

Belhar and the human: From the church to humanity for the sake of the future

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In commemorating 40 years since the adoption of the Belhar Confession, this article traces the ecclesiological focus of Belhar and probes the limits of this approach for addressing questions of racism and whiteness. It argues that the underpinning anthropological questions, already visible in the infamous 1857 decision of the Dutch Reformed Church, remain unexplored and proposes that it is exactly in questions of theological anthropology that the church will need to find its confessional voice today. It proposes a theological shift from ecclesiology to anthropology as the church seeks to deepen its commitment to a more human future in the face of persistent global racism.

Contribution: The limitations of the ecclesiological focus in the Confession of Belhar are illustrated by bringing them into dialogue with the infamous 1857 decision that opened the door for segregation in Reformed ecclesiology. Drawing on recent theological research on whiteness, a proposal is made for how a stronger anthropological focus can serve to provide Christian language to engage with ongoing racism and white supremacy.

Keywords: Belhar; racism; theological anthropology; ecclesiology; whiteness.

Introduction

When commemorating Nicaea in 2025, I argued about the language of confessions (Van Wyngaard 2025):

[T]he real question should then not simply be a remembrance of creedal statements but examining what creedal statements and the collective remembrance have done over time and into the present. (p. 276)

My argument below seeks to highlight the ways in which Belhar's confessional language formed the way in which questions of racism could be theologically explored, and in the process limits the way in which emerging questions of anthropological hierarchies can be theologically critiqued. In commemorating 40 years of Belhar, the question I raise here is whether a more explicit articulation of our theological anthropology in response to white supremacy and colonial racism is not at the heart of what the church is called to today?

I have previously outlined various ways in which the heretical nature of apartheid was illuminated in the 1980s (Van Wyngaard 2019b), making a particular distinction between Bosch's illumination of an ecclesiological heresy and Maimela's on an anthropological heresy. What I want to focus attention on below is that Belhar's ecclesiological emphasis both limits the extent to which it can address deeper questions of racism and also leaves opaque what the implications would be for emerging questions of radical human equality and what a Christian confession that can provide the theological language to consistently carry this would look like.

The argument will first outline the ecclesiological emphasis of Belhar as it responds to apartheid, before turning to the infamous 1857 decision of the Dutch Reformed Church to illustrate the underlying whiteness that precedes the segregationist impulse in the South African Reformed tradition. In the final section, the possibility of a more explicit anthropological engagement to expand on Belhar is proposed.

Belhar as an ecclesiological confession

It should be quite clear, even on a superficial reading, that the Confession of Belhar is largely focused on the church. There are 18 references to the church in the text of the Confession.¹

1. Here I use the original Afrikaans text. In Afrikaans, there are also two references to 'volk'. The first, in article 3, was originally translated to 'church', and the second was translated to 'people of God'.

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Four of the five Articles refer to the church in the first sentence. But beyond mere explicit counts of words, the entire thrust of the confession is focused on the church. Starting with the Trinitarian formula introducing God's gathering of the church in Article 1, and then opening Article 2 with a repetition of the classic four markers of the church, Belhar gives its unique confessional focus by highlighting how embodying unity and reconciliation visibly is what God calls the church towards both as an expression of the simple nature of the church – what the church is created to be – but then also repeatedly draws in a broader vision of 'the world'² to which the church is to be a witness.

Article 4 takes a slightly different approach by not opening with any explicit reference to the church and only turning to the church by paragraph 3. In Article 4, the confession turns to the nature of God, and ties this to biblical expressions of justice and peace. This includes the nod towards the language typical of liberation theologies that 'God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged'.³ For Article 4, the church is introduced in paragraph 3, and the preceding reflection on the nature of God is presented as the reason for the church's commitment to justice.⁴ But even here, nearly as much attention is given to the calling of the church towards justice as to God as a God of justice.

It is also clear, and to be expected, that Belhar is explicitly concerned with the history of racism, drawing from the experience of those who crafted it under apartheid South Africa. While apartheid is never directly named in the confession, the reference in Article 3 to 'a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis' makes quite explicit the 1980s apartheid South Africa to which the confession responds, even while allowing for its application where similar enforced separations occur under a different name.

