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Belhar at forty: Justice, unity and the cries of the poor in African Christian mission

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This article re-examines the theological significance of the Belhar Confession 40 years after its adoption by exploring its relevance for African Christian mission in contexts marked by persistent poverty and inequality. Emerging during the apartheid struggle in South Africa, the Belhar Confession articulated a prophetic theological response that affirmed unity, reconciliation and justice as essential dimensions of the Christian gospel. While much scholarship has focused on its historical role within South African ecclesial debates, less attention has been given to its broader missiological implications for contemporary African Christianity. This study, therefore, investigates how the theological vision of Belhar may illuminate the mission of the church within African societies where the cries of the poor remain a defining social reality. The research adopts a theological–missiological interpretive methodology based on qualitative document analysis and critical engagement with major scholarship on Belhar, African theology and global mission. By situating the confession within the wider conversation of African contextual theology and the *missio Dei* framework of mission, the study examines how Belhar's insistence that the church must stand where God stands challenges Christian communities to embody solidarity with marginalised populations. The findings indicate that the confession offers a significant theological resource for reimagining Christian mission in Africa by linking ecclesial unity with social justice and public witness.

Contribution: The article argues that re-reading Belhar through African missiology expands the theological horizon of the confession beyond its original historical setting. It demonstrates that Belhar's call for unity and justice provides an important framework for justice-centred mission within African societies confronting economic inequality and social marginalisation. The study contributes to ongoing debates on African theology, mission studies and public theology by proposing that the Belhar Confession continues to shape how churches participate in God's mission among the poor and the oppressed.

Keywords: Belhar Confession; African missiology; church unity; justice; poverty; public theology.

Introduction

Belhar at forty

The Belhar Confession emerged during one of the most profound moral crises in modern Christian history. In apartheid South Africa, racial segregation was not merely a political structure but also a theological challenge confronting the credibility of the Christian gospel itself. Certain sectors of the Dutch Reformed tradition had developed theological arguments that attempted to justify racial separation, presenting apartheid as compatible with Christian faith. Within this context, the Belhar Confession appeared as a confessional protest, rejecting such theological distortions and reaffirming that unity, reconciliation and justice belong to the very essence of the gospel (Boesak 1984:14–18; eds. Cloete & Smit 1984:65–70; Naudé 2010:109–112).

Belhar, therefore, did not emerge as an abstract theological reflection but as a response to a concrete historical crisis. The confession articulated a theological resistance grounded in the conviction that the church cannot remain neutral when confronted with systemic injustice. Its authors insisted that the unity of the church is a gift of God that must become visible in social and ecclesial relationships, that reconciliation in Christ demands the dismantling of structures of hostility and that the church is called to stand with those who suffer injustice (Boesak 1984:28–33; eds. Cloete & Smit 1984:66–72; De Gruchy 2002:46–48). In this sense, Belhar represents a moment when Christian doctrine was reclaimed as a resource for confronting injustice rather than legitimising it.

Four decades after its adoption by the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, the historical system that produced Belhar has formally ended. Yet the social realities that shaped its theological urgency remain deeply visible across many parts of the African continent. Economic inequality, structural poverty and social marginalisation continue to affect large segments of African societies. The persistence of such realities raises a crucial theological question: Does Belhar belong solely to the history of South African resistance, or does it continue to offer a theological framework capable of addressing contemporary struggles for justice and dignity within wider African contexts?

This question becomes particularly significant when examined through the lens of Christian mission. Missiological scholarship increasingly recognises that the mission of the church cannot be separated from the social realities within which the gospel is proclaimed. Christian mission involves participation in the redemptive activity of God in the world, a participation that encompasses both proclamation and transformation (Bosch 2011:372–374; Wright 2006:23–26). As Bosch famously argues, mission must be understood as participation in the *missio Dei*, the ongoing work of God to reconcile and restore creation (Bosch 2011:389–391). Within this broader theological vision, the struggle for justice and the defence of human dignity cannot be detached from the church's witness.

Historical studies of world Christianity further demonstrate that the expansion of the gospel has consistently generated new theological reflections as it encounters diverse cultural and social contexts. Christianity's growth beyond its Western centres has produced a polycentric global faith in which theological insights emerge from multiple cultural locations (Sanneh 2003:29–33; Walls 2002:73–76). In this shifting landscape, African Christianity has become one of the most dynamic centres of global Christian vitality. Theological reflection emerging from African contexts, therefore, carries increasing significance for understanding how the church responds to social realities such as poverty, injustice, and marginalisation.

African theologians have long emphasised that Christian theology on the continent must engage the lived experiences of African communities. Scholars such as Bediako (1995:229–233) have argued that theology in Africa cannot be detached from the historical and social realities within new cultural environments. Such insights invite renewed reflection on how confessional documents like Belhar may speak beyond their original historical setting.

