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Confessing Belhar Then and Now

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Abstract

In this introductory essay, we reflect on what it means to understand Belhar as a confession in the Reformed churches today, a document of a *theologia viatorum* and a living authority in mutual recognition that offers guidelines for an ongoing journey in which faithfulness requires ongoing revisiting and revising, historical, systematic, and constructive reflection, critique, and discernment. We situate Belhar in its context of ecclesial and political struggles against apartheid in South Africa, introduce its main tenets, and trace its reception and ongoing significance while also noting criticism, and give an overview over the pieces collected in this volume.

Keywords

Belhar Confession – apartheid – Reformed confessions – confessing – authority – status confessionis

In the “Preface” to *Church Dogmatics* III/4, Karl Barth remarks that the confessions are not to be treated as “homes” in which one “settles down.”¹ They are, rather, maps that guide the journey that we must “go through again and again.”² Like manna from heaven, the witness of the confessions must be gathered anew day by day. Their theology is a dynamic *theologia viatorum* that calls us to God as it sends us to witness. As we celebrate the Belhar Confession and its legacy, there is a temptation to settle down and make ourselves at home with Belhar. One form of settling is to delimit our engagement to historical reflection—to say definitively what Belhar was. Another is to delineate its theology once and for all. To say conclusively what Belhar is.

Our intent in this volume is to do neither. Instead, we follow Barth’s advice and traverse the paths mapped by Belhar again and anew. “[T]he Confession of the Church must not be left at home in a museum, but rather must be carried in front of them, and they must go behind it, when they move into their battles. It is not enough for the Church to have a confession. They must live by it,”³ writes Dirk Smit, a coauthor of Belhar, quoting Eberhard Busch’s reflection on the Barmen Declaration, another confession that figures prominently in the story of Belhar. Confessions are documents of struggle, and as they give witness of those struggles, they also offer direction and guidance for new and different situations of struggle. But living by a confession is the opposite of an unwavering dogmatism. Following Belhar as a banner that leads and guides likewise demands critical and constructive interpretation of its witness, both then and now. Taking our bearings from Belhar and undertaking new lines of inquiry through its witness requires insight into its contextual origins and thus necessitates revisiting and revising the history of the confession and the confessing movement to which it belongs. Taking our bearings from Belhar also means

1 The word rendered as ‘Confession’ in the English translation is *Konfession*. This term in the original German indicates a theological tradition or community. It carries the sense of ecclesial ‘denomination’ (e.g., Lutheran or Reformed) rather than theological ‘declaration’ (e.g., Belhar or Westminster). Even so, *mutatis mutandis*, Barth’s observation applies to confessional documents as much as to denominational traditions.

2 Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/4: *Die Lehre von der Schöpfung* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1951); *Church Dogmatics* III/4: *The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. Geoffrey Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. George Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961). Hereafter, CD. Subsequent citations will be by volume, part, paragraph, and section with English and German pagination: e.g., CD III/4, xiii/3.

3 Dirk Smit, “Barmen and Belhar in Conversation: A South African Perspective,” *Deel* 47:1–2 (2017). Cf. Eberhard Busch, *Die Barmer Thesen 1934–2004* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2004), 10; Eberhard Busch, *The Barmen Theses Then and Now: The 2004 Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary*, trans. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 4, emphasis original.

attending precisely to the contextual nature of confessions that might demand formulating new and different words in new and different circumstances in order to do justice to its spirit rather than its letter. “*We, here, now, confess faith in this!*” is the nature and substance of Reformed confession that gestures toward universality precisely from the transparent historical and social particularity of its witness.⁴

In that spirit, several of the essays in this volume began as presentations at a pair of events marking the fortieth anniversary of Belhar’s composition. In October 2022, the Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary and the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary cohosted an international webinar on the theme “Confessing Then and Now: Thinking with Belhar in North America.” In November 2022, the Reformed Theology and History Unit of the American Academy of Religion hosted a panel “Reflecting on the Belhar Confession After Forty Years” at its Annual Meeting. Those presentations and the essays that emerged from them, as well as the additional contributions included here, revisit and revise the history of the Belhar Confession and its reception in order to revitalize its witness, especially within Reformed theological and ecclesial circles.

