

From “Blood River” to “Belhar”: a bridge too far?

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Abstract

2013 saw the 175th commemoration of the Great Trek. The festivities reached a climax on 16 December when many Afrikaners celebrated the Vow in commemoration of victory of the Voortrekkers against the Zulus at Blood River. At the same time the Dutch Reformed Church to whom the majority of Afrikaners belong decided at its General Synod in 2011 to start a process to make the Confession of Belhar part of the confessional basis of the church. This was followed up with a proposal for a new Article 1 of the Church order which included the Confession of Belhar at the 2013 General Synod. While Blood River and the Vow forms part of the foundation on which Afrikaner nationalism, which led to apartheid, was built, the Confession of Belhar constitutes the struggle against the very policy of apartheid. This article asks the question of whether it is possible to make a mind shift away from Blood River and what it stands for to Belhar, to unity, to reconciliation and to justice. To answer this question, the change that took place in the Dutch Reformed Church Bloemfontein, better known as Tweekoringkerk, as well as the decision of the recent synod serve as two examples to show that for some members of the church it may indeed still be a bridge too far.

Introduction

Operation Market Garden took place from 17-25 September 1944 during the Second World War¹. It ended in the battle of Arnhem, one of the most dramatic battles of the war, which cost the Allies nearly twice as many casualties as D-day. The purpose of the operation was to end the war by Christmas 1944 by dropping the combined forces of the American and British armies behind German lines to capture the crucial bridge across the

¹ C Ryan, *A Bridge too far: The classic History of the Greatest Battle of World War II*, (New York: Touchstone, 1978).

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Rhine at Arnhem. During the planning stages of the operation, General Browning made a remark which inspired the idiom used in the title of this article. He said in answering a question of the Commander in Chief, Field Marshall Montgomery: "I think we could go a bridge too far."² After the failure of the operation his famous words became an idiom meaning: "going too far and getting into trouble" or "being too ambitious".³ This idiom illustrates the question which this article poses namely: can Christian Afrikaners who still celebrate the Vow after 175 years make the move to embrace the Confession of Belhar. In order to answer the question the article will firstly explore the Battle of Blood River – the origins of the Vow and the important role it played and still plays in the lives of many Christian Afrikaners. Secondly, the article will focus on the origin and content of the Confession of Belhar. Thirdly, it will use the so called *Tweetoringkerk*⁴ in Bloemfontein and the proposed new Article 1 as two examples to show that it is indeed possible to make a move from Blood River to Belhar, before concluding that, although it is possible, for some, the bridge is indeed too far.

The Battle of Blood River

Background to the battle

To understand the deep roots of Afrikaner nationalism and the importance of the Vow it is necessary to revisit the Battle of Blood River. The abolition of slavery in 1834, the proclamation of English as the official language and the struggle for agricultural land which led to the border wars, to name a few, were some of the reasons which led to a mass emigration from the Cape colony from 1835. Between 10 000 and 15 000 farmers left the colony in what became known as the Great Trek.⁵ This movement to the interior brought the Voortrekkers into contact with indigenous peoples who inhabited the interior of Southern Africa for centuries.⁶ Piet Retief, one of the leaders of the Voortrekkers thought that the Boers⁷ and the Zulus⁸ could live side by side in Natal and approached Dingane⁹ in October 1837 to bargain for land. The Zulu king indicated that he would consider granting an extensive area of

² www.rememberseptember44.com accessed on 4 August 2013.

³ www.usingenglish.com accessed on 4 August 2013.

⁴ This is the informal name of the Dutch Reformed Church Bloemfontein.

⁵ GDJ Duvenage, *Die Groot Trek die eerste drie jaar – Deel 3: Die Gelofte*, (Pretoria: Sygma) 128 – 138.

⁶ OU Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story*, (Pretoria: Series 5 Dept of Church History, University of Pretoria, 2005) 27.

⁷ Another term meaning farmers used to describe the Voortrekkers.

⁸ The Zulus was the indigenous people living in the interior of Natal.

⁹ King of the Zulus.

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land¹⁰ on condition that Retief recovered cattle stolen from him by Sekonyela, the Tlokwa chief.¹¹ Retief returned to Dingane with 70 men to return the cattle and to sign a treaty with the Zulu king. Dingane had Retief and his men murdered and followed it up by sending his impis¹² to attack Voortrekker laers at the Bloukrans and Boemans rivers, killing 500 people. A revenge attack by Voortrekker leaders Andries Potgieter and Piet Uys ended in disaster after they were ambushed by Dingane's impis.¹³ Andries Pretorius,¹⁴ a good organiser and a gifted leader, arrived in Natal to help the Voortrekkers on 22 November 1838. On the 25th he was chosen as Commandant General and shortly after, he started preparations for an expedition against Dingane. This set the scene for the Battle of Blood River.