At the same time, contemporary African societies continue to confront significant socio-economic challenges. Poverty and inequalities remain defining features of many communities, raising pressing questions about the social responsibility of the church. African theologians such as Oduyoye and Mugambi have therefore argued that Christian theology must address the ethical implications of faith within societies marked by suffering and injustice (Mugambi 1995:18–21; Oduyoye 2001:46–49). Similarly, Ghanaian theologians have emphasised that the mission of the church must engage both spiritual transformation and responsibility (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:67–70; Pobee 1979:52–54).

In this broader theological landscape, the Belhar Confession offers a powerful resource for reflecting on the relationship between faith, justice and mission. Its declaration that God stands specially with the poor, and the oppressed introduces a profound ethical challenge for Christian communities. The confession insists that the church cannot remain indifferent when confronted with injustice and that its witness reflects God's concern for those who suffer exclusion and oppression (Boesak 1984:30–33; Naudé 2010:111–113; Smit 2007:82–85).

Despite this significance, most scholarly discussion of Belhar continues to focus primarily on its role within South African ecclesial debates. While these discussions remain crucial, they risk limiting the broader missiological implications of the confession. When considered within the wider framework of African theology and global mission, Belhar invites reflection on how Christian communities across the continent might respond to persistent social inequalities. The confession's emphasis on justice and solidarity raises important questions regarding the mission of the church in contexts where poverty continues to shape the lived experiences of millions.

This article, therefore, seeks to revisit the Belhar Confession 40 years after its adoption by exploring its relevance for African Christian mission. Rather than approaching Belhar solely as a historical response to apartheid, the study interprets the confession as a theological resource that continues to illuminate the mission of the church within societies marked by inequality and marginalisation. The central question guiding this investigation is, therefore: *How can the Belhar Confession be re-read through African missiological perspectives in order to address the persistent cries of the poor within contemporary African societies?*

However, before proceeding, three terms central to this study warrant brief clarification. The phrase 'cries of the poor' in this study is not rhetorical. It refers to the documented, differentiated suffering of communities experiencing chronic unemployment, food insecurity, displacement, gender-based exclusion, and structural denial of basic services, conditions extensively recorded across sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2022:1–4). Also, 'African Christian mission' is understood in this work as the diverse ecclesial witness of the Christian communities across the continent, encompassing proclamation, healing, community development and prophetic social engagement and is not reduced to a single confessional or geographical expression (Kwiyani 2014:18–22; ed. Okure 2000:3–7). Finally, the phrase 'persistent reality of poverty' is grounded in the World Bank (2022:1–3) report, which estimates that approximately 60% of sub-Saharan Africa's population lived on less than $2.15 per day in 2022. More recently, as of 2024, about 464 million people in sub-Saharan Africa were living in extreme poverty, representing 46% of the region's population, even as the region accounts for only 16% of the world's population but

67% of all people living in extreme poverty globally (World Bank 2024:1–3). This means that two-thirds of the world's extreme poor live in sub-Saharan Africa. These statistics render poverty not merely a social condition but one of the most pressing moral challenges before the African church today.

Therefore, the argument advanced here is that Belhar should be understood not merely as a historical document but as an enduring theological vision that challenges the African church to embody justice-centred mission. When interpreted within the broader conversation of African theology and missiology, the confession calls the church to move beyond abstract declarations of unity towards concrete practices of solidarity with those who experience poverty and social exclusion. In this sense, Belhar continues to confront the church with a question that remains deeply relevant: what does it mean for the church to stand where God stands in a world where the cries of the poor continue to echo across African societies?

Research methods and design

Analytical framework

The study adopts a theological–missiological interpretive methodology to examine the continuing significance of the Belhar Confession for African Christian mission. Rather than employing empirical fieldwork, the article engages in critical theological analysis grounded in textual interpretation, scholarly dialogue and contextual theological reflection. This approach aligns with established methods in theological and missiological research, in which doctrinal texts, historical documents and theological interpretations are analysed to illuminate contemporary ecclesial and social realities (Bosch 2011:8–10; Wright 2006:27–30). Ethical clearance for the broader research context informing this study was obtained from the University of Gold Coast Research Ethics Committee (UGCREC: 25091).

The study, therefore, proceeds through qualitative document analysis. The primary source examined is the text of the Belhar Confession, interpreted as a theological response to the ecclesial and political crisis of apartheid. This reading is complemented by major scholarly interpretations that examine the historical emergence, theological structure and ethical implications of Belhar. Through this approach, the article identifies central theological themes within the confession, particularly its emphasis on unity, reconciliation and justice (Boesak 1984:28–31; eds. Cloete & Smit 1984:66–70; Naudé 2010:109–112).

Document analysis remains an important method in theological scholarship because theological arguments often develop through engagement with texts, traditions and confessional statements. Such analysis enables scholars to trace how theological ideas emerge within particular historical contexts while also exploring their relevance in new social settings (Sanneh 2003:31–34; Walls 2002:74–76). In this study, the Belhar Confession is therefore approached not merely as a historical artefact but as a theological text that continues to generate interpretive possibilities for Christian mission in contemporary African contexts.