The story of the Belhar Confession is a complex and compelling tale of theological imagination, ecclesial contestation, and political confrontation, as several of the essays in this volume demonstrate. For now, it is worth reminding ourselves that the events leading to Belhar make sense only in the larger and longer context of the colonization and decolonization of South Africa. The Dutch subdued and settled the Western Cape beginning in the mid-1600s. They ruled until 1795, when the English invaded. Although the English prevailed, resistance and conflict persisted for more than a century through the two Anglo-Boer Wars (1880–1881 and 1899–1902). As the English expanded the Cape Colony from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, the Dutch were forced further and further west and north, where they reestablished independent colonies in Transvaal, Natal, and the Orange Free State. The tenuous conflict between Dutch and English colonizers persisted until the 1910 establishment of the Union of South Africa, which integrated the three Dutch colonies into the English Cape Colony as an independent nation of the British Commonwealth.

4 Karl Barth, citing John Calvin in his passionate lecture to the World Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches in Cardiff 1925: Karl Barth, “The Desirability and Possibility of a Universal Reformed Creed,” in *Theology and Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 116.; Karl Barth, “*Wünschbarkeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses*,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925* (GA III.19), ed. Holger Finze-Michaelsen (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1990), 616.

This geopolitical and sociocultural confrontation between the English and the Dutch was imbued with theological and providential significance. As the English forced them northwest, the Boers, as Dutch settlers came to be called, interpreted their experience through the narratives of Exodus. They understood their journey of resettlement, “the Great Trek,” as both an oppressive human exile and a miraculous divine deliverance. They believed that the 1838 Battle of Blood River, during which a Voortrekker wagon train survived attack by an overwhelming force of Zulu, was a sign of divine providence—a vindication of their cause against the British and an indication that it was God’s will for them to establish new homelands. The Boers’ claim that the Exodus narratives legitimized their initial settler-colonial enterprise and eventual apartheid regime might strike contemporary North Atlantic readers as absurd, especially since the Exodus figures so prominently in Black theologies of liberation. Although inverted in terms of racial ideology—settler-colonial domination versus postcolonial liberation—the way the Exodus narrative functions in both contexts as a divine mandate for these otherwise diametrically opposed geopolitical projects has uncanny similarities.

In South Africa, the hoped-for liberation from British hegemony would not come until the 1948 election of the National Party on an ethno-nationalist platform. When it did, the Afrikaners, as the Boers came to be known, set out to codify and intensify racial segregation into the regime of modern apartheid. The architecture of “separate development,” as apartheid was called, was the creation of the Dutch Reformed Church, who initiated ecclesial segregation in the late 1800s when it established “daughter churches” for nonwhites: the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC, Black / “Colored”), the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA, African / “Bantu”), and the Reformed Church in South Africa (RCSA, Indian). Separate development functioned in apartheid South Africa much the way “separate but equal” functioned in Jim Crow America. However, unlike the Black churches in the United States, which were founded by Blacks as a means of liberation and self-determination, the South African daughter churches were founded by whites as a means of segregation and subjugation. Indeed, what began with ecclesial partition in the 1880s became legally and politically institutionalized apartheid segregation, from the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Population Registration Act (1950) all the way to forced resettlements into tribal “Bantustans” in the 1960s.

Resistance to colonization and segregation is as old as the seventeenth-century Dutch conquest of the Cape. Ecclesial resistance to congregational segregation is at least as old as the boycotts that followed the nineteenth-century racial partition of the churches. The Wynberg Circuit (Cape Town) released an immediate denunciation of apartheid and its purported biblical basis in 1948.

Other landmarks of ecclesial protest discussed throughout this volume include the 1955 *Statement on Apartheid* by the South African Catholic Bishops Conference, the 1961 *Cottesloe Declaration*, and the 1968 *Message to the People* of the South African Council of Churches. Two of the most crucial antecedents to Belhar are the tandem declarations of a *status confessionis* by the Lutheran World Federation in 1977 and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1982. These ecumenical declarations set the stage for the Belhar Confession and its most immediate precedents.

