

APPENDIX

PERSPECTIVES ON THE BELHAR CONFESSION
AN ESSAY COLLECTION

Introduction

The church does not live *for* itself—it becomes who it is by responding to the Word and Spirit of God. Nor does the church does live *by* itself—it lives within a lost and broken world and carries out God’s mission there.

When the church is fully responsive to God, it hears God’s voice clearly. Then it declares and enacts God’s intentions in practice. The dual movement of confession—proclaiming what God says, and therefore what God wills—characterizes a church that is both Reformed and reforming.

In the sixteenth century, reformers led by Word and Spirit discerned that the church had come to embody its own intentions before God’s will. So they wrote statements of faith—statements about God. They also professed the way the reformers believed God was calling them to live in the world.

In the twentieth century, the dominant church in South Africa openly declared that God’s intentions for the world were disunity and irreconciliation, and thus it supported a regime of brutal injustice. The Belhar Confession was written to respond to the voice of God in that situation. The Belhar says nothing new about God. Rather, it affirms the truth of Scripture that God is one, that God dwells in eternal, triune community, and that God is just. Therefore, for God’s will to be done on earth, God calls the church to proclaim and to practice unity, reconciliation, and justice.

At its heart, then, the Belhar Confession is far more than a programmatic guide for how the church ought to act. It testifies to the nature of God. While it prods the church to reform its practice, more deeply it calls the church to renew its praise.

The Belhar Implementation Team offers this collection of essays, which look at the Belhar Confession from different angles and consider its potential impact on the RCA. Will Belhar compel us to respond to racism or sexism? Is it truly scriptural? Will it make a difference for our faith development? Are confessions still valuable in the twenty-first century?

The essays are intended to provoke thought and to inform, not to persuade. May they serve their purpose as the Reformed Church in America continues to discern and discuss the formal adoption of the Belhar Confession.

The Belhar Implementation Team includes Jim Daniels from the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship, Harold Delhagen and Oliver Patterson from the Commission on Christian Unity, general secretary Wes Granberg-Michaelson, Paul Janssen representing the Commission on Christian Worship, Mark Kellar from the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, general secretary emeritus Ed Mulder, Pam Pater-Ennis from the Commission on Christian Action, and GSC staff Paul Boice, Ken Bradsell, Doug Fromm, Earl James, Christina Tazelaar, and Jennifer Vander Molen.

**The Belhar Confession
Where Are We Now?**

By Ed Mulder

Whenever we take a trip by car I love to stop at a rest stop, find the big map board, and see where we are. It is helpful to see how far we have come and how far we have yet to travel.

Join me as we consider the Reformed Church in America's engagement with the Belhar Confession, a journey that covers many years. In order to understand where we are today, we need to understand when this journey really began.

On a hot summer day a tourist from South Africa stood in front of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City and asked me, "Is this the same Dutch Reformed Church as we have in South Africa?" My answer was, "Yes and no."

The Reformed Church in America shares its roots with the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. In 1628 the Dutch West India Company established a colony on Manhattan Island providing, among other things, religious services. The Company provided ministers who were trained and ordained by the Classis of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. In 1642 the Dutch East India Company established a Dutch colony at Cape Hope in South Africa. The policy of the East India Colony was the same as the West India Company. Churches established in the United States and South Africa would eventually become autonomous. Yes, there was a Dutch connection between the Reformed Church in America and the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.

In 1792 the Reformed Church in America became an autonomous denomination. In 1824 the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) became autonomous. Over the years these two denominations maintained close fraternal relations. They adopted the same confessional standards, exchanged correspondence, and sent fraternal delegates to their respective General Synod meetings. But while similar, the two denominations would evolve differently. During the mid-1900s the DRC in South Africa developed a mission policy of separate development that became the blueprint for a national policy of apartheid. As a result of the missionary efforts of the DRC, three separate Reformed denominations were formed: the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) for the colored, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) for the blacks, and the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) for the Indians. What began as permissive separation along racial lines over time became an enforced policy.

