradicts praying with Belhar. Between being conscious and self-critical of my own epistemological dislocation/displacement and limitations, and seeing the need, the opportunity, a barren land of still so much to

explore and do with Belhar in the liturgy of the worship service, we take the modest yet courageous step of starting to play and pray more with Belhar in the liturgical *ordo*.

The DRC's *Handboek vir die Erediens—Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk* of 2010—especially when compared to its predecessor of 1984—reveals the kind of liturgical renewal the DRC underwent post 1994; of being particularly informed and up to date. However, a closer look from a specific perspective (as in confessing Belhar) also reveals, unfortunately, a displaced and dislocated embodiment. Over the past decades there have been tremendous liturgical creativity, freedom of expression and productivity within DRC circles (cf. Clasen 2010; Jacobs 2002; Müller 1990; Van der Merwe 2001; Wepener 2011; Wepener and Van der Merwe 2009), but the absence of Belhar (and other texts associated therewith [cf. the various appendixes in Naudé 2010, 219–236]) is striking. Why is it that when I start my (re)search to find some creative liturgical suggestions of how to pray and play with Belhar in die entire liturgical *ordo* of the worship service, I find more information and creative suggestions and proposals in overseas resources? In this instance, I refer not only to the official liturgical resources and documentation within the DRC (and, to some extent, to URCSA and the rest of the family), but also to scholarly literature probing and exploring this suggestion. Besides the excellent work done by Kritzinger (2014; 2017) and his congregation and their scholarly documentation in this regard, I am not aware of anything else available over 25 years on. In fact, to problematise the situation even further: it is in the DRC, and probably even wider, not simply a case of struggling to receive and live Belhar, but the confessional tradition *per se*. In the words of Willie Jonker (1994, 153), the actual problem in the DRC is not only the reception of Belhar, but also the living (reception and familiarity) with the confessions *per se*.

When Russel Botman (2010, 8) says: “The confession of Belhar was ahead of its time. Although it developed in the 1980s, its real meaning and power will be revealed in the 21st century. A generation of the 1980s gave birth to a source of faith that will be the glue of generations to come” [author’s translation], my suggestion is that we recognise and explore this further liturgically. Confessions, and the Belhar Confession in particular, provide the church, especially the DRC, with a potent liturgical resource, words to witness to the Word, to pray to God, throughout the liturgical *ordo* and life. Imagine what can happen when our liturgies are bathed in the words Belhar provides us?

On Praying and Worshipping with Belhar: In the Life of the Liturgy and the Liturgy of Life

GATHERING²

† Call to Worship:

Liturgist (L): We believe in the triune God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Congregation (C): **Mother of us all,³
who through Word and Spirit
gathers, protects and cares
for the church from the beginning of the world
and will do to the end.**

(Based on the Belhar Confession, Article one.)

† Greeting:

L: From the love of God,
the grace of Christ,
and fellowship of the Holy Spirit:
a living and visible *unity*

C: – **established only in freedom and not under constraint;**

2 In this proposed liturgy, we follow the fourfold ecumenical order of: i) Gathering; ii) Service of the Word; iii) Celebration of the Meal at the Table; and iv) Being Sent/Commissioned into the World. This is one of the great re-discoveries of “Liturgical Renewal” in the 20th century, as we became more appreciative of the way in which the church worshipped in its early years (cf. Quivik, 2009).

3 See Landman (2017, 363) who convincingly shows “that the concept of justice is presented at an advanced level in the Confession of Belhar; however, it is regrettable that, in this confession, justice is embodied in sexist language. The article suggests certain changes in the language of the Confession of Belhar in order to include women.” A few pages on, Landman (2017, 368) states the matter explicitly: “When the reconciliation between believers and God is taken as the basis for unity, but God is described as a man (‘Father’) and in male terms, one cannot help but suspect that, here, women are not confessed to be believers in equal terms. So, in this instance too, the use of sexist language deprives women of their equal status as believers, and hijacks the just God to belong to a specific gender.” Landman (2017, 369) proceeds to suggest that in Belhar’s case we should consider to confess “Father, Son” rather with “Caretaker, Saviour.” Though I fully agree with her objection, I wonder whether it is the best way forward. Migliore (2004, 287–288) helps us when he remarks: “Exclusively functional trinitarian language veers in the direction of modalism ... Guided by God’s Word and Spirit, the church should be open to fresh Trinitarian imagery that will complement—not replace—the traditional images ... This might, for example, take the form: ‘I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; the Source of Life, the Word of Life, and the Gift of Life.’” Another very good alternative to take note of—for which we opted in the above text after listening to various voices—is the widely accepted form used by the Riverside Church in New York: “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all” (Duck, 2013, 177). In short, we do not want to lose relational language, and thus it is better to add words that complement, show and honour the rich ways in which God continues to reveal Godself between the lines and throughout Scripture to us.