The text of the confession itself does not explicitly mention apartheid. Rather, it confesses three central beliefs at the heart of the gospel: unity, reconciliation, and justice. The acclamation that “Jesus is Lord” grounds all three: He is the head of the church, and condition of membership can only be faith in him. In him, the reconciliation of all people with God has been achieved once and for all. In him, God has revealed himself once and for all as “the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people.” Confessing faith in him, and celebrating unity, reconciliation, and justice as gifts of divine grace in Jesus Christ, the confession also emphasizes their nature as an obligation for the church. It demands that the unity constituted by God “must become visible” in the church and the world rather than absolutizing “natural diversity” or “sinful separation” into segregated ecclesial and political structures. It cautions that the reconciliation achieved once and for all in Jesus Christ is obscured and obstructed where “alienation, hatred and enmity” continue to be promoted. It insists that “God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged,” and that subsequently, “the Church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged.” The confession summarizes the threefold divine gift and the threefold divine obligation in the words of the earliest Christian creed, already found in the New Testament as a baptismal formula: “Jesus is Lord.” It thus effectively claims its stand as an interpretation and explication of the church’s true faith, performed rhetorically in the traditional form of scriptural foundation, statements of faith, and subsequent rejections.⁵

The Belhar Confession, drafted in 1982 and adopted by the DRMC in 1986, emerged at the intersection of ecclesial and political anti-apartheid movements. The South African Confessing Church’s ecclesial opposition to apartheid was intertwined with wider sociopolitical opposition. Clergy members

5 *The Confession of Belhar*, <https://www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions/the-belhar-confession/>, accessed January 28, 2026.

such as Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane, and many others figured prominently in the United Democratic Front, as did countless thousands of laity. Among the most important national ecumenical organizations were the South African Council of Churches, the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa, and the *Belydende Kring* (Confessing Circle), each of which released influential theological statements against apartheid in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although these three organizations were interracial and interdenominational, Black leadership and membership predominated, especially clergy and laity from the DRMC. These organizations performed roles roughly analogous to those of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the U.S. American civil rights movement.⁶

The details of Belhar's emergence are discussed throughout the essays in this volume. For now, it is enough to say that the Belhar Confession was the result of a broad-based grassroots ecclesial movement rooted in the congregations and organizations of the Black Reformed Churches. It is a confession from below, a postcolonial African witness from the Global South to the ecumenical church contesting white supremacy. Thus, the consequence and influence of Belhar extends well beyond the nation of South Africa and the continent of Africa, as its reception has quickly shown.

The confession's most immediate effect was twofold. First, during apartheid, Belhar catalyzed ecclesial resistance during the struggle's climactic decades of the 1980s and 1990s. Second, following the fall of apartheid through legislative repeal, a new constitution, and national elections in the early 1990s, the Belhar Confession was the basis for the 1994 union of the DRMC and RCA as the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). However, the unification accomplished by URCSA was limited to the two primary Black Reformed churches. Although the Dutch Reformed Church disavowed apartheid and reopened its congregations to mixed membership, beginning with the *Vereeniging Statement* of 1989, neither it nor the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, the two predominant white Afrikaner denominations, has joined URCSA.⁷ In a cruel irony for the DRC, a primary obstacle to reunification is the Belhar Confession itself, which they refuse to recognize as a fourth form of unity alongside the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Belgic Confession. Although the DRC does not object to the substance of Belhar, it denies the doc-

6 It is worth noting that the Christian Institute, an interracial ecumenical center for theological reflection and political organization, often reprinted speeches and news stories about the civil rights movement in *Dunamis*, its widely circulated newsletter.

7 See Piet J. Naudé, *Neither Calendar nor Clock: Perspectives on the Belhar Confession* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 138–148.

ument's status as a confession.⁸ For its part, URCSA has gone back and forth several times on whether or not adoption of Belhar is a precondition for reunification.⁹ In this, the witness of Belhar remains, in part, tragically unconsummated within South Africa itself.

There are many, including some contributors to this volume, who are skeptical about designations of the Belhar Confession as a "gift" to the worldwide church.¹⁰ Subsequent and current reappraisals of Belhar wonder whether the confession is as theopolitically significant as often is claimed. Insofar as the Dutch Reformed Churches of South Africa remain divided, how much influence and consequence did Belhar really have? Critics also worry that Belhar sometimes is anointed as *the* authentic witness of African Christianity even though it represents the work of just one strand of Protestantism in one African nation. If the confession is the work of but a handful of theologians and clergy,

8 See Eugene A. Fortein, "Why Not Belhar? Some Reflections on the Foremost Barrier in the Process of Church Reunification," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 47, no. 1 (2021): 1–17.