While the Reformed Church in America was not void of racism and injustice, the relationship between the RCA and the DRC became increasingly estranged. The DRC blatantly justified apartheid on scriptural grounds. The RCA began aggressively to deplore the beliefs and practices of apartheid. Are the two denominations the same? The answer has to be no. In order to understand the Belhar Confession it is important to connect the dots from the RCA perspective.

In 1948 apartheid became the law of the land in South Africa. It was put into practice with full approval of the DRC, which at the time was called "the Parliament at prayer." Apartheid was approved scripturally. Beginning in the 1950s the General Synod of the RCA took strong actions opposing the practices of apartheid and the distorted views of Scripture associated with it. Again and again the RCA pleaded with the DRC to change its ways. The DRC published a document entitled "Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture." The DRC was relentless in justifying apartheid.

Historically the Reformed Church in America has had a strong social consciousness. It has insisted that there needs to be a consistency between word and deed. A strategic role would

be played by the “minority councils” of the Reformed Church. The African American Council in particular played an important role in advocating the dismantlement of apartheid. Relationships were developed with an organization in South Africa known as the Broederkring. Members of this association consisted primarily of colored, black, and Indian ministers, along with a few whites. Increasingly the Reformed Church had strong ties to South Africa through individuals. In 1979 a Task Force on South Africa was formed, and it functioned until 1995.

In 1981 the General Synod took an action to discontinue its ecumenical relations with the DRC. The reason for this action was the DRC’s refusal to acknowledge that apartheid was a sin. In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared apartheid a *status confessionis*, a situation where the truth of the gospel is at stake. The DRC was excommunicated from WARC and subjected to conditions for reinstatement. It was at this same time that RCA entered into church-to-church relations with the DRMC, the DRCA, and the RCA in South Africa. As a denomination we committed ourselves to standing in solidarity with our black, colored, and Indian brothers and sisters in their struggle. The RCA was the first Protestant denomination to divest itself of investments in corporations doing business in South Africa. We urged sanctions against South Africa. The eighties were a time when the international community and churches began to put pressure on South Africa’s draconian practices.

In 1982 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church drafted “The Confession of 1982”; a few years later it came to be known as the Belhar Confession. This confession emerged out of incredible suffering. It lifts up the themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice. It expresses the hope that the DRC would adopt this confession and agree to join with its daughter churches to become the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). Steeped in the Scriptures, it sought reconciliation, justice, and unity among all people. In 1985 the DRMC sent a copy of the Belhar Confession to the RCA, requesting a response. The text was received and distributed throughout the church.

That is now 24 years ago. In 1986 the Commission on Theology wholeheartedly affirmed the Belhar Confession. For the next five years the Commission on Christian Unity made the Belhar Confession its highest priority.

In the year 2000 a new sense of urgency developed regarding Belhar. The Commission on Christian Unity commended the Belhar to churches for reflection, study, and response as a means of deepening the RCA’s commitment to deal with racism and strengthening its ecumenical commitment to the URCSA and other Reformed bodies. (In 1995 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, or URCSA. Upon the union of the two churches the Belhar was adopted as the fourth confessional statement of the newly formed denomination.)

With the invitation of URCSA before it, the RCA set out in a most intentional way to consider adopting the Belhar as its fourth confessional statement. Beginning in 2002, presentations were made at each General Synod meeting regarding Belhar, including:

- The RCA’s history with Belhar (2002)
- The theological implications of Belhar (2003)
- The practical implications of Belhar (2004)
- Confessions—what they are and how they inform the church (2005)
- The use of Belhar as an educational/formative work in nurturing the witness and mission of the church (2006)

In 2007 the General Synod was asked to vote on a provisional approval of the Belhar. The synod approved this recommendation. It further agreed that in 2009 the General Synod would vote on whether to adopt the Belhar as a fourth confession of the Reformed Church in America.

We have come a long way since we began this journey with Belhar. Understanding where we have come from and understanding the history out of which Belhar has emerged helps us to appreciate how relevant this confession is for our time, for our world, for the Reformed Church. We are called to confront the racism that exists in our society. We are called to strive for unity among Christians everywhere. In a broken and fragmented world, we are called anew to be reconcilers.