Preparations for the battle: the Vow

Pretorius left the laer¹⁵ at Klein Tugela on 27 November 1838 with 400 men and horses, 57 wagons, and 1 000 oxen (De Jongh 1987:152). As they went along more men joined the expedition and the commando's numbers grew to 470 men. While preparations were made to safeguard the laer against a possible attack, time was also spent on preparing the men psychologically. Religion played a major role in this part of the preparation. Pretorius had the point of view that: "He who trusts in the good God is not building on sand."¹⁶ The importance of this spiritual preparation was underlined by a remark of Sarel Cilliers, one of Pretorius's men and also an elder in the Dutch Reformed Church. He declared after the battle of Italeni, which the Voortrekkers lost, that the loss was due to their indifferent attitude towards God.

The decision was made that daily morning and evening prayers would be held. On Saturday evenings men gathered spontaneously at the tent of Pretorius to sing hymns and pray together. De Jongh remarks that these religious practices confirm that the commando was carried on prayer and that there was a serious religious atmosphere among the men.¹⁷

¹⁰ The area between the Mzimvubu and Thukela rivers and the Drakensberg mountains was indicated.

¹¹ T Cameron (red), *Nuwe Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika*, (Pretoria: Human & Rousseau, 1986)132.

¹² Zulu word for soldier.

¹³ Piet Uys, as well as his son Dirk were killed at the battle of Italeni on 6 April 1838 as the Voortrekkers suffered a massive defeat.

¹⁴ Andries Wilhelmus Jacobus Pretorius left his farm Lets kraal in the district of Graaff Reinet in October 1838 with his wife and 7 children.

¹⁵ Term used to describe the campsite of the Voortrekkers.

¹⁶ "die op den goeden God vertrouwt, Heeft zeker niet op zand gebouwd" in PS de Jongh, *Sarel Cilliers*, (Johannesburg: Perskor, 1987)155.

¹⁷ De Jongh, 155.

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Sarel Cilliers preached mainly from the Old Testament as he saw an important correlation between the Voortrekkers and Israel. As Israel fought against the gentiles to get to the Promised Land, the Voortrekkers had to fight against the Zulus to get to their promised land. Cilliers's sermons from the Old Testament made a big impression on Pretorius and he began pondering the possibility of making a vow to God. After one of Cilliers's sermons from Joshua, Pretorius consulted Cilliers about the possibility of a vow. After obtaining the general consent of the men it was decided that the Voortrekkers would make a vow to God. The Vow was made for the first time on Sunday 9 December 1838 on the banks of the Wasbank River.¹⁸ Sarel Cilliers led the service. He first asked all the men if they were prepared to take the Vow. He then read from Judges 6:1-23.¹⁹ He also talked about Jephtah and quoted Judges 11:30-31 where Jephtah made a vow to the Lord.²⁰ The words of the vow are as follows:

Here we stand before the holy God of heaven and earth, to make a vow to Him that, if he will protect us and give our enemy into our hands, we shall keep this day and date every year as a day of thanksgiving like a Sabbath, and that we shall erect a house to His honour wherever it should please Him, and that we also will tell our children that they should share in that with us in memory for future generations. For the honour of his name will be glorified by giving Him the fame and the honour for the victory²¹

It is clear that in the Vow, which took the form of a prayer, the Voortrekkers asked God to grant them a victory over the Zulus. In return they would build a church in memory of his name and they and their children and the generations coming after them would consecrate it to the Lord and celebrate the day with thanksgiving. The idea of a vow probably originated not only from scripture readings and the messages of Sarel Cilliers, but also from the theology of the Dutch Protestant Wilhelmus á Brakel (1635–1711). He described a vow as a commitment to God in which the people making the vow promised to do certain things to thank God for his deliverance from difficult circumstances. A vow could accord á Brakel be made in any difficult

¹⁸ De Jongh, 159.

¹⁹ Judges 6:1-23 is the story about Gideon and his fight against the Midianites.

²⁰ Judges 11:30-31: And Jephtah made a vow to the Lord: 'If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.

²¹ Translation from Dutch.

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situation²². Being Dutch, the Voortrekkers would have been influenced by the theology of a Brakel. The Vow was repeated every evening with evening prayers.