9 See Willem Saayman, "Unity and Diversity: An Overview of the URCSA Decisions on Church Unity Since 1994," in *Belhar Confession: The Embracing Confession of Faith for Church and Society*, ed. Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel and Leepo Modise (Stellenbosch: SUN, 2017), 119–131. Cf. Addenda 4–13 in the same volume, 455–492.

10 The language of gift is used freely in scholarly descriptions of the Confession. See, e.g., Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, "Reading the Belhar Confession in Its Historical Context," in *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice*, ed. Robert Vosloo and Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel (Stellenbosch: SUN, 2013), 329–345, here 334; Piet J. Naudé, "A Gift From Heaven: The Reception of the Belhar Confession in the Period 1982–2000 and Its Ecumenical Significance Today," *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 44, nos. 3–4 (2003). Cf. Naudé, *Neither Calendar nor Clock*, 130–165. This language also appears in several ecumenical dialogues and statements. It is used in the 2009 "Statement by the Delegation from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches" drafted for a consultation about the stalled reunification of the DRC with the URCSA (see Clifton Kirkpatrick, Setri Nyomi, and Jerry Pillay, "A Statement by the Delegation from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches," in *Belhar Confession: The Embracing Confession of Faith for Church and Society*, ed. Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel and Leepo Modise (Stellenbosch: SUN, 2017), 475–477). Jerry Pillay, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, called Belhar "a 'gift' to the world-wide church to challenge all forms of discrimination and oppression" in a 2016 appraisal of its reception (Jerry Pillay, "A Historical Survey of the Acceptance and Impact of the Belhar Confession Since 1986," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 48, no. 2 (2022): 1–16). Most significantly, the Uniting Reformed Church itself uses this language in its ongoing dialogue with the Dutch Reformed Church about their stalled reunification (see, e.g., Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, "Response of the URCSA with Regard to the Acceptance/(Non) Acceptance of the Belhar Confession in the DRC," in *Belhar Confession: The Embracing Confession of Faith for Church and Society*, ed. Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel and Leepo Modise (Stellenbosch: SUN, 2017), 489–492).

all of whom were formed by the theology of Afrikaner Calvinism, how African can Belhar really be?

Even so, Belhar has been influential and consequential in the wider ecumenical church, especially among Reformed churches. Ecumenical reception of the confession ranges from scholarly attention to denominational adoption. The Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa and Namibia was the first international church to adopt Belhar in 1986. The United Protestant Church of Belgium followed suit in 1998. In the United States, the Belhar Confession was adopted by the Reformed Church in America in 2007 as a fourth form of unity in addition to the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. Two years later, in 2009, the Christian Reformed Church declined to do likewise, but instead recognized Belhar as an authentic “contemporary testimony.” The Presbyterian Church (USA) incorporated Belhar into its Book of Confessions as part of its governing polity in 2016 after a first unsuccessful attempt in 2010.

What drove Belhar, like other confessions of the late twentieth century, was the pronouncement of a *status confessionis* on injustices that were discerned to be incompatible with the substance of faith and the nature of the church. The contributors and editors of this volume concur that the realities of apartheid South Africa constituted a definite situation of confession. Historically, other voices have expressed concern whether what, in their view, were primarily ethical or political motivations could constitute grounds for a confession of faith. Yet Belhar’s insistence that segregation and injustice are not neutral to matters of the faith tapped into deep Reformed commitments about the inseparability of justification and justice, the correspondence between doctrine (founded on grace) and ethics (founded on gratitude), and thus the need for conformity between ‘faith’ and ‘life.’ This renewed insight whose torch Belhar carries has sparked a renewal of a confessing spirit in many other contexts since.

Of course, the simple positing of “the *integrity* of the gospel” and “the *unity* of the church” as criteria for a state of confession settles nothing. They demand specification and interpretation. We must constantly discern what does or does not threaten such integrity or unity. In a pair of essays about the South African situation, Dirk Smit takes up questions about the *status confessionis*.¹¹ In them he concludes, “Anyone trying to determine the exact meaning of ‘*status confessionis*’ from dictionaries, encyclopedias, and textbooks in systematic theology

11 Dirk Smit, “A *Status Confessionis* in South Africa?,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 47 (1984): 21–46; Dirk Smit, “What Does a *Status Confessionis* Mean?,” in *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church*, ed. G.D. Cloete and Dirk Smit (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 7–32.

would be disappointed [...] The expression is in fact *not* a technical term with a fixed and definite content.”¹² The quest for a settled definition is a fool’s errand that risks either infinite regress or circular reference. This does not make the term a humpty-dumpty word that means whatever anyone who uses it intends it to mean. What historical instances of the *status confessionis* have in common is much more like what Wittgenstein calls “family resemblance.” In his famous example, board games, card games, and ball games all count as “games” even though they do not all consist of the same enumerable properties or conform to a single nameable essence.¹³ Nevertheless, we readily and rightly recognize them as games. So too the *status confessionis*.