The methodological framework also incorporates comparative missiological analysis. The study situates Belhar within broader discussions concerning the relationship between Christian mission and social transformation. Missiological scholarship emphasises that the mission of the church must be understood within the wider framework of God's redemptive activity in the world. Bosch (2011:389–391) argues that Christian mission involves participation in the *missio Dei*, the divine initiative through which God seeks the reconciliation of humanity and restoration of creation. Such an understanding challenges the church to engage not only spiritual concerns but also the social and ethical realities shaping human life.

The analysis also engaged African theological scholarship that emphasises contextual theology. African theologians consistently argue that Christian theology on the continent must engage the lived experiences of African communities. Mbiti (1971:16–17) maintains that theology cannot be separated from the social realities within which African Christians live. This insight was later expanded by Bediako (1995:228–231), who demonstrated how Christianity became deeply embedded within African cultural and historical contexts.

The methodological approach, therefore, operates through three analytical movements. Firstly, the study conducts a close theological reading of the Belhar Confession to identify its doctrinal claims. Secondly, these claims are situated within broader missiological discussions concerning mission, justice and social transformation. Thirdly, the theological insights of Belhar are interpreted within African socio-economic contexts where poverty and marginalisation continue to shape the experiences of many communities.

By integrating these analytical perspectives, the methodology enables the article to move beyond historical description towards a constructive theological vision that continues to illuminate the mission of the church in contemporary African societies. In this way, the methodological framework provides the foundation for re-reading Belhar as a living theological resource that challenges the African church to respond faithfully to the cries of the poor.

The historical emergence of the Belhar Confession

The emergence of the Belhar Confession must be understood within the complex intersection of theology, politics and ecclesial struggle that characterised apartheid in South Africa. During the 20th century, apartheid developed not only as a political ideology but also as a system that sought theological legitimation within certain Christian traditions. In particular, segments of the Dutch Reformed churches developed doctrinal arguments that portrayed racial

separation as compatible with the divine ordering of society. This theological justification of segregation created a deep crisis within the Christian community because it placed the authority of the gospel in tension with structures of racial injustice (Boesak 1984:12–16; eds. Cloete & Smit 1984:64–66; De Gruchy 2002:45–47).

Apartheid, therefore, produced not merely political conflict but also profound theological contestation within South African Christianity. The question confronting many church leaders was whether the church could remain silent in the face of racial oppression or whether faithfulness to the gospel required a clear confessional response. Theological voices emerging from the Black Reformed community increasingly challenged the moral legitimacy of apartheid, arguing that the system contradicted the biblical vision of reconciliation and justice (Boesak 1984:18–21; Maluleke 2000:19–22). For these theologians, the issue was not simply social policy but the integrity of Christian doctrine itself.

Within this context, the development of Belhar represented a decisive theological intervention. The confession was drafted in the early 1980s by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, a church composed primarily of Christians classified as 'coloured' under apartheid racial categories. In 1986, the confession was formally adopted, articulating a theological rejection of racial division within the body of Christ (eds. Cloete & Smit 1984:67–69; Naudé 2010:110–111; Plaatjies-van Huffel 2013:1–8, 2014:301–325). Belhar thus emerged as a confessional declaration that confronted both ecclesial division and political injustice.

It must be noted that Africa is not a theological monolith, and any attempt to extend Belhar's relevance beyond its South African origins must reckon seriously with this diversity. The social conditions that gave birth to Belhar differ significantly from those prevailing in, for instance, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo or Rwanda. The legacies of British, French, Portuguese and German colonialism produced distinct political, economic and ecclesiastical formations across the continent (Katongole 2010:12–16), besides the various indigenous cultural differences that exist among several tribes. The dominant forms of Christianity that took root during the colonial era, such as the Catholic in Central Africa, Anglican in East Africa, Reformed and Lutheran in southern Africa and in increasing Pentecostal–Charismatic across West Africa, further complicate any straightforward application of a distinctly Reformed confessional document to the continent's breadth. A critical question, therefore, presses upon this study. That is, why should churches outside the Reformed tradition regard Belhar as theologically relevant to their mission? The answer lies not in Belhar's confessional form but in its theological substance or lessons. Its insistence that the church must stand where God stands, that unity, reconciliation and justice belong to the gospel, articulates commitments that transcend Reformed ecclesiology. Furthermore, the massive presence of African Initiated Churches and Pentecostal–Charismatic movements, which together represent the majority of African Christian adherents today, cannot be ignored. Okure (ed. 2000:14–17) observes that biblical mission in the African context demands a hermeneutic of life, a reading of Scripture from within the concrete suffering of communities, which is precisely what Belhar's call for solidarity with the poor invites across all confessional traditions. Similarly, Kwiyani (2014:62–65) argues that African Christianity's missionary energy is increasingly shaped not by inherited Western denominational identity but by a Spirit-empowered impulse towards communal healing and social transformation, values that resonate with Belhar's prophetic concern for the poor across confessional traditions.