The Zulus attacked at first light on the morning of 16 December 1838, but were defeated after a lengthy battle.²³ That night the commando got together in the laager to thank the Lord for the victory. Sarel Cilliers led the service and once again emphasised that it was the Lord who gave the victory to the Voortrekkers. This was also the first commemoration of the Vow on the battlefield of Blood River.²⁴

The belief that God intervened at the Battle of Blood River and gave the victory to the Voortrekkers confirmed to the Voortrekkers that they were indeed God's chosen people. It is this belief which made the Vow one of the cornerstones of Afrikaner nationalism which played a major role in the history of members of the Dutch Reformed Church through the 20th century.

The Vow and Afrikaner nationalism

The day of the Vow

Although the Vow was, for the first few years, mainly commemorated in small groups and families, Sarel Cilliers started in 1839 with the collection of funds to build a church as was promised in the Vow. He also propagated that the church was to be built in Pietermaritzburg, the capital of Natalia, the new Voortrekker republic.²⁵ A temporary building was constructed from wood and reeds while the Voortrekkers were building the church. The building was finished and inaugurated in 1841.²⁶ In 1864, 16 December was proclaimed as a church holiday in Natal. This stimulated the growth of the commemoration of the day and the Vow. In 1865, 16 December was proclaimed as a national holiday in the ZAR²⁷ and got the unofficial name of "Dingaansdag".²⁸ In 1910 the Union government proclaimed Dingaan's Day a public holiday for the whole of South Africa. In 1952 the National Party government changed the name from Dingaan's Day to the Day of the Vow in an attempt to make the day less offensive to blacks and to shift the focus of the day from Dingaan to the Vow. The day was also elevated to a "Sabbath" by legally

²² A Bailey, *Die gelofte van 16 Desember 1838: Die herdenking en betekenis daarvan 1838 - 1910*, (Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2006) 4.

²³ De Jongh: 168 give a detailed description of the battle.

²⁴ Bailey, 4.

²⁵ DW Kruger, *Die viering van Dingaansdag 1838- 1910*, (Kaapstad: Nasionale Pers s.j.) 12.

²⁶ MCE Van Schoor, *Is Geloftegedag gereeld gevier?* Die Taalgenoot 25 Des 1955 p6.

²⁷ ZAR was the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek, one of the independent Boer republics that came into being after the Great Trek

²⁸ Kruger, 11-15.

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attaching "Sabbath restrictions (no organised public sport, closed theaters etc.) to the holiday, giving it its format until 1995."²⁹

This also explains the unique character of the festivals commemorating the Day of the Vow. Although it was a festival where Afrikaner nationalism was celebrated, it had a strong religious character. Bailey compares the celebration of the Vow with the passion play in Oberammergau.³⁰

According to the Afrikaner historian, FA van Jaarsveld, the development of Afrikaner nationalism in the ZAR, which was generated by the attempts to regain their independence after British annexation of the ZAR in 1877, was decisive for the establishment of 16 December as a historical festive day. In 1880 the ZAR revolted against Britain in an attempt to regain its independence. Before the start of hostilities the Burghers of the ZAR gathered at Paardekraal in December 1880 where the Vow was renewed by piling a cairn of stones, symbolising both past and future: the past because the Vow had freed them from black domination and the future because they saw it as a sign that they would continue fighting until they regained their independence from British imperialists³¹ This would prove true not only of the ZAR, but also for the Republic of South Africa.

Afrikaner nationalism

During the course of the 20th century the Vow and the Battle of Blood River were used by Afrikaner political, religious and community leaders to explain the political, social and economic circumstances of Afrikaners and in the process fed the fire of Afrikaner nationalism. This statement is confirmed by 1938 centenary celebrations of the Great Trek during which the Battle of Blood River and the Vow were a central reference point in what Grundlingh and Sapire describe as "an important populist phase" in the development of Afrikaner nationalism.³² In a speech at The Battle of Blood River site, Dr DF Malan, leader of the Nationalist Party, referred to difficulties of keeping South Africa a "white man's country". He said: "At the Blood River battleground you stand on sacred soil. It is here that the future of South

²⁹ FA van Jaarsveld, *Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle*. (Kaapstad: Tafelberg-Uitgewers, 1979) 48-49.

³⁰ The passion play which takes place once every ten years is the commemoration of a Vow which the inhabitants of Oberammergau made in 1633 in which they promised to stage the passion play if God would deliver them from the plague. A Bailey, *Die herdenking en Betekenis van die Geloof van 16 Desember 1838*. SA tydskrif vir Kultuurgeskiedenis 20(2) November 2006.

³¹ LM Thompson, *The political Mythology of Apartheid* (London: University Press, 1985) 169.

