

The significance of eschatology in the reception of the Belhar Confession

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Dates:

Received: 30 Jan. 2026

Accepted: 08 Mar. 2026

Published: 20 Apr. 2026

How to cite this article:

Conradie E.M., 2026, 'The significance of eschatology in the reception of the Belhar Confession', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82(2), a11297. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v82i2.11297>

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This article offers a constructive thesis on how the continued relevance of an ecclesial document such as the Belhar Confession can be maintained, given the need to recognise a particular *casus confessionis*. The Belhar Confession must indeed be understood as 'a moment of truth'. While the themes of unity, reconciliation and justice have lost none of their relevance, the critique of heresy as expressed in the Confession cannot be reiterated given ideological shifts.

Contribution: It is argued that the key to its continued relevance lies in its eschatology, in the tension between the already of the gospel and the not yet of its eschatological vision. On this basis, a brief account of the underlying and often implicit eschatology of the Belhar Confession is offered. It is argued that to endorse the Belhar Confession means to place oneself in a trajectory where this Confession is regarded as a moment where the gospel was at stake and where an appropriate response was expressed in and for that moment. The continuity in this trajectory is not provided by the precise formulations, the context or even the selected themes. It is provided by the gospel itself. It is the tension between the already of the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit and the not yet of the eschatological vision that keeps the trajectory on track and sustains its momentum.

Keywords: Belhar Confession; eschatology; ethics; ideology; justice; reconciliation; unity.

Introduction

In the late David Tracy's classic discussion of the category of a classic, he observes that a classic has the uncanny ability to compel interpreters to engage with it anew in changing circumstances. It seems to have an excess of meaning that cannot be exhausted through any one interpretation. Not only can one construct new meaning on the basis of engagement with a classic; the interpreter is the recipient of such meaning that cannot be controlled by seeking new relevance for a bygone classic. Tracy explains that the universality of a classic is precisely based on its particularity. It speaks to all ages because it engages in what is at stake in a given situation. It uncovers in that situation something that is core to the human condition (see Tracy 1981:99–153).

Greeley (1974), in conversation with Tracy, illustrates this observation with examples such as Shakespeare who was a Londoner, Mozart who was based in Vienna and Dante who was a Florentine:

The greatness of all these men's contributions was derived mainly from the particularities of the tiny spectrum of the time-space continuum they inhabited. They indeed transcended such limitations and spoke to all men [*and women – EMC*] of all ages, but their transcendence did not come from denying their own cultural roots, but rather from discerning the richness and universality latent in their own cultural heritage. (p. 698)

On this basis, Tracy explores the categories of a religious classic and the Christian classic – for him, the event and person of Jesus Christ (Tracy 1981:154–192, 233–304). Jesus, too, was a Jew who focused his ministry almost entirely on Galilee.

One may add that something similar applies to the Christian creeds and to Reformed confessions alike. The Nicene Creed cannot but be understood within the context of the Council of Nicaea (325). The complexities of that particular council compelled vehement debate that called for a new interpretation (see Kim 2021), illustrated by its immediate aftermath, by the Council of Constantinople (381) and the Council of Chalcedon (451). It also applies to the very particular circumstances that led to the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Canons of Dordt (1618/1619) and to a lesser extent the

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Belhar40', under the expert guidance of guest editor Prof. Christina Landman.

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Heidelberg Catechism (1563). Likewise, the Apostles' Creed must be understood within the context of the catechumen towards baptism in the early church, but is not tied to any particular geographical context.

In this contribution, I will explore a similar dynamic in the Belhar Confession (1982/1986). I will observe that it is precisely its particularity in the church struggle against apartheid and the relationship between the Dutch Reformed Church and the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) that enables it to speak to new issues in changing contexts. I will investigate the underlying eschatology of the Belhar Confession in order to suggest that this is crucial for opening up its excess of meaning and to speak well beyond its original context.