- L: real and radical *reconciliation*
C: – **generating new possibilities of life for society and the word;**
L: and compassionate *justice*
C: – **where we stand by people in any form of suffering and need.**
Amen.

† **Mutual Greeting:**

From time to time it is good when God's words of greeting are followed by a mutual greeting in which worshippers extend the words they have heard to each other. The traditional and well-known "Christ's peace be with you" may be introduced with the following lines from Belhar:

As God "by his life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also the irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity," so let us pass the peace of Christ to each other (*whereby we allow worshippers some time and space to greet each other ... and witness how "God by his life-giving Word and Spirit enables his people to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world."*) (Cf. Belhar Article three.)

† **Welcoming:**

Often it is also good if words of welcoming resonate as further extension of the Triune God's greeting in which the gifts of unity, reconciliation and justice are expressed. Some of the phrases in Belhar's three main articles indeed provide us with words that reveal the unique content of the church's hospitality when we say:

Welcome in the name of Jesus Christ!

In Christ we share the gift and goal of visible *unity* within the new human community.

In Christ we embody *reconciliation* by embracing people who are often socially excluded and exploited.

In Christ we practise *justice* by standing where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged.

To the stranger in need of community, the estranged who longs to embrace the other, and to all who hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness, this congregation opens wide its doors and welcomes all in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

† Service of Baptism:

- For God's invitation and promises for Baptism:

Besides the numerous scriptural texts to state in this regard—see, for instance, the 14 classic texts provided by Titcombe Steenwyk and Witvliet (2016, 261–263)—it is also possible to make use of various summary paragraphs, such as from the Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 66, 69–70, 74; and Article 34 of the Belgic Confession (cf. Titcombe Steenwyk and Witvliet 2016, 267–268). Following this line of thought, it is also possible to draw from Belhar's Article two (where some of these classic baptismal passages surface) and state the following by asking:

L: To what kind of community do we primarily belong?

C: **We belong to one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints from the entire human family.**

L: What does initiation through baptism into this community mean to us?

C: **We know as community of believers that we have been reconciled with God and with one another. Becoming part of the unity within this community is both a gift and goal for the church of Christ. Through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought.**

L: In what ways do we manifest our baptismal lives and identities?

C: **In that we love one another; that we practise and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one 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, are obedient to One Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby filling the law of Christ that we need one another and build up one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity.**

L: What about the diversity and differences within this community?

C: **This unity is established only in freedom and not under constraint; and the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions,**

**as well as the various languages and cultures,
are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ,
opportunities for mutual service and enrichment
within the one visible people of God.**

L: What is thus the only condition for membership in this church?

C: **Only faith in Jesus Christ.**

- **Responses of faith towards Baptism:**

In the early church, it was also the custom to turn first to the west and renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of evil, and then to the east to profess our faith in the Triune God. The three rejection clauses of Belhar can surely help us describe what this could mean in our day and context. This applies not only as a once-off and only suitable for believers baptism, but also in the case of infant baptism as the community as such are called to witness that Christian life involves both dying and rising with Christ. In this symbolic turn from the west to the east, growing deeper into our death and resurrection in Christ, we can renounce Satan and all evil forces with the three rejection clauses of Belhar, and then proceed to profess together the Apostles' Creed in response to our own baptism in His name.

L: Do you/we renounce any doctrine which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation?

C: **I/we renounce that!**

L: Do you/we renounce any doctrine which sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ?

C: **I/we renounce that!**

L: Do you/we renounce any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel?

C: **I/we renounce that!**

L: Now that we know what we renounce, reject and do not believe in, we can also proceed to profess our faith.

Do you/we believe in God the Father?