The theological structure of Belhar is organised around three central themes: unity, reconciliation and justice. Firstly, the confession affirms that the unity of the church is both a gift and an obligation. Christian unity is grounded in the reconciling work of Christ and must therefore become visible in the life of the church. Any form of segregation that divides believers along racial or social lines is therefore incompatible with the gospel (Boesak 1984:28–29; Smit 2007:80–83). This emphasis on visible unity directly challenged ecclesial structures that mirrored those racial divisions of apartheid society.

Secondly, Belhar emphasises reconciliation as a central dimension of the Christian faith. Reconciliation is not understood merely as an abstract spiritual reality but as a transformative process that restores relationships among people and between people and communities. The confession therefore rejects any ideology that legitimises hostility, separation, or injustice among human beings (De Gruchy 2002:48–50; Naudé 2010:111–113). In this sense, reconciliation becomes inseparable from justice, as genuine reconciliation cannot occur where injustice persists.

Thirdly, Belhar affirms that God stands specially with the poor and the oppressed. This declaration reflects a theological conviction that divine justice demands solidarity with those who suffer under unjust systems. The confession insists that the church is called to stand where God stands, namely with those who experience marginalisation and exclusion (Boesak 1984:30–33; Smit 2007:83–85). Such language resonates deeply with broader liberation theological traditions that emphasise God's preferential concern for the poor (Gutiérrez 1988:112–115).

The significance of Belhar extends beyond its immediate historical context, as it reasserts the confessional responsibility of the church in moments of moral crisis. Christian confessions have historically emerged when the fundamental truths of the gospel are threatened. In such moments, the church is compelled to articulate its faith in ways that address concrete historical challenges (Smit 2007:78–79). Belhar, therefore, belongs to a long tradition of confessional responses within Christian history in which doctrinal statements serve as instruments of theological witness.

South African scholars have emphasised that Belhar should not be understood merely as a political protest but as a theological articulation of the gospel's ethical implications. For Smit, the confession represents a moment in which doctrine and ethics converge, demonstrating that the unity of the church cannot be separated from justice in society (Smit 2007:82–84). Naudé (2010:114–116) similarly argues that Belhar challenges the church to examine the relationship between faith and public responsibility, insisting that Christian belief must manifest itself in concrete practices of justice.

Emerging scholars have continued to explore the broader implications of Belhar for contemporary theological reflection. Maluleke (2000:119–26) argues that the confession opened new possibilities for African theological engagement with issues of power, identity and justice. Similarly, Nadar and Reddy (2015:591–592) highlights how Belhar invites ongoing reflection on the intersection of theology and social transformation in African contexts. Kaunda further suggests that the confession continues to provide an important theological framework for addressing systemic injustice in postcolonial African societies (Kaunda 2019:98–101).

More recent scholarship also emphasises the global significance of Belhar. As Christianity increasingly shifts towards the Global South, theological voices emerging from African contexts have gained greater prominence within global theological discourse (Sanneh 2003:34–36; Walls 2002:76–78). Within this shifting landscape, Belhar represents one of the most influential theological contributions from African Christianity to global Christian thought. Its insistence that unity and justice belong together within the life of the church challenges Christian communities worldwide to reconsider how faith is embodied within social structures marked by inequality.

The historical emergence of Belhar, therefore, reveals a confession born of struggle but oriented towards a broader theological vision. While rooted in the particular context of apartheid South Africa, the confession articulates principles that transcend its original historical moment. Its theological insistence that the church must embody unity, pursue reconciliation and stand with the oppressed continues to resonate in societies where injustice persists. In this sense, Belhar does not belong solely to the past but remains a living theological resource capable of shaping Christian witness in contemporary contexts (Landman 2024: 1–4).

Understanding this historical background is essential for interpreting the confession within the broader African context. The next section, therefore, turns to the contemporary socio-economic landscape of the African continent, exploring how poverty and inequality continue to shape the lived experiences of many communities and how these realities echo the theological concerns articulated within Belhar.

The cries of the poor in contemporary African contexts

If the Belhar Confession emerged from a historical struggle against racial injustice, its theological logic cannot remain confined to that context alone. The confession's declaration that God stands 'in a special way with the poor and the oppressed' raises a deeper theological question that continues to confront African Christianity today. While apartheid represented a visible system of racial injustice, the persistent reality of poverty and economic inequality confronts the African church with a comparably urgent moral demand today. In this sense, the cries of the poor have become one of the defining moral challenges facing the African church.

Across the continent, economic growth has often coexisted with deep social disparities. While several African economies have experienced periods of development, the benefits of this growth remain unevenly distributed. Large segments of the population continue to experience precarious living conditions, limited access to social services and chronic economic insecurity. Scholars of African development repeatedly note that poverty in Africa cannot be reduced merely to individual hardship but reflects structural conditions embedded within political and economic systems (Mugambi 1995:20–22; Pobee 1979:52–55). Such conditions raise important theological questions regarding the mission and social responsibility of the church.