Last but not least, God calls us to do justice. Could it be that God is using a people who have suffered much to challenge us to become more fully the people God wants us to become?

Ed Mulder is general secretary emeritus for the RCA. He began his journey with Belhar on a 1980 trip to South Africa as General Synod president.

Why Confess?

By Paul R. Fries

The Reformed Church in America is a confessional church. But is it a *confessing* church?

This question alerts us to a distinction generally overlooked in discussions about the place of confessions in the church. It is one thing for a denomination to formulate and adopt confessions; it is another thing for a church to *confess* its confessions. A confession per se is merely a document, a document which may lie inert in the dusty archives of a community of faith, the passion and hope inspiring its writing long forgotten. Or a confession may spring to life—guiding, energizing, and shaping the mission and ministry of the people of God. When this happens a church not only possesses its confessions, but is possessed by them. It confesses its confessions!

The three confessions acknowledged by the RCA clearly served as instruments of confessing when they were first adopted by the churches which wrote them. The Belgic Confession proclaims the faith of congregations living under the sword of persecution in what today we know as Belgium—a faith bringing its author, Guido de Brés, to a martyr's death. The Heidelberg Catechism, while not serving its desired purpose of uniting Lutheran and Reformed churches in the Palatinate (a region of Germany), became the vehicle for unifying continental Reformed Christianity and a tutorial of faith for countless men and women through the centuries. The sometimes icy articles of the Canons of the Synod of Dort defended a high Calvinism against its detractors; formulated the theology, worship, and order soon to be imported to structure what would become in America the RCA; and unhappily triggered persecution in the Netherlands. While the consequences of confessing the confessions were not always admirable, no one could believe for a moment that at their inception these testimonies were some kind of doctrinal ornamentation. They were not made to be admired and preserved, but to be confessed!

Like the historic confessions of the RCA, the Belhar Confession was born in strife and was fashioned to sound the clear notes of evangelical faith in a situation where the baptized no longer responded to its call. The South African social and political matrix in which it was composed is well known, as is the history of its writing, adoption, and reception—these

need no further elaboration here. As the RCA “imported” its confessions from Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, is the church now prepared to “import” and adopt a confession from South Africa? And not only to import and adopt it, but to own it? The church is faced with one of the potentially most important decisions ever made in its long history. Will the church adopt the Belhar Confession, and if adopted will our denomination confess it?

What would confessing the Belhar Confession mean? Confessing is a way of speaking, and as I have written elsewhere, confession as speech calls “...into being who and what we are and at the same time determines our purpose and commitment.”¹ Our personal and corporate identity is located in speaking—not speech or language, but speaking. In speaking, identity is actualized. The identity of a person, community, institution, or nation is not static like an image stamped on a coin; it is dynamic—not something we are but something we do.² Guido de Brés suggests this when he begins the Belgic Confession with the words, “We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths...” But another beginning far more profoundly reveals the dynamic character of speaking. John in the prologue to his gospel writes, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14) and “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:18). Through the Son’s words and deeds God is disclosed to us. Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the Father “speaking” to us, and through that speaking we identify him as the one true God; in response to this speech we are called to our true identity and purpose: to be the sons and daughters of the living God whom we serve. Confessing is identity and it is also destiny.

It is by that special kind of speaking in word and deed—confessing—that we come to be what God is calling us to be. Confessing is far more than the formal acknowledgement of a statement of faith, although this is the indispensable beginning point. It is also far more than finding a new way to speak about ourselves. Confessing the Belhar will alter our denominational DNA. A new coordinate will be factored into the course charted by the church—a coordinate orienting its worship, theology, and order, its *kerygma*, *liturgia*, and *diakonia*. Confession is identity and destiny; by adopting and then confessing the Belhar Confession, the RCA will gain a new sense of self and mission, a new identity promising to deepen and broaden the church’s witness to and participation in the kingdom of God.