The role of a *casus confessionis*

In one of his authoritative contributions to the volume *A Moment of Truth*, Smit (1984) discusses the category of a *status confessionis* and its relatedness to a *casus confessionis*. There is no need to repeat the argument here. Nor is there a need to account for the particular context in which the Belhar Confession originated (see Adonis 2006; Kritzinger 2010; Plaatjes-van Huffel 2013, 2014). It may suffice to note a few reminders where misunderstanding is possible:

Firstly, it is important to note that the Belhar Confession does not simply offer a theological critique of apartheid in South Africa. The word 'apartheid' is not mentioned in the text of the Confession, nor in the accompanying letter, although the confession does speak three times of the 'enforced separation' of people on the basis of race and colour. There is ample reference to the socio-political context, to conflict between people, injustice and oppression. The Confession speaks of 'a world full of injustice and enmity' (section 4 of the confession) and the accompanying letter of 'a broken world' (paragraph 3). There is mention of 'a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity' (section 3 of the confession). There is an implied critique of social inequality: 'the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others' (section 4).

However, unlike the Kairos Document of 1985/1986, the Belhar Confession does not offer contextual analysis or an ethical assessment of any of that. Instead, it addressed the question raised by Jaap Durand in a famous class discussion in 1978: What is *theologically* wrong with apartheid? (see Botman 1996; Durand 2016). The answer was that it assumes the fundamental irreconcilability of people (see Durand 1984). The enforced separation of people invites a prophetic critique of the government of the day. However, where such forced separation is also legitimised or condoned within the church by appeals to the gospel, that amounts to a heretical distortion of the gospel. The Confession explains why this is the case under the three rubrics of the unity of the church, the gospel of reconciliation in Jesus Christ and a God of compassion and justice, especially for the poor, oppressed and marginalised.

Secondly, the ecclesial context is important. The accompanying letter explains that the ecclesial context (of 1982) required discernment and confession. The heart of the gospel is at stake, given the ways in which it was being distorted. It mentions the situation in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in particular. The issue was twofold, namely the alignment of the Dutch Reformed Church with the National Party government of the day and the subservience (financially and otherwise) of the then DRMC to its 'mother'. What is not mentioned explicitly is the breakaway movements from the DRMC in the founding of the *Volkskerk van Afrika* [People's Church of Africa] (in 1921) and the Calvin Protestant Church of South Africa (in 1950), essentially over such subservience. One may say that the credibility of the DRMC in its own social context was being undermined by such continued subservience, especially given the role of pastors who grew up in and were trained within the Dutch Reformed Church. Indeed, the *Volkskerk* was established precisely because of the way in which white missionaries ran the affairs of the black-dominated congregations under their jurisdiction (see Hector 2022). Something similar applies to Calvin Protestant Church.¹

Thirdly, the ideological context is important. The word 'ideology' is used repeatedly in the text of the Belhar Confession and the accompanying letter. What was that ideology or ideologies? One may argue that by 1982, the political plausibility and feasibility of Verwoerdian apartheid or even 'separate development' was already suspect, also among supporters of the National Party government. The Bantustan policy was still being implemented through the establishment of the 'independent' states of Transkei (1976), Bophuthatswana (1977), Venda (1979) and Ciskei (1981). However, after the Soweto uprisings in 1976, it was already crystal clear that this cannot resolve the constitutional rights of urban blacks. Neither could the Tricameral Parliament be established by the South African Constitution of 1983. Put differently, by 1982 apartheid – as a plausible ideology – was already dead if not yet buried among its own adherents. In its place came the far more ominous ideology of state security that led to the repeated states of emergency in the 1980. The critique of state theology in the *Kairos Document* of 1985/1986 addresses that explicitly, together with its critique of 'church theology'.

Fourthly, in its critique of heresy the Belhar Confession focuses in Article 2 (on church unity) on ecclesial distortions that absolutise natural diversity and sinful alienation; in Article 3 (on reconciliation), on ecclesial distortions that legitimise enforced separation and undermine the ministry of reconciliation; and in Article 4 (on God's justice) on any ideology (whether prevalent in the church or not) that would legitimise injustice or fail to address such injustice in the name of the gospel.