Exemplars and models play a significant role in such discernment as well as creative development. Together with the Barmen Declaration, the Belhar Confession has become such a model for new confessional stances far beyond the issues these documents initially addressed and the ecclesial traditions that birthed them. Beyond adoption of the document itself, Belhar’s witness has been drawn upon in pursuits of reconciliation and movements for justice in other contexts, from the World Communion of Reformed Churches’ 2004 Confession of Accra in the face of economic injustice and ecological destruction to ongoing deliberations about the churches’ stance on matters of gender and sexuality. How Belhar informs and inspires further confessing stances is explored by several contributions in this volume.

Every confessional document has its own time and place, not because there is no determinate content of faith, but because God’s faithful grace is experienced anew every morning, and because God’s light casts different shadows on different mountain slopes. From early liturgical acclamations that “Jesus is Lord” to doctrinal creeds issued by imperial councils, from the Reformation’s catechisms to twentieth-century prophetic witnesses, even the modes and genres in which Christian communities have confessed their faith have shifted dramatically over time. It may be that another shift is upon us. Belhar stands for a time and place in which theological reflection afforded not just resistance against structural injustice and oppression but also moments of decisive historical victory over them, and it continues to inspire such movements. At the same time, such a mode of confession relies on an optimism about the force of the church’s witness that for many today might seem misplaced in light of the planetary escalation of ecological, economic, and political catastro-

12 Smit, “Status Confessionis,” 21, emphasis added.

13 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), §§ 65–71, 27–29.

phes, the widespread resurgence of authoritarian, nationalist, and reactionary movements in political as well as church arenas, and a deterioration of social and ecclesial conditions for change. It might seem symptomatic that even the World Communion of Reformed Churches, a long-standing stronghold of confessing fervor for justice and social transformation, has modulated its tune to the more subdued tone of its most recent General Council meeting's theme: "Persevere in your witness." What future forms confession will take and what it might mean to persevere in the witness of Barmen, Belhar, and Accra is yet to be determined. Will their particular form and content, substance and mood, commitments and rhetoric continue to offer models for further confessing, or will new modes and genres of confessing have to be developed?

However Belhar is engaged, whether with celebratory exuberance or cautionary reluctance, in creative adaptation or critical departure, and wherever the confession is encountered, whether in South Africa or elsewhere, we must account for interpretive context: social, political, cultural, theological, and ecclesial. Dangers abound. We may be enticed to transfigure the embodied history and lived theology of the Confessing Church into a symbol or model, a romanticized relic—or, worse, a mystified totem—locked away under glass in a museum, as Smit and Busch warn us not to do. History must not become hagiography. Conversely, as new communities turn to Belhar and as younger generations return to it, we may be tempted to disfigure its legacy and condemn its historic witness as falling short of contemporary sensibilities. Although unavoidable, our inevitably Whiggish historiography has limits, as Hegel and Rorty remind. Critique must not become contempt. Belhar is neither a pristine truth beyond any criticism nor a contaminated compromise beyond all repair. Like all Christian witness, it is *permixtum*, blessed with wisdom and courage even as it is burdened by flaws and faults.

Our hope is that, taken together, the contributions in this volume render a charitable and prudent balance of historical insight, appreciative appropriation, constructive criticism, and expansive application of the Belhar Confession. They remember Belhar's past witness against apartheid in South Africa and imagine its present and future witness to unity, justice, and reconciliation around the world. Our recollection and reflection are historical, sociological, political, and theological. Some write from the vantage point of those who were instrumental in the emergence of Belhar during the South African anti-apartheid struggle. Others write from the perspective of those for whom Belhar has become influential in later struggles for justice. Together, we aim to engage Belhar as a landmark of both confessional theology and political theology. We aspire to chart further trajectories for doctrinal, ethical, and political development of global Reformed theologies.