Without overstating the obvious, in Belhar, a confession on the church and a response to a racist society are woven together. In a volume commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Confession of Belhar (Plaatzies-Van Huffel & Modise 2017), David Kuyler explicitly engages the question of Belhar's response to racism. His argument illuminates clearly what happens in Belhar, and also provides us with a starting point to examine the limitations of Belhar as a lens on addressing racism in church and society.

It is particularly Article 2 that draws Kuyler's attention – the question of unity. For Kuyler, the key is 'the relationship between members of churches and the ethical way they should relate with one another' (Kuyler 2017:219). Kuyler traces this emphasis through a range of ecumenical reflections. He cites the 1948 Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops, which emphasised that race should not limit

2. This, from Article 2, follows the text of John 17 and, in the context of the confession, seems to be limited to humanity, not creation as a whole.

3. This particular phrase has often been highlighted by those who reject the confession and has led to extensive theological discussion (see e.g. Naudé 2010:203–218).

4. Article 4 also contains one of the two references to 'volk', and the one that was translated as the 'people of God' rather than the 'church'.

membership or position (Kuyler 2017:217),⁵ the 1964 World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) General Council statement emphasising unity and that excluding people from the church based on race 'contradicts the very nature of the church' (Kuyler 2017:216) and the 1970 WARC General Council statement condemning racism, which, in Kuyler's lens on this, is described as segregation made into a law (Kuyler 2017:216). Finally, he reflects on the WARC Ottawa proceedings, which highlights the apartheid belief in the irreconcilability of humans⁶ and the injustice of apartheid. The Confession of Belhar stands in this tradition when it denounces racism based on its convictions around the unity of the church and reconciliation of people.

Repeatedly, Kuyler focuses attention on an ethical reading of Belhar. For example, he states that 'Alfred Rauhaus rightly argues that the *status confessionis* was indeed an ethical issue' (Kuyler 2017:218) and places his reading within a lens on ecclesiology and ethics (Kuyler 2017:227). As indicated, this ethics focuses on joining across difference, emphasising 'bringing people of races together in worship services' (Kuyler 2017:224) and urges that members from different races must not only be tolerated but 'welcomed as expressions of cultural diversity and equality' (Kuyler 2017:225).

For Belhar, the church is an explicit counter to the structural racism of apartheid; however, its description of this racism is nearly exclusively focused on the 'forced separation' [*gedwonge skeiding*] that underpinned the entire apartheid system. Kuyler's reading is not to be faulted; Belhar's counter to this racism is indeed a call to unity – bringing different people together. Even while Article 4 does expand on the oppression embedded in the apartheid system, what it risks obfuscating is the inherent anthropological hierarchy – theologically informed – that underpinned the entire history of colonial racism. Or to put it in more nuanced language, Belhar does not explicitly and theologically name the whiteness that anchored the racial and racist ordering of the world.

Eddy van der Borgh's repeated argument around a fundamental problem within some ecumenical statements around identity starts to outline aspects of the problem that we need to engage with.

In his inaugural lecture for the Desmond Tutu chair at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, he argued his point most poignantly (Van der Borgh 2009):

... becoming and being Christian does not infer leaving behind one's anthropological identity. That is impossible and would mean a denial of humanity. All these identities comprise what we are. We do not leave them behind when we become Christian and a member of the church. Nor do they evaporate. (p. 22)

5. Kuyler quotes, among other things, the reference that 'every race should be encouraged to develop in accordance with their abilities' (Kuyler 2017:217), without noting or reflecting on the similarities with proto-apartheid and apartheid separate development language.

6. Russel Botman recounts how Jaap Durand led his students to discern in dialogue with Barth that this was the heart of the theological problem of apartheid (Botman 2006).