Confessing understood in this way is an act of faith. The implications of confessing the Belhar Confession cannot be foreseen, and to so confess is certain to change the church in unexpected ways. A new identity will mean sloughing off aspects of our present identity, and this can be painful. A new sense of our God-given destiny will lead the church into yet unknown arenas of mission. Whatever the RCA will become after five, 10, or 15 years of confessing its fourth standard, this much is clear: God’s call to unity, reconciliation, and justice, which has hovered on the periphery of denominational life, will move to its center. These are the heart passions of the confession. If they do not awaken passion in the denominational heart then the RCA may have adopted the Belhar Confession, but it will not have confessed it.

¹ “Reflections on Confessing,” Paul R. Fries. *The Reformed Review*, Fall 2006, vol. 60, #1, online issue. I have been instructed in my reflections on speaking by the thought of Georges Gusdorf in his work *Speaking*.

² *Ibid.*

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**The Belhar and Race:
The Dream Fulfilled**

By Gregg Mast

“The Dream Fulfilled”—those words were in very large type across the top of *USA Today* on November 5, 2008, heralding the election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States of America. No matter how one voted in this election, one can hardly be immune to the historic nature of what we have done as a nation. “Everything is possible in these United States,” intoned Obama as he stood before us as the first African American to be elected to the highest office in the land. Indeed, the world seemed to hold its breath as it watched and then cheered the news that a person whose blood flows from Kansas and Kenya will now help chart the course of global events.

But the headline portends some very real challenges for the U.S. as a country and for us as a church. The headline makes it sound as if we have forded the Jordan and taken up residence in the Promised Land. It sounds like the struggle is over, the battle has been won, and the dream of a more perfect union can now be put on the shelf as a great trophy to be honored.

This challenge goes to the very heart of what it means to be an American, but it also speaks clearly to the Christian vision of a world where peace will reign because all of God’s children have found justice. Just a few days after the election, an incident was reported in New Jersey where a cross was burned on the lawn of a family that supported Obama. The father of this family explained to his eight-year-old daughter that sometimes people hate to lose. I wish it were that simple and that innocent.

As we turn our eyes to the Belhar Confession and ask why the Reformed Church in America might consider adopting it as a fourth confession and what role it could play in our life and faith, allow me to share with you a portion of a letter that was penned a little more than 20 years ago about the relationship the writer believed God expects between different races:

We believe in regard to the races that the Bible in its entirety clearly indicates that God has separated people for his own good purpose. He has erected barriers between nations—not only land and sea barriers, but also ethnic, cultural and language barriers. God has made some people different one from another and intends for those differences to remain.

In biblical history, any effort to bring men together in oneness was judged and cursed by God. He wants nations to remain segregated one from another (Acts 17:26; Genesis 10:5, 32; Genesis 11:8, 9; Daniel 7:13; Zechariah 14; Revelation 11:15; Revelation 21:24).

Any violation of God’s original purpose manifests insubordination to him (Romans 9:12-24), and no Christian has any business being involved in any such practice (as reported in the newsletter *Black Caucus RCA*, the official voice of the Black Council, RCA, August 30, 1985).

This letter summarizes well the warped theological foundations of apartheid in South Africa. I wish I could tell you that these words were penned by a racist South African pastor or theologian 20 years ago. But alas, the words are from a letter written by Bob Jones III, president of Bob Jones University, and sent in response to an inquiry about the ban on interracial dating on campus. Again, I wish I could suggest that such a position was unique

to a fundamentalist, Southern school. But they summarize well the quietly whispered words from my parents 40 years ago when I wondered why I could not date a young black woman. We have all received from this land we love, and this country of which we are justifiable proud, legacies of suspicion, deep-seated feelings of superiority and inferiority, and even hatred—and these were not swept away in a remarkable election on one Tuesday evening in November. I believe that the election of President Obama presents us with a profound challenge and opportunity to deepen the conversation about race and racism that remains very much unfinished. There are still confessions to be made, hurts to be healed, covenants to be created, and hopes to be nurtured—made even more possible as we have taken a significant step forward with the election of an African American, a person of “mixed race,” as our national leader.