For instance, in Ghana, the Ghana Statistical Service (2021:14–17) documented that 23.4% of the population remained multidimensionally poor, with rural farming households, female-headed families and communities in the northern regions bearing disproportionate burdens. These are not abstract percentages. They represent subsistence farmers who lose harvests to climate shocks with no government safety net, mothers watching children die from preventable diseases in clinics that lack basic medicines, and young men drifting into informal or illegal economic activity because formal labour markets remain structurally closed to them. In Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics (2022:8–11) reported that over 133 million people, nearly 63% of the population, experienced multidimensional poverty. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, decades of resource extraction combined with armed conflict have produced conditions in which women and children bear the greatest burden of displacement and structural violence (Katongole 2017:41–44). The cries of the poor are therefore not one voice. There are many voices, differentiated by gender, geography, ethnicity and the particular forms of political exclusion that shape each community.

African theologians have long insisted that theology on the continent must engage these social realities directly. For John Mbiti, theology cannot be detached from the everyday experiences of African communities. Mbiti (1971:15–18) argues that Christian reflection in Africa must remain rooted in the concrete historical situations in which believers live. The lived experiences of African Christians, including

struggles related to poverty, injustice and social exclusion, therefore become legitimate starting points for theological reflection. In this context, injustice in African societies manifests in unequal administration of legal systems that favour those with economic power in discriminatory land tenure arrangements that routinely dispossess smallholder farmers, in police brutality directed disproportionately at the urban poor and in the criminalisation of informal economic activity through which millions sustain themselves (Kaunda 2019:99–101; Mugambi 1995:20–22). Social exclusion, similarly, takes visible and painful form in the marginalisation of women from economic and political decision-making, in the stigmatisation of persons living with HIV, in ethnic discrimination that fragments communities and in the neglect of children within families fractured by urban migration and economic pressure. Maluleke (2000:22–25) insists that African theology must honour the agency of those enduring such exclusion rather than constructing theological narratives that speak about the poor without genuinely speaking with them. This critique complicates any straightforward application of Belhar as a theological solution. It means that before the confession can illuminate the church's mission, the church must first be honest about whether it has truly heard the specific, differentiated cries rising from its own social context.

This emphasis on contextual theology was further developed by Kwame Bediako, whose work explored how Christianity becomes deeply embedded within African cultural and historical contexts. Bediako (1995:229–233) observes that African Christian theology emerges not merely through the translation of Western theological ideas but through the encounter between the gospel and the realities of African life. In societies where economic hardship shapes daily existence, theological reflection inevitably engages questions of justice, dignity and social transformation.

Within this framework, poverty cannot be understood simply as an economic condition but as a theological problem that challenges the credibility of Christian witness. The persistence of widespread poverty raises uncomfortable questions regarding the relationship between faith and social responsibility. Oduyoye (2001:46–50) argues that Christian theology must confront structures that perpetuate human suffering rather than merely offering spiritual consolation to those who suffer. In her view, the gospel calls the church to participate actively in the struggle for justice and human dignity.

Ghanaian scholarship also contributes significantly to this conversation. John S. Pobee argues that Christian theology in Africa must address the moral challenges confronting contemporary societies, including poverty and social inequality. For Pobee (1979:50–54), the church cannot proclaim the gospel authentically while ignoring the socio-economic conditions that undermine human dignity. Similarly, Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:68–71) observes that African Christian movements increasingly wrestle with questions of economic survival, social mobility and the moral meaning of prosperity in communities struggling with poverty.

At the same time, newer voices within African theological scholarship continue to expand this discussion. Scholars such as Chammah J. Kaunda argue that African Christianity must critically examine the political and economic systems that perpetuate inequality across the continent. Kaunda (2019:98–102) suggests that Christian theology should challenge structures that marginalise vulnerable communities while promoting a vision of social justice grounded in the biblical understanding of human dignity. Likewise, Mwaura and O'Malley (eds. 2016:82–85) have emphasised that African churches increasingly respond to complex social challenges, including poverty, gender inequality and social exclusion.

These theological reflections reveal a growing consensus that the mission of the church in Africa cannot be separated from the struggle for justice within society. While evangelism remains central to the Christian mission, the credibility of that mission becomes questionable when churches remain silent about social realities that undermine human dignity. This tension becomes particularly visible within rapidly growing African Christian movements. The expansion of Christianity across the continent has produced vibrant religious communities, yet this growth often occurs alongside persistent economic hardship. As a result, the church increasingly confronts the challenge of articulating a theological response to poverty that integrates spiritual proclamation with social responsibility (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:70–72; Kaunda 2019:101–103).

It is within this context that the theological significance of Belhar becomes especially apparent. The confession's insistence that the church must stand where God stands introduces a profound challenge for contemporary African Christianity. If God stands with the poor and the oppressed, then the mission of the church cannot remain indifferent to the social realities that shape the lives of marginalised communities. Belhar therefore raises a question that continues to echo across African societies: what does it mean for the church to embody unity and reconciliation in contexts where economic inequality continues to divide human communities?