This reminder does not fall from the air but is consistently made in response to the reigning ecumenical theological responses to questions of social identity. For example, these words just quoted follow on a discussion of the 2006 Faith and Order document *Participating in God's Mission of Reconciliation*, about which he writes: 'The text says that those who become Christian, as it is expressed in baptism, leave behind national, ethnic, and racial identities' (Van der Borgh 2009:21). What was identified in response to Faith and Order in his inaugural lecture, he similarly identified with a number of other ecumenical documents previously (Van der Borgh 2008). Questions of social difference are treated by the church as something in society that should be responded to, rather than as something that affects the very identity of the church. It becomes an ethical rather than a theological issue.

In his valedictory lecture more than a decade later, he summarised his own programme along these lines: it is about 'the relation between religious and socio-cultural identities', it responds to the observation that Christian responses resort to 'ethical and reconciliation language' and lack a 'depth dimension that deals with underlying theological issues' (Van der Borgh 2023). This focus does, however, show a certain progression in Van der Borgh's work. Where his earlier work, including when explicitly focusing on Belhar, seeks to show the limitations in a focus on unity which cannot theologically engage with socio-cultural diversity (Van der Borgh 2012), by his valedictory lecture, he insists that the colonial and racist history informing socio-cultural identities needs to be given far more explicit theological attention (Van der Borgh 2023).

While Kuyler opts to centre the ethical call of Belhar as a response to racism and Van der Borgh questions the reduction to ethics of ecumenical documents, they both do so, noting that in the end, the concrete practices of the church remain reflective of a deeply unresolved ecclesiological problem. What Belhar's ecclesiological focus, however, does not adequately name is a deeper crisis in the construction of the very identities now divided – that which underpinned the possibility of division.

Hidden in plain sight – Whiteness in 1857

While there are indeed various ways to outline this problem, there is perhaps only one synodical meeting that matches the 1986 meeting at Belhar in terms of its visibility in the history of the Reformed tradition and racism in South Africa: the 1857 meeting of the *Gereformeerde Kerk van Zuid-Afrika*.⁷ In theological circles, South African Reformed circles in particular, 1857 is often recalled as a key marker in the theological justification of apartheid. In this year, the then synod of the Dutch Reformed Church conceded that congregations may indeed administer the sacraments to white and black members during separate liturgies. Much has been

written on this decision. Often attention is drawn to the fact that the synod was aware that splitting the local church along such lines is outside of a biblical ideal and that it took decades for the synod to make such a concession. Giliomee emphasises that discourse preceding this and during much of the debate did not favour segregation (Giliomee 2003:219). Kritzinger, however, reminds that the decision only formalised what was already practised. Even in cases where congregations may have included all members in a single sacramental liturgy, the segregation was visible in multiple other practices – such as seating arrangements or leadership structures, and that while 1829⁸ may have emphasised unity, it was prompted by racialised divisions already in existence (Kritzinger 2024:38–39). Yet I turn to 1857 to take note of a different, and to some perhaps a seemingly more innocent, theological formulation that allowed for the formalisation of this proto-apartheid decision: the naming of the parts.

The often-quoted decision reads (*Gereformeerde Kerk van Zuid-Afrika* 1857):

The Synod considers it desirable and scriptural that our members from among the Heathen be accommodated and incorporated into our existing congregations, wherever possible; but where this approach, due to the weakness of some, would obstruct the promotion of the cause of Christ among the Heathen, the congregations that have been established, or are still to be established, from among the Heathen, shall enjoy their Christian privileges in a separate building or institution. (p. 60 [author's translation])

Attuned to 20th century racial nomenclature, and if unaware of the broader history in which this particular decision was embedded, some might mistakenly think that the decision itself contains no clear reference to race at all. The formulation in the actual decision refers to 'our members from among the Heathen'. On the one hand, any doubt on what this formulation refers to is removed by noting the broader context of the minutes of the meeting where the underlying question is identified as '*Discussie over blanken en gekleurden*' [Discussion over white people and coloured people] (*Gereformeerde Kerk van Zuid-Afrika* 1857:60). And yet, we are not facing a mere euphemism, an attempt to hide the blunt reality or racial logic by drawing on a less troublesome theological description. Rather, this 'we' that forms the 'our existing congregations' and that is different from the 'members from among the Heathen' is exactly what constitutes a Christian logic of whiteness. It is not merely that the 'we' and the 'heathen members' are known by all who heard these words, but rather that such an identification was made possible by an extensive Christian colonial and racial logic which fundamentally distorts a Christian vision of community, draws from a white vision of salvation, and produces a racialised anthropological hierarchy through claims to Christian inclusion.