³² A Grundlingh and H Sapire, "From Feverish Festival to Repetitive Ritual? The Changing Fortunes of Great Trek Mythology in a Industrializing South Africa, 1939-1988", *South African Historical Journal*, 21, 1989, 27.

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Africa as a civilised Christian country and the continued existence of the responsible authority of the white race were decided ... You stand today in your own white laager at your own Blood River, seeing dark masses gathering an isolated white race." According to Malan the "new Blood River" was the city where white and black confront each other in the labour field. "If there is no salvation", Malan declared, "the downfall of South Africa as a white man's country" would be sealed. This could only be prevented by forceful intervention without which the victory of faith at Blood River would be transformed into one of despair and ruin.³³ This pattern of use by Afrikaner leaders of the Vow continued in the decades after 1938 and also flourished in the "volksteologie"³⁴ of the Afrikaans churches. In the *Kerkbode* of 22 September 1948 this policy, which also became known as apartheid, was called a "church policy".³⁵ Giliomee states: "The church, like many other institutions, increasingly adopted certain characteristics of the Afrikaner people."³⁶ The way in which Afrikaner nationalism influenced the Afrikaans speaking churches can be illustrated by examples from the sermons of prominent ministers like Rev CR Kotze of the famous "Tweeteringkerk"³⁷ in Bloemfontein. In a sermon on Isaiah 51, Kotze used verse 1 as his focus text: "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn"; Kotze referred to the return of Israel from exile and the restitution which would follow. To achieve that, they had to look at the rock from which they were cut.³⁸ Kotze then mentioned the leaders of the past like Abraham, Moses, Joshua and David before calling upon his congregation to look at the hand of the Lord in the history of the Afrikaner people. "Look from where you came"³⁹ he exclaimed and went on to challenge the congregation to seek the hand of God in the history of the Afrikaner people. "You were cut from rock" he said and then used Jan van Riebeeck and the Huguenots as examples before referring to the Voortrekkers and their deeds of bravery against the Zulus. "The Voortrekkers became and made the Afrikanervolk" he said.⁴⁰ The title of the book in which Kotze's sermons were published serves as a further example. Called *The Bible and the struggle of our people*,⁴¹ the book contains sermons which address different

³³ Van Jaarsveld, 71.

³⁴ Volksteologie is a term which was used to identify the Afrikaner people with Israel.

³⁵ JC Adonis, "The history of Belhar" *NGTT*, v 47 no1 2006, 234.

³⁶ H Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners*. (Kaapstad: Tafelberg 2004), 336.

³⁷ "Tweeteringkerk" refers to the church building of the Dutch Reformed congregation, Bloemfontein. In contrast with many other church buildings, it has two towers.

³⁸ CR Kotze, *Die Bybel en ons Volkstryd*, (Bloemfontein: SACUM 1955), 5.

³⁹ Kotze, 5.

⁴⁰ Kotze, 7.

⁴¹ My translation of "Die Bybel en ons volkstryd".

themes which were linked to the struggle of the Afrikaner people. That the book was published in 1955 confirms the fact that this type of theology played a major role in the promotion of Afrikaner nationalism through the history of the 20th century. The content of this nationalistic energy, however, changed profoundly in the 1970s and 1980s as meanings were attached to 16 December and the Vow “that would have a greater resonance with an increasingly sophisticated and self confident urban Afrikanerdom”.⁴² This did not, however, change the fact that the Vow was still one of the cornerstones of Afrikaner nationalism. Liebenberg describes the mythology which helped to make 16 December and the Vow one of the cornerstones of Afrikaner nationalism as follows:

It was believed that Blood River saved the Great Trek, that it was the birthplace of the Afrikaner people and a symbol of the victory of Christianity over heathendom and barbarism. All Afrikaners were irrevocably bound by the Vow for all time. The belief that the victory was a miracle played a major part. Many Afrikaners believed that divine intervention gave the Voortrekkers the victory that God’s intervention at Blood River to save the Voortrekkers proved that He was on the side of the Afrikaner people and would not abandon the Afrikaner nation. The victory was also proof that God had commissioned the Afrikaner people to keep South Africa white or that God desired white supremacy in South Africa.⁴³

That the Vow and what it stands for is still important to many, is confirmed by many Afrikaner Christians who still attend annual church services on 16 December in commemoration of the Vow.⁴⁴ On 16 December 2013 thousands of people attended the service in the Voortrekker monument in Pretoria.⁴⁵ The important question that therefore must be asked is: Can Afrikaners who grew up in a church which taught them “to look at the rock from which they were cut,” embrace the confession of Belhar and what it stands for, or will it prove to be a bridge too far? The importance of this question is emphasised by the decision of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in 2011 to start a process to make the confession of Belhar

⁴² Grundlingh and Sapire, 28.