The Belhar Confession speaks of unity, reconciliation, and justice and, if adopted as a part of our denominational identity, I believe it will begin to help us answer these questions:

- Why is it important to seize this moment as an opportunity to deepen our commitment to wrestle with the demons of racism that have afflicted this nation from its inception?
- Why is it important to seek a way forward *together* as the RCA tries to become a more richly diverse community of God’s children?
- Why is important for us to find in the painful experience and great wisdom of our brothers and sisters in South Africa some paths for us to trod in the years ahead?

To confess the Belhar as our own carries with it two distinct but complementary meanings: “to confess” means to genuinely admit how we have fallen short of what God expects of us. It also means that we recommit our lives to the divine vision that inspires our faith. The confession of our sin is the only way toward sanctifying our witness. The Belhar has come to us for such a time as this—I pray we will find within it God’s leading, as our feet edge ever closer to the waters of the Jordan.

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Observe All Things: The Belhar and the Call to Discipleship

By Mitchell Kinsinger

One way to tell which passages of Scripture are beloved and influential in the church is by whether or not they have a name. Think of the “Great Commandment” or the “Great Commission.” Ask people to offer a shorthand for the first, and I suspect you will get fairly uniform versions of “love God, love your neighbor.” Ask people to offer a shorthand for the second and my hunch is that you will hear a little more variety of emphasis: “Go,” “make disciples,” “make disciples of all nations,” and perhaps even “baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Many people stop there, but the Great Commission actually continues into the next verse: “and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). “Teaching them to observe all things,” is the way that the King James renders it. Teach them. To obey. Everything. It is hard to find more sobering words in the Gospels. When G. K. Chesterton observed that the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, but rather found difficult and untried, he could have had this clause of the Great Commission in mind.

We struggle with this task because it is difficult, and we need help. From the perspective of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship, the Belhar Confession offers help by way of its encouragement to live a Christ-like life characterized by unity, reconciliation, and justice. Since Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the Scriptures of the Old Testament, surely true discipleship is interested in obeying all the commands and teachings of Scripture. These three central tenets of the Belhar Confession—unity, reconciliation, justice—articulate what can be considered the heart and soul of what discipleship looks like. In fact, I am reminded of the Staples office supply store slogan, “Yeah, we’ve got that.” Unity? Yeah, we’re called to that. Jesus prays in John 17 that his followers would be one even as the he and the father are one. Reconciliation? Yeah, we’re called to that, too. “God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). Justice? Yeah, we’re also called to that. God has shown human beings what is good and required: that we “do justice” (Micah 6:8).

In this way, the Belhar provides a necessary corrective to the other three forms of union (the Heidelberg Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Belgic Confession), which seek to teach us how to think. The Belhar not only encourages us to continue to think well, but also to live well. It tells how to live in the world—how to live like disciples in unity, reconciled and reconciling, and seeking the justice that characterizes the reign of Christ.

As we reflect on our call to follow Christ in word and deed, we are reminded of how radical true discipleship really is. We may well wonder, can we do it? Or better, can we even come close to true discipleship? In our finite, fallible, sinful world, our work will only begin to embody these kingdom principles in shadowy emerging ways. But not engaging in these high callings is not an option, and what’s more, at our weakest, we must rely on God’s strength. If we despair at what seems to be a hard or even impossible task, we have the comfort of the final words of the Great Commission, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Those words of comfort can sustain us in the midst of the hard work of a discipleship which seeks unity in the midst of division, a discipleship which works for reconciliation where there is alienation, and a discipleship that rolls up its sleeves, in the words of Amos, to “let justice roll down like waters” (Amos 5:24). In this way, then, the Belhar can serve as an effective shorthand for the church’s passion for discipleship and Christian education.

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Observations on the Belhar Confession and Scripture

By Tom Stark

1. When the predominantly black and colored churches in South Africa (now united as the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa) adopted the Belhar Confession, they already subscribed to the same three doctrinal standards as their white mother church (the Dutch Reformed Church): the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort. The dependence of these three standards on Scripture is overwhelming. The standards have footnotes of Scripture references; at many places Scripture texts are quoted, or quoted and applied, or longer sections are expounded (The Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments); or the language in the standards closely parallels or summarizes Scripture. A focused “doctrine” of Scripture can be seen in Articles 1-7 of the Belgic

Confession, but the full doctrine is found throughout the standards.