More than a separation of Christian worshippers into separate buildings, an increasingly segregated, racially

⁷This was the name of the then Cape synod, formally today called the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid Afrika*, but which is more widely represented by the Dutch Reformed Church which today includes this as one of the synods of its General Synod.

⁸The 1829 synod received similar requests for a separation within the local congregation but rejected these.

constituted religious life is of concern here. Where I want to draw attention to is the underlying matter of the 'we' that can organise Christian life, the 'we' that can make the distinction between the 'we' and the 'our heathen members'. Yes, at times Christian visions of white salvation produced strong logics of exclusion – where whiteness was not only synonymous with Christianity but Christianity was also exclusive to those considered white.⁹ Such logics did exist among colonial Christianity in the Cape Colony;¹⁰ but what we have in this case, and what is more common historically, is rather a distorted vision of inclusion, where the inclusion of 'gekleurden' [coloured] Christians is tied to and mediated by the insistence on the whiteness of Christianity.

Reflecting on a different context, Catholic discernment during the 16th-century colonial expansion in the southern Americas, Willie Jennings describes the problem of colonial Christian theologians' discernment of idolatry. His concern is not in the first instance with Christian language of idolatry in description of indigenous people, but rather that this Christian discernment is done as if 'from the perspective of the ones to whom the revelation to the one true God was given, Israel' (Jennings 2010:97). His argument ties to a broader trajectory that whiteness draws from Christian supersessionism or replacement theology – the idea that the church replaces Israel in God's heart, which in colonial racial logic becomes intertwined with a white Christianity which sees European space and white bodies as the means through which God's work of salvation is mediated (Van Wyngaard 2019c:54–57). What is hidden in the exclusive focus on the introduction of separation in liturgical practices, leading to ecclesial and later geographic segregation, is the position from which such a decision could be taken. The unstated 'our'. This decision, that in hindsight was read as foundational to later apartheid theologies, also draws from a form of normalised supersessionism, such that the biblical language of Jew and gentile is seamlessly reproduced to rhetorically position white colonial Christians into the position of the Jew and 'gekleurden' Christians into that of gentile, here named as heathen.

While the decision is noted for its segregationist impulses, its framing language, in fact, reveals the deeply problematic and racialised logic through which Christians were drawn into a distorted community. For Jennings, this inability to recognise a shared gentile identity disrupts the possibility of intimacy that a Christian identity should have made possible (Jennings 2010:97), and this distorted community organised around an ecclesial and salvific vision which reaches out and draws in from the position of Europe reimagined as ground for God's salvation becomes the tragic reality of colonial Christianity (Jennings 2010:33). Tracing a different tradition but a similar logic, Elliott indicates how in Methodist missionary history in South Africa, Christianity is seen as a humanising force – implying that indigenous people's humanisation is found

through a process of Christianisation, which in reality comes through its proximity to whiteness (Elliott 2025:3).

We often think of the problem of white theology as a problem of thinking humanity apart. And no doubt, our own history with thinking apart would seem to confirm that. But the question of the 'our heathen members' was at heart about thinking people together.¹¹ And the deeper problem is exactly in this thinking together. Because underpinning how synod can think 'our heathen members' into 'our congregation' is a racial vision. While indeed at times race determines the boundary of inclusion into the Christian community, more often historically, and also in our own history, it mediates the terms of inclusion and facilitates the distortion of community.

After 40 years, we need to note that Belhar's response to the racism in the church was built on a rejection of the segregation, specifically forced segregation, on racial grounds, and built on a constructive vision of unity. It rejects the division and segregation that, in many ways, are linked to the decision of 1857. But Belhar remains unable to name the 'our' that underpinned this theological justification of apartheid, and of the soteriological and anthropological logics that made this possible. Belhar is not alone in this; in fact, this insistence on unity with little capacity for critical theological reflection on the way the underlying anthropologies are theologically constituted was pointed out as finding its place in various ecumenical documents. It raises the question of what such an anthropological 'yes' and 'no' would look like in Christian confessional language, and how this might carry the church in both its ongoing response to racism as well as in various other questions with deep anthropological implications that are drawing the attention of churches globally.