Moreover, there is a deeper methodological problem here that honest theological engagement cannot avoid. This study, like other scholarship on Belhar, speaks for the poor rather than allowing them to speak. Katongole (2017:44–47) addresses this problem by arguing that the theological imagination of African Christianity must be shaped by the lament from below, that is, the unfiltered grief and protest that rise from communities experiencing structural abandonment. He draws on documented voices from eastern Congo and northern Uganda that articulate suffering in ways that resist neat theological categorisation, insisting that the church must first be confronted by these cries before it can credibly claim to respond to them. Bediako (1995:231–233) similarly insists that authentic contextual theology begins not with doctrinal application but with listening, where one allows the actual experiences of African communities to generate the questions that theology must then answer. On this reading, Belhar does not arrive as a ready-made answer

to African poverty. It functions more honestly as a confessional mirror, a document that forces the church to examine whether its own life and structures actually hear the differentiated cries emerging from its social context, before presuming to speak or act on behalf of those who suffer.

Recognising this continuity does not diminish the historical uniqueness of Belhar. Rather, it reveals the deeper theological logic embedded within the confession. Belhar does not merely condemn one particular system of injustice; it articulates a vision of the church that refuses to separate unity from justice or reconciliation from solidarity with the oppressed. When interpreted within contemporary African contexts, this vision invites a renewed missiological reflection on how the church participates in God's mission among communities whose lives are shaped by poverty and marginalisation.

The next section, therefore, turns to the central task of this article: re-reading Belhar through the lens of African missiology. By engaging the theological insights of Belhar alongside African missiological scholarship, the study explores how the confession may illuminate the mission of the church in societies where the cries of the poor continue to shape the moral landscape of Christian witness.

Re-reading Belhar through African missiology

The preceding discussion has shown that the Belhar Confession emerged as a theological response to racial injustice, yet its deeper theological logic extends beyond the historical context of apartheid. When examined within the broader framework of Christian mission, Belhar invites a re-reading that situates its themes of unity and reconciliation and justice within the wider social realities confronting African societies today. The confession, therefore, raises an important missiological question: How should the church understand its participation in the mission of God in contexts where the cries of the poor remain a defining social reality?

Missiological scholarship has increasingly emphasised that Christian mission must be understood within the framework of the *missio Dei,* the mission of God in the world. This perspective shifts the focus of mission away from institutional expansion towards participation in God's redemptive work within history. David Bosch (2011:389–391) famously argued that mission involves the church's participation in God's ongoing activity of reconciliation and restoration. Such participation cannot be confined to spiritual proclamation alone but must also engage the social realities that shape human life. Within this framework, questions of justice, dignity and social transformation become inseparable from the mission of the church.

This understanding of mission resonates strongly with the theological vision articulated in Belhar. The confession insists that the church must stand where God stands, particularly with those who experience injustice and marginalisation. For Boesak (1984:30–33), this declaration represents one of the most radical theological insights within Belhar because it links the identity of the church directly with the struggle for justice. The confession, therefore, challenges the church to embody a form of Christian witness in which unity and justice cannot be separated.

At the same time, global studies of Christianity reveal that theological reflection increasingly emerges from the experiences of communities in the Global South. Walls (2002:73–76) argues that Christianity has become a polycentric global movement in which new theological insights arise from diverse cultural contexts. Similarly, Sanneh (2003:31–34) emphasises that the expansion of Christianity across cultures generates fresh theological interpretations shaped by local social realities. Within this global transformation of Christianity, African theology occupies an increasingly influential position.

African missiological reflection has therefore sought to explore how the mission of the church engages the social and historical realities of African societies. Scholars have repeatedly argued that Christian mission on the continent cannot ignore issues such as poverty, injustice and political instability. For Pobee (1979:52–55), the credibility of Christian witness in Africa depends on whether the church addresses the concrete challenges facing African communities. Mission, in this sense, involves both proclamation of the gospel and participation in the transformation of society.

Similarly, Bediako (1995:229–233) argued that African Christian theology emerges from the encounter between the gospel and the lived experiences of African communities. In contexts where economic hardship and social inequality shape daily life, the interpretation of Christian faith inevitably engages questions of justice and dignity. Such insights reinforce the idea that theological reflection in Africa cannot remain detached from the social realities experienced by the majority of the population.

Three African scholars who considerably sharpen this conversation are Emmanuel Katongole, Harvey Kwiyani and Teresa Okure. Katongole (2010:16–21) challenges what he calls the 'social imagination' of African Christianity. He argues that the church has too often operated within a political and economic framework inherited from colonialism rather than developing a distinctly gospel-shaped alternative social vision. For Katongole, mission is not primarily a programme or strategy but a communal interruption, a practice that embodies a different social reality in the midst of structural suffering. This is, in substance, what Belhar demands of the church, even if Belhar's authors did not frame it in those terms. Kwiyani (2014:62–68) extends this by arguing that African Christianity's most authentic missiological impulses are driven by ubuntu sensibilities that refuse to separate individual salvation from communal flourishing. Belhar's insistence on visible ecclesial unity intersects productively with Kwiyani's ubuntu-shaped missiology; both refuse to allow the church to proclaim

reconciliation abstractly while tolerating division in practice. Furthermore, Okure (ed. 2000:14–18) challenges African theology by indicating that the Scriptures should be read through what she calls a hermeneutic of life, that is, an interpretive approach that takes the concrete circumstances of suffering communities as the primary theological horizon rather than importing external doctrinal frameworks. Together, these three voices press the argument beyond a simple affirmation of Belhar's relevance, raising the harder question of how Belhar must itself be read differently when approached from within the differentiated suffering of African communities rather than above it.