We begin with Jaap Durand's autobiographical reflection, "My Road to Belhar." Durand was an Afrikaner who opposed apartheid. Though ordained in the white DRC, he served as professor of theology and vice chancellor at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), the Black university in Cape Town. With Allan Boesak, who was chaplain at UWC, Durand famously arranged that students who had been arrested for protesting were able to sit their exams in Victor Verster prison. Later, in 1978, Durand interposed himself between his students and security forces firing on them with rubber bullets during a campus protest. Durand recounts events in his theology seminar in which his students, including Leonardo Appies and Russel Botman, first formulated what would become the central theological conviction of the Belhar Confession: that apartheid's assumption of the irreconcilability of the races was a heretical contradiction of the gospel of reconciliation. Through his students and his colleague Allan Boesak, that conviction made its way to the 1978 General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, on to the 1982 Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and into the 1982 Belhar Confession that Durand drafted with Dirk Smit. This essay, translated into English for the first time by Rachel Baard, introduces anglophone readers to many of the events before and behind Belhar that often are omitted or obscured in the literature outside South Africa.

In "Barth, Barmen, and Belhar: The Politics of Reformed Confession," Derek Woodard-Lehman situates the Belhar Confession within the wider context of twentieth-century ecumenical opposition to apartheid and the longer history of the Reformed confessions. He does so by interpreting Belhar in conversation with Karl Barth's normative paradigm of Reformed confession and the precedent of the 1934 Barmen Declaration, both of which were widely influential in the South African Confessing Church. Woodard-Lehman demonstrates that the operative praxis of Barmen and Belhar alike conforms to Barth's normative paradigm. On this basis, he articulates a "politics of Reformed confession" that operates through an "analogy of citizenship" by which the rule of faith is the pattern for the rule of law, and the freedom of the Christian is a prototype for the freedom of the citizen. In so doing, Woodard-Lehman illustrates how Barmen and Belhar are not merely responsive to contingent features of Nazi and Afrikaner ideology; they are powerfully expressive of essential theopolitical factors internal to Reformed theology.

Rachel Baard stages a historical and theological encounter among various anti-apartheid theologies in her essay, "A Chorus of Dissent: The *Confession of Belhar* in Conversation with the Kairos Document and Ubuntu Theology." She contrasts Belhar's confessional theology with the liberationist approach of the 1985 *Kairos Document*—another theological declaration from the Church Struggle—as well as the African cultural approach of Desmond Tutu's Ubuntu

theology. Her comparison highlights Belhar's strengths and weaknesses relative to other voices in the chorus of opposition to apartheid. Like Boesak, Baard argues that Belhar's greatest strength is its emphasis on the central *kerygma* of the Church: "Jesus is Lord." This one Lord calls all people into his one church, which cannot be separated by so-called "natural revelations" such as ethnic difference. At the same time, she asserts that Belhar needs supplementation by more explicitly contextual and cultural theologies that reflect theological voices in the global church, including the worldwide Reformed community. Taken together, Baard concludes, these theologies complement one another and offer a more complete witness to unity, reconciliation, and justice.

Allan Boesak was among the most prominent leaders in the Confessing Church Struggle against apartheid. He has written widely on the history of the Confessing Church and the theology of the Belhar Confession, with an admirable humility about his own crucial role in the Struggle.¹⁴ We are extraordinarily grateful for his contribution to this volume, "'Jesus is Lord': Belhar as *Skandalon* in Communion, Singularity, and Disruption." In his essay, Boesak focuses on the simple central claim of the confession: "Jesus is Lord." He reads this primordial and perennial confession of the Church as expressing Belhar's affirmation of the Christian community as a whole, its continuity within the Reformed tradition, and its singularity as a confession from Africa and from within the particular South African context. Belhar, like all confessions, asserts the singularity and priority of the Christian community over and against other racial-ethnic, geopolitical, and sociocultural identities. Identity and unity in Christ transcend differences and divisions on any other basis. For that reason, Boesak argues, it is a *skandalon*, a stumbling block and an offense, to those who would oppose these identities against each other or interpose between them through segregation, oppression, or domination. This, in his estimation, is nowhere more evident than in the Afrikaner DRC's continued refusal to recognize Belhar as a fourth form of unity and to reunite with the URCSA.