Confessing a true humanity

In spite of the ecclesial emphasis outlined in Belhar, questions of anthropology were at the heart of black theology debates in the years leading up to the drafting in 1982, and in the midst of the tumultuous 1980s. Allan Boesak (1977), arguably the most important church leader in the process that led to the Confession of Belhar, emphasises this prior anthropological commitment in 1977:

Black Theology, by taking this situation seriously, seeks to realise the true humanity of black people. For blacks, authentic humanity means *black* humanity. Blacks know that racial fellowship and reconciliation will never become a reality unless whites learn to accept blacks as *black people*. (p. 27)

Boesak's use of true humanity is closely linked to earlier black consciousness and black theology rhetoric. Biko's dialectic, which poses black consciousness against 'the liberals', is one of the most frequently referenced sentences in his 'I Write What I Like' essays. It is worth quoting in full (Biko [1978] 2012):

11. Richard Elphick famously traces this in how 'equality' of faith was deeply interwoven with the separation of people in terms of race (Elphick 2012).

9. See, for example, the extensive discussion on hereditary heathenism in *The Baptism of Early Virginia* (Goetz 2016).

10. This is typically recounted in narratives of opposition to Christian mission, for example, Van der Kemp's critique of frontier farmers (Smit 2016).

For the liberals the thesis is apartheid, the antithesis is non-racialism, but the synthesis is very feebly defined. They want to tell the blacks that they see integration as the ideal solution. Black Consciousness defines the situation differently. The thesis is in fact a strong white racism and therefore the antithesis to this must, ipso facto, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance – a *true humanity* where power politics will have no place. (p. 99 [author's own emphasis])

This emphasis on true humanity, however, forms the theme of three essays in the original *Essays in Black Theology*.¹² Here we also find the very problem that I outlined in the confessional language of Belhar in the foundational structuring of black consciousness (and we can add black theology).¹³ The ecclesiological emphasis of Belhar is most explicitly responding to the separation of apartheid, particularly as it found theological justification in the (Dutch Reformed) Church, but struggles to name the 'strong white racism' that underpins this.

Curiously, Belhar did not make use of the widely known language on the image of God in its confessional language, even while the positive anthropological claims drawing in the language of the image of God were already visible in, for example, the work of Maimela (Van Wyngaard 2017) and the extensive public performance of Tutu (Kobe 2023:108–112, 196). Yet the language of the *imago Dei* still does not sufficiently probe the anthropological critique of white racism that the 1980s black theology produced. Takatso Mofokeng pointed out that such a return to creation underestimates the depth of colonial destruction, so that any reconstruction of humanity on the other side of colonial modernity cannot draw from creation but must be done in a Christological key – drawing on resurrection language (Van Wyngaard 2019c:174–177).

My argument is not that Belhar can be disconnected from the broader history of black theology of liberation that preceded it – that would be impossible. However, the deeper anthropological commitments in black theology of the time are hidden by a stronger ecclesiological focus. Vuyani Vellem rightly responds to the way that Belhar is domesticated in order to reject the place of liberation theology;¹⁴ but his claim that Belhar enunciates 'a *new humanity* and ecclesiological understanding for the affirmation of life' (Laubscher & Vellem 2018:7, emphasis added) is difficult to trace back to the confessional text, given the abundance of ecclesiological claims and the very limited focus on this new humanity or true humanity in theological perspective.

12. See Van Wyngaard (Van Wyngaard 2019c:142–146) for a detailed discussion of the differences between the 1972 collection of essays published as *Essays in Black Theology* and the 1974 *Black Theology: The South African Voice*.

13. Biko can credibly be read as a theological voice (Africa 2024), and at least in this essay, the claim on true humanity should be read as drawing on a particular eschatological imagination (Van Wyngaard 2019c:130–142).