⁴³ BJ Liebenberg, “Mites rondom Bloedriver en die Geloofte,” *South African Historical Journal* 20, November 1988, 17.

⁴⁴ Alet Rademeyr. “Versoening gaan in twee rigtings,” *Beeld*, 17 Desember 2011.

⁴⁵ F Van Rooyen. “Duisende ruk op vir geloftediens,” *Beeld*, www.beeld.com accessed on 12 February 2014.

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part of the confessional basis of the church.⁴⁶ In order to answer this question it is important to look at the origin and contents of the Confession of Belhar.

The Confession of Belhar

Origins of the Confession

According to Durand the roots of the Confession of Belhar go as far back as 1977 when he, as a lecturer at the University of the Western Cape, led a discussion class on the theological objections against apartheid.⁴⁷ The result of this discussion eventually ended up at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in Ottawa in 1982 where Dr Allan Boesak was elected as the new president. The World Alliance also discussed the political situation in South Africa and came to the conclusion that: "the promises of God for this world and for his church are in direct contradiction to apartheid ideals and practices".⁴⁸ Adonis is correct when he says: "This statement by the WARC is in fact a restatement of the 1978 declaration by DRMC⁴⁹ that 'the apartheid policy is in contradiction to the gospel'." It is this statement that was based on the class discussion led by Prof Jaap Durand at the University of the Western Cape in 1977. The WARC also declared that the political policy of apartheid was considered a sin and that its moral and theological justification was "a travesty of the gospel, and its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy".⁵⁰ They concluded: "that this situation constitutes a *status confessionis* for our churches, which means that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardising the integrity of our common confession as Reformed churches".⁵¹ The next step which the WARC took was to suspend the membership of the two Afrikaans churches⁵² which supported the policy of apartheid.⁵³ These decisions of the WARC came before the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1982 via its Commission for 1982

⁴⁶ Algemene Sinode van die Ned Geref Kerk 2011, Besluiteregister, 3, www.ngkerkas.co.za.

⁴⁷ Durand, JFF Unpublished memoirs: *My pad met Belhar*, n.d, 1.

⁴⁸ JM van der Merwe, "Ras, Volk en Nasie" en "Kerk en Samelewing" as beleidsstukke van die Ned Geref Kerk, Unpublished DD dissertation, University of Pretoria, 1990, 331.

⁴⁹ Dutch Reformed Mission Church.

⁵⁰ CJA Loff, *Bevryding tot Eenvording. Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk in Suid-Afrika 1881-1994*. Gepubliseerde doktorsale proefskrif. Kampen: Theologische Universiteit Kampen. 1998. 261.

⁵¹ Proceedings of the 21st General Council of the World alliance of Reformed Churches, 17-27 August 1982, Ottawa Canada, 177.

⁵² The churches were the Dutch Reformed church and the Nederduitsch Hervormede Kerk van Afrika.

⁵³ Proceedings, 32.

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Ecumenical Matters⁵⁴. The synod discussed the report on the 1st and 2nd of October 1982 before taking the following decisions: "Because the secular gospel of apartheid profoundly endangers the confession of reconciliation in Jesus Christ and the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ in its very essence, the DR Mission Church declares that it presents a *status confessionis* for the Church of Jesus Christ" and: "We declare that apartheid (separate development) is a sin, that its moral and theological justification makes a travesty of the gospel and that its continued disobedience to the Word of God is a theological heresy."⁵⁵

The implications of this decision were spelled out by Prof G Bam, when he told the synod that the declaration of a *status confessionis* meant that: "The faith is clearly confessed and the false teaching that is in contradiction with this is clearly rejected."⁵⁶ Bam continued to request the synod to name an ad hoc committee to write a confession and to present it to the synod. His request was proposed by Revs J Coetzee and A van Wyk.⁵⁷ This proposal was accepted by the synod without opposition. The moderator then appointed a commission consisting of Rev IJ Mentor, Dr AA Boesak, Prof DJ Smit, Prof JJF Durand and Prof G Bam as chairperson.⁵⁸ Durand remembers what happened as follows:

We met for the first time during the tea break of the afternoon session. The commission decided that I and Dirkie should write a concept confession for approval by the commission and then by the synod. Dirkie and I went to my office in the administration block of the University of the Western Cape to start working on this intimidating assignment of the synod. At that stage I already had a clear idea of a basic confession in my head. With Dirkie it must have been the same because we quickly came to a mutual agreement. Firstly, we had the decision of the 1978 synod which made reconciliation the point of departure of everything that was happening in my office. Secondly, we had the situation of a divided family of churches. Thirdly, we had the idea of irreconcilability of people which directly led to separation and injustice to the poor. We therefore decided that the confession would deal with church unity, reconciliation among people and justice.