Contemporary African theological voices continue to expand this conversation. Oduyoye (2001:46–50) insists that Christian theology must address structures that perpetuate human suffering rather than merely offering spiritual comfort to those who suffer. In her view, the mission of the church involves participation in the struggle for justice and human dignity. Likewise, Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:68–72) observes that African Christian movements increasingly confront questions related to economic survival, social mobility and the ethical meaning of prosperity in communities experiencing poverty.

Some scholars have further highlighted the need for African theology to confront political and economic systems that perpetuate inequality across the continent. According to Kaunda (2019:99–102), Christian mission should contribute to the transformation of social structures that undermine human dignity. Similarly, Mwaura and O'Malley (eds. 2016:83–86) note that African churches increasingly face complex social challenges, including poverty, gender inequality and political instability, which require theological responses grounded in both faith and social responsibility.

Within this broader theological landscape, Belhar can be re-read as a missiological document that speaks powerfully to contemporary African realities. The confession's emphasis on unity challenges the church to confront divisions that arise not only from race but also from economic inequality and social exclusion. Its emphasis on reconciliation invites communities to pursue healing within societies marked by historical injustice and ongoing disparities. Most significantly, its affirmation that God stands with the poor calls the church to embody solidarity with those whose lives are shaped by poverty and marginalisation.

Re-reading Belhar through African missiology, therefore, expands the theological horizon of confession. Rather than remaining confined to the historical struggle against apartheid, Belhar emerges as a theological resource capable of illuminating the mission of the church within contemporary African contexts. Its call for unity, reconciliation and justice invites the church to embody a form of Christian witness that responds faithfully to the cries of the poor.

The next section explores the implications of this interpretation for the life and mission of the African church. By examining how Belhar's theological vision might shape contemporary Christian practice, the discussion considers how the church can embody a justice-centred mission in societies marked by inequality and marginalisation.

Discussion

Missiological implications for the African Church

If the Belhar Confession is re-read through the lens of African missiology, its implications extend far beyond historical remembrance. The confession becomes a theological mirror in which the African church must examine its own identity and mission. Belhar does not merely describe a theological ideal; it confronts the church with a demanding question regarding the credibility that invites African Christianity to reconsider the relationship between ecclesial growth, social justice and the mission of God.

One of the most immediate implications concerns the nature of the church itself. Belhar insists that unity belongs to the very essence of the church. Yet unity cannot be reduced to institutional or denominational alignment. Rather, the confession suggests that unity must become visible in the life of the Christian community. For Smit (2007:82–84), this visibility of unity is one of the most challenging aspects of Belhar as it forces the church to examine whether its structures and practices embody the reconciliation proclaimed in the gospel. Where social divisions remain entrenched, the credibility of Christian unity inevitably comes into question.

In many African societies, these divisions increasingly take economic rather than racial forms. Rapid urbanisation and economic disparity often produce congregations in which wealth and poverty coexist within the same ecclesial space. In such contexts, the theological claim that the church is a community of reconciliation becomes difficult to sustain if the lived realities of believers remain shaped by inequality. The confession, therefore, challenges African churches to move beyond symbolic declarations of unity towards practices that reflect genuine solidarity with marginalised communities.

A second implication concerns the missionary identity of the church. Missiological scholarship has long emphasised that Christian mission involves participation in the redemptive activity of God within the world. Bosch (2011:389–392) argues that the church participates in the *missio Dei* by embodying the values of God's kingdom in its witness and practice. Such participation necessarily involves engagement with the social realities that shape human life. Mission cannot be confined to the proclamation of salvation while ignoring the structural conditions that undermine human dignity.

Belhar reinforces this missiological insight by insisting that God stands specially with the poor and the oppressed. This affirmation carries profound implications for the mission of the African church. If God's concern for the marginalised

forms part of the biblical witness, then Christian mission must reflect that concern in both word and action. Boesak (1984:30–33) argues that Belhar calls the church to embody a prophetic witness that confronts injustice rather than accommodating it. In this sense, the confession situates Christian mission within the broader struggle for justice and human dignity.

African theologians have increasingly emphasised this ethical dimension of mission. Pobee (1979:52–54) argues that the credibility of Christian witness in Africa depends on whether the church addresses the social challenges facing African societies, including poverty and inequality. Similarly, Oduyoye (2001:47–50) insists that Christian communities must engage structures that perpetuate suffering if they are to embody the compassion and justice of the gospel. These perspectives resonate strongly with Belhar's insistence that the church must stand where God stands.

A third implication concerns the relationship between ecclesial growth and social responsibility within contemporary African Christianity. The rapid expansion of Christianity across the continent has produced vibrant religious communities that play important roles within public life. Yet this growth often occurs within societies where poverty remains widespread. Scholars of African Christianity, therefore, raise critical questions regarding how churches interpret the relationship between faith, prosperity and social transformation.