The Belhar Confession rests on and assumes a view of Scripture found in these three doctrinal standards, also shared by the RCA, the Christian Reformed Church, and others.

2. The CRC and a Reformed Church in Indonesia have officially concluded that the original wording of Question 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which addresses the mass, is not an accurate statement of the present day teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. The RCA has put Question 80 in a footnote. The CRC decided that Article 36 of the Belgic Confession, on civil government, was to be amended in part as unbiblical. The RCA, when it became independent of the Dutch Church in 1792, no longer included the “Rejection of Errors” in its version of the Canons of Dort, and disavowed the condemnation of “Anabaptists” in the Belgic Confession.

There are minor variations in the texts of the three standards around the world, but the variations do not affect the commitment of the standards to scriptural authority.

3. In my earlier years as a campus minister, I discovered that the only Christian leader most students seemed to know was Billy Graham. Almost all had heard one of his television specials. On a number of occasions a student said to me, “Billy Graham always says, ‘the Bible says,’ and I don’t believe the Bible.” While that was a favorite expression of Billy Graham, those who knew the Bible realized that in every message he also paraphrased and quoted and summarized the Bible’s teaching without always saying “the Bible says.” I smiled inwardly at skeptics who got their guard up for every “the Bible says,” not realizing how much more Bible they were getting in all the rest of the sermon.

While the Belhar Confession does not say, “the Bible says,” it alludes to, quotes, and paraphrases the Bible throughout, and is in fact saturated with Scripture. In addition to those Scripture references given in Belhar, there are many other Bible passages on which the statements in the confession are based.

4. A Jewish student in Boston came to believe in Christ as her Messiah. Her parents reacted strongly. Her baptism was solemn, as the pastor knew what a costly step this was for her. She later prepared and led a small-group Bible study on John 9 at a training weekend. I was to evaluate afterwards, and I mentioned there had not been much application, and she said that had been hard for her since she hadn’t seen any applications in the text. I mentioned the blind man’s parents, who distanced themselves from him. She was amazed—she hadn’t seen that. I had thought that would leap out at her.

We know we don’t necessarily “get it” when we study Scripture. The Belhar Confession introduces us to the work of fellow believers who have struggled deeply to see what Scripture teaches about unity, reconciliation, and justice.

5. A Kenyan pastor at InterVarsity’s Urbana conference told of tensions that had developed between Western and national leaders in a congregation. Finally, a mediator assigned leaders of each group to preach on the next two Sundays on the main message of the story of Joseph. The Western speaker emphasized that, no matter how difficult life may be for you, God will always take care of you. The African speaker emphasized that, no matter where you are, you must always be concerned for your extended family.

We read and apply with cultural eyes, and exposure to “cross-cultural eyes” can enlarge our understanding of God’s Word. The question may not be who is more correct, but what we need to learn from Scripture through the experience of brothers and sisters in Christ from a different cultural context.

6. An early Unitarian leader is supposed to have said, “You can’t write a creed I can’t subscribe to.” Or sometimes the assertion is, “You can prove anything from the Bible.” Any of our creeds and confession can be twisted, as can the Bible itself (“The Canons of Dort teach fatalism,” “The Heidelberg is devotional and has no doctrine,” “The Bible doesn’t teach the Trinity,” and so on). No doubt the Belhar Confession will also be twisted. But the church must firmly resist any and all of these twisted meanings.

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**The Belhar and Reconciliation:
The Confession’s Application to the Church’s Work in Sudan**

By Debbie Braaksma

When the church finds itself struggling through a painful crisis situation, we often discover some of its most profound work is taking place, both theologically and in terms of practical ministry on the ground. Confronted with the evil practice of apartheid, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa did superb theological reflection on how Scripture speaks directly to the issue of disunity, and the need for reconciliation and justice, and has given us the gift of the Belhar Confession.