14. The prevalence of such views is visible in extensive discussions over the years, but remains visible in the persistent rhetoric of the Dutch Reformed Church (Van Wyngaard 2019a:11–15).

Even while the justice article in Belhar, which has historically brought about significant resistance exactly because of how it draws on liberatory language, carries a vision of human equality, it does not provide an expansive anthropological vision that would allow for a theological critique of anthropological hierarchies.

While the language of whiteness was not available for the drafting of Belhar, the anthropological underpinning of the visible ecclesiological problem was named already. In the past 40 years, the language of whiteness in relation to privilege gained increasing traction, referring not merely to economic positionality, but to 'shared social space in which the psychological, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of this privileged positionality are normalised, and rendered unremarkable' (Steyn 2005:121). Furthermore, the fundamental theological underpinning of the construction of race has received sustained attention in recent years. Perhaps the most important contribution to this was the publication of Willie Jennings' *The Christian Imagination*. Jennings points to the theological work which made race into a soteriological shorthand, where those named as white were considered as having higher salvific possibility, while those considered black would have a lower salvific possibility (Jennings 2010:33–36), and where a European Christianity discerned God's work of salvation through a deformed calculus – discerning salvation in reference to itself (Jennings 2010:140–141). As Carter, in close dialogue with Jennings, argued in detail, white Christianity interprets itself into the place of Israel to become the mediating space for God's work of salvation (Carter 2008:107). The result was a Christianity where 'whiteness functions both as a marker of insured salvation, but also a marker of that which mediates salvation' (Van Wyngaard 2019c:251). Yet this logic was also seen to underpin the 'our churches' and 'our members from the heathen', a soteriological lens informing racial construction in the Reformed tradition, in the above-discussed 1857 decision. While this can be argued in far more detail, the key point here is the note that the very idea of race and the way in which whiteness was constructed put the heart of the gospel at stake. Or, to put this in language familiar to the history of Belhar, it calls for a *status confessionis* broader than the problem of forced segregation that typified apartheid.

While Belhar gave confessional language for articulating the ecclesiological no and yes for the implications that the theological justification of apartheid is a heresy, the challenge that both preceded and outlived apartheid is the way white colonial Christianity theologically reimagined the human in racial ways which theologically sanctioned its hierarchisation. Even while extensive critical theological resources around whiteness exist, the language of whiteness continues to cause tension when used critically within church discourses across the ecumenical spectrum (Van Wyngaard & Van der Riet 2025:8). In the absence of a full recognition of the distorted theological vision that underpinned it, racial identities are relegated to just another 'normal' aspect of human diversity. Yet, as already outlined above in relation to Van der Borgh's critique on how baptismal language ignores the complexity

of social identities, the answer is not found in attempts to 'renounce race' (Jennings 2010:63). Silencing race repeatedly works to reinforce its existing function (Milazzo 2025). As Jennings points out, following his detailed tracing of the way colonial Christianity constructed race, 'the way forward, if there is a way forward, will involve several more conceptual steps before a future of communion might be envisioned' (Jennings 2010:64).

In terms of liturgical or confessional language, one concrete example might be the anthropological commitments developed liturgically in a litany that evolved in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) congregation Melodi ya Tshwane. Through work explicitly rooted in black theology of liberation, the statement titled *I Stand Tall*¹⁵ articulates a positive anthropology that deliberately sought to counter colonial racial constructions. While Kritzing describes this as a way of embodying Belhar (Kritzing 2014:6–7), it also provides liturgical language that explicitly engages with anthropological questions in ways Belhar does not articulate as explicitly. Although following a different liturgical rhythm than the synodical decision at Belhar, it might nonetheless be of value for the church to more explicitly consider the 'therefore' that would follow this positive anthropological commitment – rejection that follows the confession.

For the Dutch Reformed Church, where up to now congregations continue to be organised in fairly homogeneous white and Afrikaans communities, the implication of this may be to consider a more deliberate engagement with historic injustice and its ongoing racial formation, similar to the *Litany of Repentance* adopted by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), where the acknowledgement of a history of white supremacy is directly linked to the Christian language of repentance (Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.] 2022).