One may safely say that such distortions remain dangerous within the South African context, as may be the case elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, by 1982, the explicit theological justification of apartheid (which can be found in *Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkereverhoudinge in die Lig van die Skrif*

1. See <https://www.cpcsa.info/history>.

[Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk Algemene Sinode 1974]) was maintained only by a minority in the Dutch Reformed Church. In the DRC's document on *Kerk en Samelewing* (Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk Algemene Sinode 1986), it was acknowledged that apartheid as a political system could not be biblically justified and admitted that the system caused harm. By 1990, its General Synod formally condemned apartheid as unjust and confessed that the church wrongly encouraged the forced separation of people (for an insider's account, see *Die Verhaal van die NG Kerk se Reis Met Apartheid, 1960–1994, 'n Getuigenis en 'n Belydenis* [Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk Algemene Sinodale Kommissie 1997]) Whatever one makes of the lasting impact of the politics of apartheid (which is far from 'dead'), of the sincerity of the Dutch Reformed Church (which is yet to accept the Belhar Confession officially), or of the racial prejudice and xenophobia that still thrives in South Africa, the specific critique of heresy in section 3 of the Confession no longer addresses the target that it did in 1982:

[A]ny doctrine which, in such a situation, sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour.

In other words, for the Belhar Confession to remain relevant in changing times, one needs to reckon with such subtle ideological shifts. The critique of heresy remains as relevant as ever before, but the target is shifting in changing circumstances. To repeat: The content of the confession is necessary, but to reiterate the rejection of heresies is relevant only through a discernment of the reigning ideologies and their theological justification. A confession retains its sharp edge only in a *moment* of truth (see again Cloete & Smit 1984).

The ongoing reception of the Belhar Confession, especially within the Dutch Reformed 'family' of churches within which it emerged, illustrates the danger of institutionalising that moment of truth (see eds. Plaatjies-van Huffel & Modise 2017; Van der Westhuizen 2019). Soon enough, Belhar became something of a fetish, a stumbling block, even a weapon that may be used to accuse others, a source of division instead of a call to unity. This is not to be blamed on the content of the confession but on its reception, especially within the Dutch Reformed Church itself. What happened is that the focus shifted from the content of the confession (unity, reconciliation, and justice) to the standing of the confession itself, from the act of confessing in a state of confession to the status of the confession.

The role of eschatology

Allow me to offer and then develop a thesis on the continuing relevance of prophetic documents like the Belhar Confession. The thesis is this: it is the vision of hope articulated in such a document, as it stands in contrast with current realities, whether in 1982/1986 or today, that enables it to speak within changing circumstances. The three themes of unity, reconciliation and justice function as selected doctrinal keys to engage with this tension.

There are three hermeneutical dimensions embedded in this thesis. Firstly, there is the discernment of the signs of the time

as hinted at in the references to ideologies, teachings and heresies. Such discernment is necessarily an ongoing process with shifts and turns occurring regularly.

Secondly, this is contrasted by the vision of hope. This creates a tension between what reality is and what it should be (see Nürnberger 1994). This vision of hope expresses that which is of ultimate significance and therefore tends to have more stability. The vision of hope may of course be expressed in different ways, and that may change over decades and centuries, but it is more stable than a discernment of the signs of the time. There is then a close relationship between eschatology and ethics – that is widely recognised (e.g., Braaten 1974, 1985; Moltmann 1967, 2012).

Thirdly, there is then a theological engagement with this tension. In the Belhar Confession, such engagement is expressed in the themes of unity, reconciliation and justice that operate as 'doctrinal keys' (or doctrinal 'constructs' see Conradie 2010b) to relate text with context, context with vision. There is some stability here as such themes will not easily become outdated (see e.g., Boesak 2008). However, the selection of relevant themes would differ from one context to another and from period to another. The actual engagement cannot be reiterated in exactly the same way amid changing circumstances. This needs to be renewed while keeping the vision of hope in mind. One may expect a thematic continuity, but then in the form of a trajectory where the distinct implications of themes such as unity, reconciliation and justice are concretised amid changing circumstances (on the notion of trajectories, see also Nürnberger 2002). The category of a confessing *journey* (Botman 2006) is therefore appropriate.

The eschatology of the Belhar Confession

Eschatology was traditionally understood as a study of (or the logic of) the *eschata*, i.e., the last things, including aspects such as the coming of the Antichrist, Armageddon, perhaps a divine rupture, the so-called second coming of Christ, the last judgement, heaven and hell and so forth. Eschatology may also be understood with reference to the *Eschatos*, i.e., the One and Only. For Christians, that is best understood as the presence of Jesus as the Christ, the Immanuel, the one who was, who is and who is to come (see König 1989).