Asamoah-Gyadu (2013:70–73) observes that African Christian movements frequently wrestle with the ethical implications of prosperity within communities struggling with economic hardship. While many churches emphasise spiritual empowerment and divine blessing, the persistence of poverty raises questions regarding the broader social responsibilities of Christian communities. Belhar introduces a critical theological perspective into this conversation by reminding the church that God's concern for the poor must shape Christian mission.

African scholars such as Kaunda, Mwaura and O'Malley continue to develop these insights. Kaunda (2019:99–103) argues that African Christian theology must engage the political and economic systems that sustain inequality across the continent. For Kaunda, the church cannot remain neutral in the face of structures that perpetuate poverty and marginalisation. Likewise, Mwaura and O'Malley (eds. 2016:83–87) highlight the growing role of churches in addressing social issues such as poverty, gender inequality and community development within African societies.

These reflections suggest that Belhar offers an important theological framework for reimagining the mission of the African church. The confession invites Christian communities to examine how their ministries reflect the values of justice, reconciliation and solidarity with the marginalised. In doing so, Belhar challenges the church to cultivate forms of mission that integrate evangelism with social responsibility and spiritual transformation with public witness.

This challenge becomes particularly significant in societies where economic inequality threatens social cohesion. In such contexts, the church possesses a unique opportunity to embody an alternative vision of community grounded in the reconciling work of Christ. When the church becomes a community in which the poor are welcomed, dignity is affirmed and justice is pursued, it offers a powerful testimony to the transformative potential of the gospel.

In this sense, the enduring significance of Belhar lies not only in its historical role during the struggle against apartheid but also in its capacity to shape contemporary Christian witness. The confession calls the church to embody a form of mission that reflects God's concern for the oppressed and marginalised. By responding to the cries of the poor, the African church participates more fully in the mission of God within societies marked by inequality and injustice.

Conclusion

Forty years after its adoption, the Belhar Confession continues to challenge the church in ways that extend far beyond the historical circumstances that produced it. While the confession emerged as a theological response to apartheid, its deeper significance lies in its insistence that the unity, reconciliation and justice proclaimed in the gospel must become visible within the life of the Christian community. Belhar therefore confronts the church with a persistent question regarding the relationship between Christian faith and social reality.

When Belhar is interpreted through the lens of African missiology, the confession reveals a broader theological vision that speaks directly to contemporary realities across the continent. The persistence of poverty, economic inequality and social marginalisation across many African societies raises questions similar to those that confronted the church during the apartheid era. While the forms of injustice may differ, the theological challenge remains strikingly familiar, namely, whether the church proclaims the gospel authentically while remaining indifferent to structures that undermine human dignity.

Missiological scholarship provides an important framework for addressing this question. Bosch (2011:389–392) reminds us that Christian mission must be understood as participation in the *missio Dei,* the ongoing work of God to reconcile and restore creation. Within this framework, the mission of the church cannot be reduced to evangelistic proclamation alone. Rather, the church participates in God's mission when it embodies the values of justice, reconciliation and compassion within the world. Belhar reinforces this missiological insight by insisting that the church must stand where God stands, particularly with those who suffer injustice and exclusion.

Within this broader theological conversation, Belhar appears not merely as a historical confession but as a living theological resource capable of shaping the mission of the church in contemporary African contexts. Its insistence that unity and

justice belong together challenges Christian communities to reconsider how their structures, ministries and priorities reflect the ethical implications of the gospel. As Smit (2007:82–85) observes, Belhar forces the church to confront the uncomfortable question of whether the unity it proclaims is visible within its social and ecclesial practices.

This question is not abstract. The differentiated cries of subsistence farmers in northern Ghana, women displaced by conflict in eastern Congo and youth criminalised for informal trading in Lagos are the concrete social realities against which Belhar's call for visible unity and justice must be measured (Ghana Statistical Service 2021:14–17; Katongole 2017:41–44). Katongole, Kwiyani and Okure, missiological thinkers on Belhar, insist, in their different ways, that the credibility of the African church's witness is not determined by the confessional documents it holds but by whether its life and practice genuinely accompany those who suffer. Belhar, read through this lens, is not a theological achievement to be celebrated. It is a standing demand; a confession continues to ask the African church whether it truly stands where God stands.

That is, the confession invites the church to move beyond symbolic declarations of unity towards practices that embody solidarity with marginalised communities. It challenges Christian communities to integrate evangelistic proclamation with social responsibility and spiritual renewal with the pursuit of justice. In this sense, Belhar reminds the church that the credibility of the gospel is closely linked how faith is embodied in social relationships.

Belhar, therefore, remains more than a historical memory of ecclesial resistance. It stands as a theological witness that continues to challenge the African church to participate faithfully in the mission of God. When the church responds to the cries of the poor with practices of justice, reconciliation and compassion, it not only remembers the legacy of Belhar but also embodies the transformative vision that inspired the confession in the first place.

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Mishael D. Ampofo: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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