C: **I believe in God, the Father almighty ...**

L: Do you/we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

C: **I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord ...**

L: Do you/we believe in God the Holy Spirit?

C: **I believe in the Holy Spirit ...**

- **Welcoming new members:**

If we have not used any of the suggestions under “mutual greeting,” “welcoming” or “God’s invitation and promises for baptism,” then we could use some of these in this instance as our (deepened communal) response to God’s grace for a new life in the Christian community.

† **Call to confession:**

In the Belhar Confession, “The Accompanying Letter of Belhar” is not only important for the interpretation and witness of the confession per se, but also provides us with important language and significant formulations to guide and lead us in our call to confession. In itself, the call to confession is not an exercise that shames us into confession, but a word of grace to embody and witness what we already believe to be true, namely that, in Christ, we have been reconciled with God and with one another. Taking our cue from “The Accompanying Letter of Belhar” we might also note how we are graced to confess our sins before God and one another.

The first paragraph in “The Accompanying Letter of Belhar” testifies: “We make this confession not as a contribution to a theological debate nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand.”

Furthermore, towards the end of the third paragraph: “[T]his Confession must be seen as a call to a continuous process of soul-searching together, a joint wrestling with the issues, and a readiness to repent in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world. It is certainly not intended as an act of self-justification and intolerance, for that would disqualify us in the very act of preaching to others.”

In this spirit, let us offer our prayers to God; let us confess our sin.

† **Prayer of confession:**

Following paragraphs one, three and four in “The Accompanying Letter of Belhar,” our prayer of confession might read like this:

L: “Along with many, we confess our guilt, in that we have not always witnessed clearly enough in our situation and so are jointly responsible for the way in which those things which were experienced as sin and confessed to be so or should have been experienced as and confessed to be sin have grown in time to seem self-evidently right and to be ideologies foreign to the scriptures.”

C: Lord, have mercy.

L: We confess that we often “take a half-truth for the whole.”
We know the power of deception,
and thus confess “that we know we are not liberated by the seriousness,
sincerity or intensity of our certainties,
but only by the truth in the Son.”

C: Christ, have mercy.

L: We confess “that none of us can throw the first stone,
and none is without a beam in their own eye.
We know that the attitudes and conduct that work against the gospel
Are present in all of us and will continue to be so.”

C: Lord, have mercy.

L: “Our prayer is that the pain and sadness we speak of
will be pain and sadness that lead to salvation.”

**C: *Kyrie eleison*
Christe eleison
*Kyrie eleison.***

† **Assurance of pardon:**

L: Hear the good news:
God has entrusted to his church
the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ.
Know that God by his life-giving Word and Spirit
has conquered the powers of sin and death,
and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity;
that God’s life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new
obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world.
(Belhar Article three).

C: Thanks be to God!

† **The passing of the peace:**

L: “We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope, liberation, salvation and
true peace to our country” (Concluding sentence from “The Accompanying
Letter of Belhar.”)
As God has given us peace through Christ, so let us start/continue to pass the
peace of Christ to each other.

Whereby we allow the community time and space to move around and share
the peace of Christ with one another ... and after a while we conclude with:

L: The peace of Christ be with you all.

C: And also with you.

† **Thanksgiving:**

*If we are not going to use Belhar’s doxology (Article five’s concluding section) later
during the fourth and last part of the service (the sending), it may be well suited in this
instance, in order to bring our first movement of gathering to a worthy ending.*

L: In gratitude for God’s grace, we give thanks now with joy.

**C: Jesus is Lord!
To the one and only God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Mother of us all,
be the honour and the glory for ever and ever.
Amen.**

SERVICE OF THE WORD

† Epiclesis:

Spirit of life-giving words,
of real Christian freedom and responsibility,
the only authority and only ground upon which we are allowed to stand here,
the only reason why we have something to say and to proclaim,
and the only reason why people listen, hear and obey,
is because Holy Scriptures is your Word for us.
Let no other motives or convictions,
however valid they may be,
give us the right to use these words
we are about to hear in proclaiming your Word.
Amen.

- *Based on the second paragraph from "The Accompanying Letter of Belhar."*

Lord our God,
Your life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death,
through the Spirit your Word speaks of real and radical reconciliation,
a living unity in freedom amidst diversity and difference,
and compassionate justice and true peace on earth.
We ask Lord that your life-giving Word and Spirit
will enable the church to live in a new obedience
which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world.
Let us as your church,
and in the hope so too your world,
hear the revelation of your Word with joy.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray this.
Amen.