In various contributions, I have suggested that it is best to understand eschatology quite simply as ongoing reflection on the content and significance of Christian hope (see Conradie 1999, 2005, 2023). This yields or should inspire a praxis, ethos and spirituality of hope. There may well be a paradoxical tension between hope, the central theme of any Christian eschatology, and eschatological reflection itself. Then we do not know *what* we hope for, only that we hope or, even worse, that to hope is rather important. Curiously, the preoccupation with the future, which prevails in the North-Atlantic world, has given birth to nihilism. By contrast, many traditionalist communities in Africa (arguably with a strong sense of rootedness in the past) are often characterised by a vibrant

sense of hope amid poverty, unemployment and inequality. 'Perhaps it is time to admit', Braaten (1972) comments:

[A]s in the story about the emperor's new clothes, that for all the talk about eschatology ... the theological mind has denuded itself of any symbols of the future that can inspire hope and action. (p. 52)

Tragically, this leaves room for the over-confident apostles of technological progress, or for apocalyptic prophets of doom, to dominate the market by producing visions that inspire hope or install anxiety and despair.

Nevertheless, the content of hope matters or else hope will merely dissipate. The content of specifically Christian hope is usually expressed in terms of four distinct clusters of symbols. These are related to the coming of God's kingdom, the hope for the resurrection of the dead, the Parousia of Christ in order to judge the living and the dead and eternal life. These symbols provide a filter through which one may investigate the Belhar Confession to discern its underlying eschatology.

One has to say that the eschatology of the Belhar Confession is more implicit than explicit (as I argued earlier – see Conradie 2000). However, it is not absent either and is easy to underestimate (as I did). It speaks of 'the one hope' that we share, without spelling out what that entails. Let us pick up some of the clues in this regard:

A first clue comes from the often overlooked first clause of the Belhar Confession:

We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who through Word and Spirit gathers, protects and cares for the church from the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

While it is somewhat odd that God has been gathering the church 'from the beginning of the world' (what about Noah, Abraham, and Moses?), there is no uncertainty in the trust that God will protect and care for the church 'to the end'. Hope is here firmly based on a trust in the Triune God – as is widely emphasised in 20th-century eschatologies in the wake of dialectic theology.

A second clue is the use of the adjective 'new' that appears in various forms five times in Confession and five times in the accompanying letter. The people of God are being built up to 'a new humanity' (section 2). 'God's life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world'. The church is witness both by word and by deed to 'the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells' (section 3).

In the accompanying letter it is stated that the church 'may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation' even though this confession is not as 'a contribution to a theological debate' nor is it 'a *new* summary of our beliefs'; it is to be understood as 'a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand'. The letter recognises that such confession demands 'the pain of individual and

collective *renewal* and a changed way of life'. It adds that 'We shall have to come to know and encounter both ourselves and others in *new* ways'. This confession calls for:

[T]he dismantling of structures of thought, of church, and of society that have developed over many years. However, we confess that for the sake of the gospel, we have no other choice.

It then speaks of a new ecumenical beginning: 'We pray that our brothers and sisters ... will want to make this *new* beginning with us, so that we can be free together, and together may walk the road of reconciliation and justice.'

There is then a sense of the new, the unexpected but that implies renewal, not replacement. To be sure, old structures will need to be dismantled, but the church will remain nurtured, protected and cared for – by the triune God.

A third clue is the ample eschatological biblical imagery that is evoked in the text of the Belhar Confession. It may suffice to extract phrases such as 'the communion of the saints'; 'fulfilling the law of Christ'; the church is called 'blessed because it is a peacemaker'; there is again 'the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells'; God's life-giving Word and Spirit 'has conquered the powers of sin and death'. It is especially the fourth clause on justice where such imagery flourishes:

God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoners and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the strangers, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering.

Accordingly, the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, 'so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream'. None of this describes current realities; the imagery expresses a quite radical vision of hope for a society that has never ever been. It is nothing but a dream, but then an inspiring one, akin to Martin Luther King's famous one (see Smit 1986).