⁵⁴ Skema van Werksaamhede van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sending kerk 1982, 602.

⁵⁵ Skema 1982, 706.

⁵⁶ Skema 1982, 606.

⁵⁷ Adonis, 236.

⁵⁸ Van der Merwe, 390.

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So far so good. What would happen next? Dirkie was sitting at the table where I usually confer with visitors and I was sitting behind my desk when Dirkie suggested that we go home and try to figure out what to do next. That is how the day ended and we went back to Stellenbosch. That is what I thought. During that night Dirkie filled the three headings with beautifully words directly from the Bible. It truly became a confession. That is what I discovered the following morning when I picked him up on our way to the university and the synod. I read the text in my car. The commission accepted it with a few small changes. If I remember correctly, Allan Boesak asked for a short addition to the introduction. That was all."⁵⁹

The Synod approved the draft confession on Wednesday 6 October 1982.⁶⁰ Four years later the moment arrived on 26 September 1986 when the confession was accepted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. Adonis wrote about this moment:

These events took place amidst great public interest. The report on the draft confession was discussed. Professors Bam and Smit strongly argued for the approval of the confession. It was a remarkable moment when 400 delegates gave their approval of the confession while 71 gave note that they could not accept it. Thus the Confession of Belhar was accepted with great joy and gratitude by the majority of delegates.⁶¹

The implications of the Confession of Belhar

The Confession of Belhar addressed three critical areas in the South African context namely church unity, reconciliation and justice. On unity it states: "that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ"; and further: "that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted".⁶² On reconciliation it stated: "We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ" and:

⁵⁹ Durand, 3.

⁶⁰ Skema 1982, 637.

⁶¹ Adonis, 237.

⁶² Confession of Belhar, www.vgksa.org.za.

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“Therefore, we reject any 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 and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.”⁶³ On justice it stated: “We believe that God has revealed God self as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this” and further: “Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.”⁶⁴

The intent of the confession is described in the accompanying letter as follows: “This confession is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches. We proclaim it against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion that threatens the gospel itself in our church and our country” and further: “Therefore this confession must be seen as a call to a continuous process of soul-searching together, a joint wrestling with the issues, and a readiness to repent in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world. It is certainly not intended as an act of self-justification and intolerance, for that would disqualify us in the very act of preaching to others.”⁶⁵

The importance of the content of the confession and the intent of the accompanying letter speak for themselves. Prof ST Kgatla confirmed this when he said:

The Belhar Confession was called for by the political and cultural movement, operating inside and outside the church, of the denial of human rights to the black citizens of the country. The church had to come up with a confession that responded to the challenges of the apartheid. The Church had a conviction that the promises and demands of the Gospel were needed by both those who propagated injustices against black fellow citizens and the victims as well. The Belhar Confession was an appropriate response by and a voice of the black Christians within the DRC family in South Africa. It was a credible response to and critique of the ideologisation of Christianity in the core beliefs of the white dominant culture of the time. It responded to the destructive experience of being dominated and the incriminating experience of being the one who domi-

⁶³ Confession of Belhar.

⁶⁴ Confession of Belhar.

⁶⁵ Confession of Belhar, Accompanying letter, www.vgksa.org.za.

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nated and benefited from the domination of the other. It brought necessary clarification to hard and pressing theological questions of the time.⁶⁶

Kgatla again stressed the importance of the Confession of Belhar when looking forward. He said: "En route to re-unification of the DRC family, the Belhar Confession remains our guiding resource for cooperation, restoration, revitalisation, and reconciliation. Thus the Belhar Confession can never become irrelevant to our existential issues."⁶⁷ De Gruchy goes further by saying that the Confession's significance for the church struggle was: "that it made ethical commitment to justice central to faith and therefore to the unity of the church".⁶⁸ It is clear from the origin and the content of the Confession of Belhar that it challenges the policy of apartheid, the same policy which grew out of and was motivated by Afrikaner nationalism which found one of its cornerstones in the Vow of 1838.