In a similar way, as the churches in Sudan went through a period of intense pain and struggle during a brutal 21-year civil war, they looked to their Lord for guidance and help and have given the worldwide church the gift of a practical model for reconciliation. One might say that the New Sudan Council of Churches was “living out” the message of the Belhar Confession as it operated from the biblical mandate so beautifully stated in point three of the confession: “We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ, that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker...”

I have seen that biblical mandate lived out in Sudan, a country that has been described as “a nation at war with itself”—there have been only 11 years of peace since independence in 1956. So in response to Christ’s call to deliver the message of reconciliation to the world (2 Corinthians 5:19) the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC), with the strong support of the Reformed Church in America, began the People to People Peace Initiative: 18 major peace conferences were held between 1997 and 2003, which prepared the way for the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. The process they developed draws upon Christian practices of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation as well as modern conflict resolution methods and indigenous and traditional methods. The NSCC received international acclaim for its work, which former Secretary of State Madeline Albright hailed as being essential to bringing peace to Sudan.

As negotiations for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement were being held, the NSCC felt that it was crucial to continue the peace-building process as it was evident that a “culture of war” had developed in Sudan and that it would take much more than the signing of a document to end the conflict. So in 2003 the NSCC created the training organization RECONCILE in an endeavor to mitigate inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts between communities in Sudan by providing training in trauma healing, conflict resolution, and civic education. My husband, Del, and I are privileged to serve with RECONCILE and, alongside our Sudanese colleagues, we have facilitated workshops in areas of Sudan where people have commented, “We have smelled the peace but we haven’t tasted it yet.” The process of doing the training has been extremely rewarding in itself as we watch the transformation of participants’ thinking. For example, a prominent Murle Presbyterian evangelist/chief

shared that although he came to our workshop ready to “finish” the Dinka Bor community (members of which had killed seven of his community members, while they were in the hospital) he left the workshop ready to lead his people in making peace between the Murle and the Dinka Bor.

But what is even more rewarding is when we hear the stories of how the participants have actually used the training in their communities to achieve peace and reconciliation. RECONCILE has trained 46 key mobilizers, volunteers who are equipped to do peacebuilding work in their local communities. One of these key mobilizers, a pastor named Sarafino Modesto, reported that in the Imotong Mountains the Lotuko and Lango peoples were engaged in a serious and prolonged cycle of killing and cattle raiding that the government was unable to contain. During one particular raid there were 50 deaths. At his own initiative, and assisted by the training he received from RECONCILE, last May Rev. Sarafino walked to 15 villages in the mountains to meet with Lotuko and Lango chiefs. Because of his commitment to Jesus Christ he risked his life to stop the cycle of violence by using the skills he acquired to encourage the chiefs to promise to only defend their people if they were raided by the opposing group, and not to exact revenge by counter-raiding. Since that time there have been no outbreaks of fighting between the Lotuko and the Lango. We have much to learn from Sudanese church leaders such as Rev. Sarafino who have incarnated the message of the Belhar Confession by courageously following the Prince of Peace to bring about reconciliation and peace.

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**The Belhar and Women:
Overcoming Sexism to Embrace Unity**
By Stacey Midge

The Belhar Confession arises out of the context of a church divided along racial lines. Racism essentially creates multiple coexistent cultures, united in location but separated by skin color and ancestry. Even living next door to one another and speaking the same basic language, racial groups develop different terminology, rituals, and social mores. One culture may take on the terms and practices of assumed dominance, while another adopts phrases and behaviors that reflect its relative subjugation.

Racial reconciliation, therefore, requires the hard work of coming to understand and integrate one another’s language and practices into one united whole—and hard work it is, but necessary. The Belhar Confession’s significance lies in its call for the whole church to engage in this difficult work of justice, reconciliation, and unity.

But what happens to those whose own culture is oppressive? Does the Belhar Confession have anything to say about other types of injustice?

I once heard someone describe the effects of racism as a fortress. The dominant group lives within the fortress, but they also control those who live in the surrounding village. The divide between the two groups is clearly defined, a wall between insiders and outsiders. Should the outsiders decide that they want to share authority over their own lives with the insiders, they are forced to either storm the battlements or find some way to contact those within and cajole them into including the villagers in the power structures.