- *Based on the Confession of Belhar, especially Article three.*

† Introductions to the profession of faith:

"We do not make this confession from God's throne and from on high, but before God's throne and before other human beings. We plead therefore, that this Confession should not be misused by anyone with ulterior motives and also that it should not be resisted to

serve such motives. Our earnest desire is to lay no false stumbling blocks in the way, but to point to the true stumbling block Jesus Christ the rock.”

- *From the last section of paragraph two in “The Accompanying Letter of Belhar.”*

† **Profession of our churches’ faith:**⁴

- L: We believe in one God
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Mother of us all,
Who gathers, protects and nourishes the church
from the beginning of the world to the end.
- C: The church is one, the church is holy, the church is universal.
It is the community of God’s children, called together from the whole of
humanity.**
- L: We believe that the reconciling work of Christ gives birth to a uniting church
because church unity is both a gift and a goal we need to strive for.
- C: The unity of the church must become visible
so that the people around us can see
how separation and hatred are overcome in Christ.**
- L: We believe that genuine faith in Jesus Christ
is the only condition of membership in this Christian church.
- C: We praise God that identity politics
does not determine who belongs to this church.**⁵
- L: We believe that God has entrusted to the church the message of reconciliation
and that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the
world.
- C: So, we reject the belief that this gospel encourages separation of people
on the basis of race, gender, class, culture or sexual identity,
or any particular identity politics for that matter.**

4 I am aware of two versions in which Belhar is used in this regard, namely URCSA’s Worship Book 2016 (cf. Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Modise 2017, 495-496 in Boesak 2017), and The United Protestant Church in Belgium’s *De Belijdenis van Belhar 20 jaar* (2018, 20). There are minor differences, in this instance, between the two churches’ use, and our own proposal follows both of them closely in its structuring and formulations. Still, the above proposal is different, as I have decided to follow the one in one place, and the other in other places. In addition, I have also added concepts such as “Mother of us all” (as explained earlier), and opted rather for “identity politics” as inclusive of all the different (and growing) identity markers being listed in both the other two proposals, and for “vulnerable people” as a more inclusive and gender-neutral term in the sentence where women feature (seemingly “exclusively”) as widows in the Confession.

5 Whereas the Confession itself only specifically refers to “race,” “culture” and “class,” both the two proposals we follow, in this instance, added (justifiably and correctly) the category of “gender” to the list. Boesak (2017, 428) makes a strong and convincing argument that this should also include gay people. I wonder whether it is not better to go to the heart of the matter and capture and qualify this ever-growing list with the concept of “identity politics.”

- L: We believe that God wants to bring about true justice and lasting peace on earth;
we believe that God is, in a special sense,
the God of the suffering, the poor and the downtrodden.
- C: **God gives justice to the oppressed and bread to the hungry;
God sets captives free and makes the blind to see;
God protects vulnerable people⁶
and obstructs the plans of the wicked.**
- L: We believe that the church is the property of God
and that it should stand where God stands:
against injustice and with those who are wronged.
- C: **So we reject every policy that causes injustice
and every teaching that allows injustice to flourish.**
- L: We are called to confess and to do all this
in obedience to Jesus Christ, our only Lord:
even if authorities or laws oppose this;
even if punishment and suffering are the result.
- C: **Jesus is Lord! We will follow Him!
To the one God,
Mother of us all,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be honour and glory
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

CELEBRATION OF THE MEAL AT THE TABLE

If we have not done the “passing of the peace,” as suggested earlier (as an enactment of our reconciliation), or shared God’s greeting with our mutual greeting or welcoming of each other in the congregation, it could also serve well, in this instance, as we move in our response from the “the service of the Word” into our “celebration at the table.”

† Responses of praise and prayer:

- Invitation to the giving of the offerings:

Besides the many scriptural passages to state in our invitation to the offering, we may also draw from Belhar Article four:

⁶ See Landman (2017, 367) who objects to the way in which the moral agency of women is portrayed in the confession, because the only explicit reference to them is as “widows” in Article four. Instead of listing only some of those names, in this instance, (and then be guilty of exclusion), or all of them (and then susceptible to sexism), I wonder whether it is not better to opt for a more collective and sensitive term such as “vulnerable people” in this regard.