The challenge which the Confession of Belhar put to many conservative Afrikaners came to the fore in 2011 when the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church took the watershed decision with a huge majority vote to start the process to make the Confession of Belhar part of the confessional basis of the church.⁶⁹ Although this decision came after the church had already decided in 1998 that it had no problem with the content of the Confession of Belhar, but that the time was not right to accept it as a confession of the church,⁷⁰ it now became part of a process which not only challenged the church as a whole, but also challenges each individual member of the church – also those who still have strong feelings about Afrikaner nationalism as symbolised by the Vow. In the memorandum of agreement between the Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa in 2012 it is also stated that: "we agree that the Confession of Belhar will be taken up in the confessional basis of the reunited church" and "we agree that the churches will journey together in this process of acceptance and renewed engagement with the Confession of Belhar".⁷¹ These decisions on Belhar and the agreement with the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa by the same church which still celebrates the Vow and which proclaimed Afrikaner nationalism as part of its theology for many decades, underlines the importance of the question: Is it possible for members of the church to move away from "Blood River" to "Belhar"? Can

⁶⁶ ST Kgatla, *The Belhar confession yesterday, today and tomorrow*, www.ngkok.co.za.

⁶⁷ Kgatla, 6.

⁶⁸ JW de Gruchy, *The Church struggle in South Africa*. London, SCM press, 193.

⁶⁹ Algemene Sinode van die Ned Geref Kerk 2011: Besluiteregister p3, www.ngkerkas.co.za.

⁷⁰ Algemene Sinode van die Ned Geref Kerk 1998: Besluiteregister p15, www.ngkerkas.co.za.

⁷¹ Memorandum of Agreement 2012, www.vgksa.org.za.

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members of the church who fostered apartheid pry themselves lose from what they were taught and embrace the content of Belhar or is it too much to ask; is it a bridge too far?

To answer this question the ministry of the Dutch Reformed congregation Bloemfontein and the proposed new Article 1 of the Dutch Reformed church serve as two examples.

Conclusion: two examples of a bridge too far?

Towers of Hope: Bloemfontein

The latest minister and first women to become a minister in the Dutch Reformed congregation, Bloemfontein, Rev Kirna Hellmuth, is correct when she says: "Bloemfontein's oldest church was a monument for Afrikaner nationalism."⁷² What happened in this specific congregation cannot be generalised, but serves as a good example of how what Belhar stands for, can indeed be a bridge too far for many members of the Dutch Reformed Church. The importance of this specific example is further confirmed by the history of the church which became known as the "Two Tower Church".⁷³ It is underlined by the words of Rev JD Kestell when he said that "the church acted as a symbol of a mother to the *Afrikanervolk* after the Second South African war".⁷⁴ Many of the famous Afrikaner heroes like Pres MT Steyn, General CR de Wet, Rev JD Kestell, Emily Hobhouse, State Presidents CR Swart and NC Diederichs to name but a few, were buried from the church and many celebrations which formed part of Afrikaner nationalism either started or ended with church services in the Two Tower Church.⁷⁵ The church played a key role during the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek in 1938 when wagons of the symbolic trek camped around the church and the church was the place where important Afrikaner culture movements like *Die Voortrekkers*, *die Federasie vir Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings* and *die Reddingsdaadbond* were established.⁷⁶ Van Loggerenberg summed up the role of the church in the history of the Afrikaner correctly when he stated in 1980: "This congregation and church like it is today belongs not only to Bloemfontein, but to the Boer people as a whole."⁷⁷

⁷² M Botha, 'n *Loopbaan vol hoop vir eerste vroue leraar*, Bloemfontein: Bloemfontein Courant 27 Maart 2013, www.bloemfonteincourant.co.za accessed on 29 August 2013.

⁷³ Afrikaans: Tweetoringkerk.

⁷⁴ JH van Loggerenberg, *Bakens op die pad van die Tweetoringkerk van Bloemfontein 1880-1980*, (Bloemfontein: Sendingpers, 1980), 19.

⁷⁵ The inauguration of the Women's memorial in 1913 started and ended in the church.

⁷⁶ Van Loggerenberg, 5.

⁷⁷ Van Loggerenberg, 43.

From "Blood River" to "Belhar": a bridge too far?