A generation ago, Allan Boesak raised the question, "Black and Reformed: Contradiction or Challenge?" His answer, and the answer of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, was that to be Black and Reformed was a challenge rather than a contradiction. Boesak and others took up that challenge in the Church Struggle against apartheid and the Belhar Confession. Belhar and the movement that produced it articulated what it meant to be Black and Reformed

14 See especially Allan A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

in apartheid South Africa. Now, a generation later, Rothney Tshaka argues that contemporary Reformed theology must confront Boesak's question anew, and with a new inflection: "*African and Reformed: Contradiction or Challenge?*" He raises this question in his essay "A Theological Double-Consciousness: Why the Belhar Confession Must Contend with Africanization," which draws a distinction between the black liberation theology characteristic of Belhar and African Theology. Tshaka summarizes what remains undone in theology and ecclesiology to create an authentically African Reformed Christianity, especially in academic theology and theological education. And he analyzes how Belhar sets the stage for a next phase, or maybe a different form of, decolonization through Africanization.

In "Doing the Truth: The Accra Confession as Belhar's Actualization," Henry Kuo revisits Belhar from the perspective of the more recent Accra Confession (2004). He argues, first, that Belhar remains a significant Reformed witness to global injustice, particularly in its racialized forms, and, second, that Accra represents a natural continuation and necessary specification of Belhar's call for unity, reconciliation, and, especially, justice. In this, he suggests, Accra "does the truth" that Belhar "says," and "actualizes" the ideals that Belhar announces. As Kuo draws on the intersectional social criticism of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Kuo shows how Accra's attention to particular axes of oppression (economic, climatological, racial, and so forth) focus Belhar's witness on concrete geopolitical challenges in the contemporary world of neoliberal empire. Taken together, Belhar and Accra call for embodied solidarity with the oppressed and continued resistance to oppressors.

Nadia Marais examines confession as a mode of resistance in her essay "Lovelyn, Belhar, and Mary: Exploring the Rhetoric of Confession as Resistance to Injustice." She analyzes three texts that reveal how confessional rhetorics resist injustice: the Magnificat, the Belhar Confession, and the #FeesMustFall protest speeches of Lovelyn Nwadeyi. Though decidedly different in genre and audience, Marais argues that these texts articulate theological truth claims that challenge systemic oppression and affirm human dignity. To do so, she highlights how Nwadeyi's speeches express themes common to the Magnificat and Belhar, particularly God's preferential option for the poor and oppressed. Because God stands with and for the poor and oppressed, the church must "stand where its Lord stands," as Belhar puts it; they must stand against systems of power and inequality. Marais identifies this twofold call to stand with the oppressed and against oppressors as a "grammar of faith" that connects these and other confessional texts. As she reads Belhar through this grammar, Marais broadens the concept of confession to include theologically inspired confrontations of injustice and articulations of human dignity.

Like all Reformed confessions, Belhar is a first word but not a last word. It is never *the* Word. As a historic confession, it cannot be anything less than a word spoken in, from, and to its time and place. Yet, as an ecclesial confession, it can become more than a word spoken in, from, and to its time and place. This is the paradox of Reformed confessions. They are at once irreducibly particular and indisputably ecumenical. In one of Barth's more insightful formulations of this dynamic, he frames the ecumenical dimensions of Reformed confession in terms of mutual recognition. He says that those who confess must "look back" to those who have confessed previously and must "look across" to those who confess simultaneously.¹⁵ When a theological statement is recognized as authoritative by anyone other than those who formulated that statement, there arises a relationship of reciprocal authority. Those who confess "here and now" make themselves accountable to those who confess "there and then," even as these newer and nearer confessors exercise authority of their own. This praxis ties together the ecumenical church as a community of witnesses in mutual recognition, even as it also spells out its internal differences and differentiation where each community confesses its faith, hope, and commitments in its own time and place, with its own language, highlighting its commitments against its own contemporary threats and dangers. As we confess that "Jesus is Lord," we know that the unity grounded in him makes both the mutual recognition and the abiding diversity in our witness necessary and good. Our hope with this volume is to contribute to the church's ongoing process of confessing. Through critical elucidation, constructive interpretation, and creative application of the Belhar Confession, may we strengthen both the mutual recognition and the internal diversity of such confessing, to the glory of God and service of the world.

15 CD I/2 § 20.1, 573/637.