“In a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; ... that God supports the downtrodden, protects the strangers, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; that God wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right; that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need ...” Let us present the offerings of our life and labour to the Lord.

SENDING/COMMISSIONING INTO THE WORLD

† Prayers of the people (Intercession):

In offering our prayers of thanksgiving and intercession, interceding for the needs of both church and world—and especially dealing with the themes of unity in community, embodied reconciliation and compassionate justice—we may invite others to join us in this prayer with the following words:

As the church belongs to God, stands where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; witnessing against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others (Belhar Article four), let us join Christ in intercessory prayer for the world.

† Announcements:

Against the background of Article four in the Belhar Confession that states: “God wishes to teach people of God what is good and to seek the right,” we have the following announcements:

† Call to discipleship:

L: Now that we have gathered,
heard and celebrated God’s Word,
we are dismissed into the world
with the following call:

C: **We believe in obedience to Jesus Christ, our only Head,
we are called to confess and to do all these things,
even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them
and punishment and suffering be the consequence.**

† Doxology:

L: Jesus is Lord!
C: **To the one God and only God,**
L: Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
C: **Mother of us all,**

L: be the honour and the glory for ever and ever.

C: **Amen.**

† **Benediction:**

As we go forth in God's name, let the living unity in freedom amidst all the diversity and difference, and the real and radical reconciliation, and the compassionate justice of which the Belhar Confession speaks, continue to be a part of our worship in this world (whereupon a blessing from Scripture follows).

Afterword

Let me state, in a short reflective afterword, what I hope has become clear from the above. First, Belhar not only deals with our faith, belief and doctrine, nor with the inherent embodiment of our lives, witness and ethics as an inevitable part thereof, but it also assumes *and* implies—inspires *and* corrects—our worship, prayer and liturgy. We know that *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* and *lex (con)videndi* belong inherently together, and that a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the rule of prayer, faith and life (together) has become clear. We shall probably continue to struggle with the faith and life of Belhar if we neglect or underplay worship with Belhar in the liturgy (in its fullest sense). Exploring this interconnected whole between worship, faith and life—and vice versa—will surely help us discover that Belhar is not something we have or possess, but who we all are called to be. In living prayerfully with Belhar, we continue to become in all of life who we confess to be. It is hoped that living liturgically with Belhar may help us overcome any distance or separation between Belhar and us.

Secondly, as we ritualise and rehearse Belhar throughout the liturgical *ordo*, we increasingly sense and appreciate Belhar's own liturgical *ordo*, movement and nature. Just as the liturgy frames our lives, we have come to note and appreciate how Belhar reframes our lives. Just as we cannot follow the liturgy only in one section or part of the *ordo*, we cannot confess Belhar in only one particular article without bearing the rest in mind. Stated differently: If liturgy/Belhar reframes our lives, then unity, reconciliation and justice not only belong inherently together, but also the unique freedom in the gathering (Article one) *and* the particular responsibility in the sending (Article five) (cf. Smit 2012, 188–190). Hearing, exploring and confessing the words of Belhar throughout the liturgy in worship—serving the Word not only in preaching and in the sacraments, but also in the way in which we gather and are commissioned in the end—will surely help reframe and deepen our liturgical lives even further. In short, let us caution to view, reserve and use Belhar only in one or two (expected) places in the liturgy, and rather explore, live and love Belhar throughout the life of liturgy and the liturgy of life. It provides us with the necessary words, vocabulary, grammar, and phrases to do so. Moreover, the above is a first small step. There is still so much more to do and explore. This obviously also implies the necessary correction and revision of what was suggested above.

In conclusion, this cannot be the last, final word on this matter. This is not the mere task of one, or even two, three or four individuals. This task belongs to the church, to all of us; all of us are called to see, seek, search and discern where and how we may accept, correct and explore the Confession of Belhar in this regard. Moreover, this should not happen with Belhar alone, but also with all the confessions we have. What is true of Belhar above is also true of all the confessions we have. They are there to be believed, lived and prayed. Rediscovering and renewing our confessions liturgically might help us experience how we and our worship services are rediscovered and renewed ... with imaginative effects expected within the next 25 years.

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