Yet even here, the risk is that repentance is linked predominantly to questions of ethics. In following the structure of Belhar, the question is perhaps how the 'therefore' is to be articulated, given a history of theologically justified colonialism and white supremacy. The way that the language of dignity, human uniqueness and equality, the creation or recreation in the image of God, and universal human community are drawn upon, to use the language of *I Stand Tall*, is after all the positive confession to emerge from a history of racism and white supremacy. But what then is the 'no'?

If the deeper problem was not only separation, but a racialised ecclesial 'our' that makes whiteness the mediating space of salvation, then the confessional 'no' must reject precisely this theological mediation. Can the church, for example, find language that would state that: Therefore, we confess the ways in which centuries of colonial conquest and

apartheid not only disrupted human dignity but deformed a Christian imagination of salvation and humanity. We reject the ways in which white Christianity interpreted itself as the mediator of salvation. We reject the use of covenantal language which ties Christian identity to ethnic, national or cultural identities, as if particular social identities are naturally Christian.

Conclusion

In spite of the stark reality of forced segregation, and the deeply spatial and divisive heart of apartheid, there was a theologically sanctioned hierarchy between the 'our' and 'our members from the heathen' that preceded this segregation. Where salvation is assumed to be more readily found and how it is to be mediated was interpreted in a racial and racist key in South Africa, and in every colonised part of the globe.

The argument here is not that merely introducing a more anthropological emphasis in our confessional language will resolve the centuries of racism and the myriads of anthropological hierarchies persistently underpinning ongoing death in society.¹⁶ However, joining those who have pointed to fundamental anthropological crises underpinning modernity, and in a particular way the Christianity that accompanied the colonial structuring of the world, I do suggest that its absence in the Confession of Belhar reminds of broader silence in the church around both critical and constructive Christian language that will allow a deeper questioning of the anthropological hierarchies structuring societies, and that can carry a more consistent Christian exploration of what it would mean to live justly today. In a world where white racism still determines the course of history, as well as beyond the history of racism, we are constantly reminded that the issue is one of hierarchy rather than just difference, as we consider what a future of communion will look like in the face of differences in language, sexual orientation, nationality, and class. As Tinyiko Maluleke (2011) reminds us:

Our differences are not only soft but hard, not only horizontal but vertical. It is not merely that some are men and others are women, but rather that men are gods and women their dispensable temptresses; not merely that some are white while others are black, but rather that the whites are masters and the blacks are servants; not merely that some like wine while others like beer, but rather that some have much to eat and drink while others have nothing; not that some believe in hell and others believe in heaven but rather that some live already in heaven while others live already in hell. (p. 86)

As we commemorate 40 years of Belhar, the question that should perhaps be on our agenda is not merely how to say no to forced separation, and yes to unity, but how to say no to

15. I stand tall and dignified in the presence of God and among my fellow human beings. I accept myself as a precious and unique person, created through Christ to be the image of the living God. Together with animals, trees and rivers we are one living community, belonging to the earth, our common home. Guided by the Spirit, we discover who we are, as a family: *Motho ke motho ka batho*.

16. In particular, the ongoing questions around how the Trump presidency is drawing from white nationalist discourses in the United States (US) and weaving that into South African whiteness, seen most explicitly in the discourse on a white genocide – <http://tinyurl.com/satrumresponse>. The construction of South African whiteness as that to which the US must respond as a refugee, while simultaneously shutting down asylum options and immigration routes for people of African and Middle-Eastern origin remain a stark reminder of how whiteness shapes the globe today, and how South African whiteness is symbolically tied to white nationalism globally.

the anthropological hierarchies that structure the world, how to say no to the forces that continue to maintain them, and how to say yes to receiving a humanity formed by a 'grace from without' (Perkinson 2004:215), and that prefigures a 'true humanity where power politics have no place' (Biko 1972:20).

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CRedit authorship contribution

George J. van Wyngaard: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, 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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Data availability

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

Disclaimer

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