With the advent of 1994, the first democratic election in South Africa brought radical change and new challenges to South Africa. The Dutch Reformed congregation in the heart of Bloemfontein would not escape the changes and challenges. This is confirmed by the membership of the congregation which declined from 2 650 in 1995 to 20 in 2012.⁷⁸ Although demographic changes played a major role, the most important reason according to Rev De la Harpe Le Roux, current minister of the congregation, was the change in focus and ministry of the congregation as part of answering to the challenges of the "New South Africa".⁷⁹ Rev Le Roux was seconded by the Free State Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church to the congregation of *Tweetoring* in October 2008. His task was the establishment of a non-governmental organisation that could coordinate practical ministry to the vulnerable and marginalised of the inner city of Bloemfontein. With the active support of the Free State Synod's Missions office and the local congregation, an existing soup kitchen was transplanted to *Tweetoring* church, and a variety of networks built. In this period the vision, mission, and programme structure of Towers of Hope was developed. By January 2010⁸⁰ the existing *Tweetoring* congregation underwent a radical transformation into a ministry, focused primarily on the vulnerable and marginalised of the city.⁸¹ Towers of Hope saw the light. It can be said that the congregation started living what the Confession of Belhar stood for – unity, justice and reconciliation. As part of the new ministry, church services on Sundays were and still are conducted in English. This, according to Rev le Roux, was the final nail in the coffin for many of the members of the congregation. Although there was a stream leaving the congregation as the challenges of the inner city grew larger, those who still remained left to join other Afrikaans congregations in Bloemfontein.⁸²

The history of what happened in *Tweetoringkerk* in Bloemfontein leads to a number of questions: Did the members who left not understand English or is there a deeper reason behind their departure? It seems that the language issue is an example of how Afrikaner nationalism still plays a major role in many Afrikaans speaking congregations. This leads to Afrikaners separating themselves once again from the rest of their fellow Christians in South Africa. The example of what happened at *Tweetoringkerk* poses the question of whether it will ever be possible for the majority of Afrikaners to embrace the Confession of Belhar as part of the confessional basis of a reunited church. The answer to the last question seems to be "no". Although

⁷⁸ Archive of the Dutch Reformed Church, Stellenbosch, 24 August 2013.

⁷⁹ Interview with rev D Le Roux 8 August 2013 Pretoria.

⁸⁰ The last traditional church services of the congregation took place November 2009.

⁸¹ Towers of Hope leadership foundation: Report 2012:2.

⁸² Le Roux, 8 August 2013 Pretoria.

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it does not mean ignorance to injustice and reconciliation, the roots of the past are too deep. What the symbol of the *Tweetoringkerk* stood for, what they were taught from the pulpit, and what they believed about the *Afrikanervolk* is too embedded in who they are. It is part of their history and identity.

Dutch Reformed Church: proposed new Article 1

The argument is further strengthened by the latest decision of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church on the Confession of Belhar, in October 2013⁸³. Although the General Synod took the watershed decision in 2011 to start the process to make Belhar part of the confessional basis of the church, the new proposed Article 1⁸⁴ is an example of how the church wants to make room for those members of the church who will not subscribe to the Confession of Belhar. During the debate it was clear that there were two groups in the synod: one group that wanted the Confession of Belhar as part of the confessional basis, and a second group that did not. This division is clearly illustrated by the proposed Article 1 which reads as follows:

Church Order Article 1:

- 1 The Dutch Reformed Church is based on the Bible as the holy and infallible Word of God
- 1.2.1 The doctrine which the Church confesses in agreement with the Word of God, is expressed in the ecumenical creeds, namely the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Creed of Athanasius; and the Three Forms of Unity, namely the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt.
- 1.2.2 The Belhar Confession is part of the confessional basis of the Church, in a way that allow members, office bearers and assemblies of the church to confess it as in agreement with the Word of God, as well as members, officers bearers and assemblies of the church that do not subscribe to it as a confession.

⁸³ Algemene Sinode van die Ned Geref Kerk 2013: Besluiteregister, www.ngkerkas.co.za accessed on 12 February 2014.

⁸⁴ Article 1 of the Church order constitutes the confessional basis of the church.

From "Blood River" to "Belhar": a bridge too far?

- 1.3 The Church accepts her calling to always confess her faith and that the expansion of her confessional basis should occur without force."⁸⁵

From this proposal which allow members, office bearers and assemblies to decide for themselves if they want to subscribe to the Belhar Confession or not, it is clear that Synod understood that there is a meaningful group of members in the church who will not subscribe to Belhar as a confession. The division in the synod on this matter, served as an example of what sentiment in the church is like.

What happened at Towers of Hope as well as the newly proposed Article 1 of the Dutch Reformed Church illustrates how difficult it is for a certain group of Afrikaans speaking members of the church to come to terms with the journey on which they find themselves. For many the integration of Afrikaner nationalism and theology in which the Vow and Blood River played a major part makes the acceptance of the Belhar Confession problematic. The Confession of Belhar may indeed prove to be a bridge too far.

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⁸⁵ Algemene Sinode van die Ned Geref Kerk 2013: Besluiteregister, www.ngkerkas.co.za accessed on 12 February 2014. Translated by Cobus van Wyngaard.

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