A fourth and final clue is found in the equally overlooked fifth clause of the confession. After emphasising the need for obedience in the current situation, 'even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence' it concludes that: 'Jesus is Lord. To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever'. The confession that Jesus is Lord is not only of an eschatological nature. However, in the then current context, with apartheid still firmly in place, it was at least counter-intuitive. The Nicene Creed adds that Christ's kingdom will have no end. It is therefore fitting to say that the glory of the Lamb that was slain will be 'for ever and ever'. Here, the symbol of everlasting life clearly comes into play albeit implicitly. The trinitarian framing of the Belhar confession in the first and the fifth clauses ensures that hope remains rooted in faith in the triune God.

In short, then, it is the eschatological vision of hope that challenges us in any and every current situation not to accept a lack of ecclesial unity, alienation between people or structures of oppression. It enables us to resist any heresy that would legitimise any of that in the name of the gospel.

Belhar on going beyond Belhar

It should be clear from the accompanying letter that the Belhar Confession is best regarded as a moment of truth. This is recognised in numerous publications on the legacy of Belhar (see Cloete & Smit 1984; Naudé 2010; eds. Plaatjes-van Huffel & Modise 2017; Smit 2007). It cannot be regarded as an aim in itself. That would mean to miss the point completely. To endorse the Confession (as many churches have done with the notable exception of the Dutch Reformed Church – see Pillay 2022; Van der Westhuizen 2019) is significant but cannot mean to fossilise its formulations as eternal truths. This would undermine the dialectic between movement and institution (see Conradie 2025) that is crucial in the act of confessing. It would mean to believe in one's confession instead of confessing one's faith.

Not every moment calls for a *status confessionis*. That is only appropriate when a situation emerges where the gospel itself is at stake, where conversation has come to a dead-end and where the only route forward is to confess one's faith, to explain where one stands (see again Smit 1984). There is no need to reiterate the confession in changing circumstances. Put differently, without discerning a *casus confessionis*, that a moment of truth emerged where the gospel itself is at stake, the dangers associated with unnecessary formalisation loom large (see Smit 2007:415). Whereas a confession is aimed at addressing heresy and avoiding schisms through a call for unity, premature creedal formation will tend to lead to conflict and schism (Smit 2007:418). At best, the particularity and distinctiveness of the confession would inspire others elsewhere in other times to discern a moment of truth in their situation. That may or may not revolve around the themes of ecclesial unity, reconciliation and justice. Put differently: each of these three themes remains as relevant as ever before (see e.g., Boesak & DeYoung 2012; Fortein 2021), but how they are addressed depends on current ideological shifts and turns.

There is a danger that the Belhar Confession may be used as an instrument in other struggles that stretch its meaning too far beyond its actual content. In the process, its significance can only be watered down. It is easy to see how the Belhar confession is relevant in a 'wounded world' (Kgatla 2024), for example, in the current Palestinian context, in hierarchical societies (India, the United Kingdom), in polarised countries (e.g., the current United States), in the critique of imperial domination (as is evident from the Accra Confession), on issues of migration and xenophobia, on issues of gender inclusivity (see Landman 2006 though), on human dignity (see Koopman 2008), on being differently abled, on a spirit of inclusivity (Conradie 2017) and multiple issues of justice. However, the Belhar Confession cannot be used for any and

all struggles towards social transformation. It was never meant to do that in any case. For example, it can hardly be used for debates on sustainability, although it could help to address issues related to climate justice. Elsewhere, I suggested that Belhar allows for a critique of consumerism and of the prosperity gospel, in particular, but that such a critique would be misunderstood if the language of confession (where no further debate is deemed appropriate) is adopted (see Conradie 2009, 2010a).

Conclusion

To endorse the Belhar Confession means to place oneself in a trajectory where this Confession is precisely regarded as a moment where the gospel was at stake and where an appropriate response was expressed in and for that moment. The continuity in this trajectory is not provided by the precise formulations, the context or even the selected themes. It is provided by the gospel itself. As I argued in this contribution, it is the tension between the already of the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit and the not yet of the eschatological vision that keeps the trajectory on track and sustains its momentum.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Ernst M. Conradie: Conceptualisation, Methodology, 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.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position

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