Within this metaphor, sexism might better be described as house arrest. A woman may

dwel within the fortress. She might be assumed to be part of the dominant group, and even assume herself to be part of the dominant group. Her location tells her that she is an insider, as do the popular terms and practices of her culture. However, if she steps outside the gates, or tries to take a seat at the table where decisions are made for the fortress, she may quickly find that she is a different class of insider. Unlike those who spend their lives outside of a clear boundary, she may be blissfully unaware of her lack of power—until she transgresses her limitations. Likewise, a woman in the village may run into the same troubles.

Such is the experience of many women in the RCA. We may sit comfortably in the pews of the church. In fact, membership statistics indicate that women may often be more comfortable in churches than men! We might assume that we have equal voice in the matters of the church, as the RCA has said that we do. But that equality breaks down when a woman's name shows up on the ballot for consistory and throws a congregation into tumult. Or when a woman goes to seminary, fully supported by her congregation and classis, and is cornered by male classmates who tell her she has no business being there. Or when, during classis exams, a woman is called to defend not just her theological learning and spiritual development, but also her lack of a Y chromosome. Or when a female candidate for ministry receives letter after letter from churches who say that they are waiting for the *man* God has called to be their pastor.

The boundaries of sexism may not be as clear or as ubiquitous as those of racism, but they do exist, invisible walls that often go unnoticed until unsuspecting women run into them. The separation of the church by racial lines is more visible, but no more divisive than the injustice that keeps women from full participation in the church.

The church is changing. Our denomination is changing. Increasing numbers of women serve on consistories, graduate from seminary, participate in RCA commissions and consultations, and pastor churches. And yet, as we focus on our multicultural future and strive to become a truly unified church, we cannot ignore the injustice that so often treats women as only partial members of the church.

The Belhar Confession explicitly challenges racism, but it also calls the church to embrace the gift and obligation of unity across all the boundaries that divide us. If we truly confess with the Belhar that “the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God,” then we confess by extension that the gifts and voices of women are valuable and necessary to the church. Only by including them fully and joyfully can we truly reflect the one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

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Why We Need the Belhar Confession

By Eugene Heideman

During the 1880s, Nicholas Steffens, the first professor of theology at Western Theological Seminary, argued that loyalty to the Three Standards of Unity—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—must be upheld as a defense against the inroads of the “mediating theologians” of Germany and the “New Theology” being taught at Andover Theological Seminary. However, his loyalty to the three confessions did not

dissuade him from criticizing them and the Church Order of Dort for their Erastian understanding of the relation of church and state.

Steffens's complaint was that especially the Heidelberg Catechism and the Church Order of Dort had an Erastian perspective that called the Reformed Church and its members to be loyal and obedient to the civil authority without adequately recognizing the prophetic right to protest against oppression and injustice.

Erastus was one of the advisors on the committee that supervised the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism under the direction of Frederick II. Question and Answer 104 make it clear that subjects must be loyal and obedient even when the ruler was weak or unjust:

Q. What is God's will for us in the fifth commandment?

A. That I show honor, love, and loyalty to my father and mother and all those in authority over me; that I submit myself with proper obedience to all their good teaching and correction; and also that I be patient with their failings, for through them God chooses to rule over us.

The catechism's requirement for patience was reinforced by Article 30 in the Church Order of Dort. It stipulated that in the assemblies of the church, "ecclesiastical matters only shall be transacted, and that in an ecclesiastical manner."

Question 104 was further reinforced in the Belgic Confession, Article 36, that teaches:

And on this matter we denounce the Anabaptists, the anarchists,
and, in general, all those who want
to reject the authorities and civil officers
and to subvert justice
by introducing common ownership of goods
and corrupting the moral order
that God has established among human beings.

In the century of political and social disorders that followed the outbreak of the Reformation, the three Standards of Unity played an important role in setting forth a Reformed theology based on Romans 13:1-8. They provided room for the civil authorities to act without being dominated by the papal hierarchy. They rejected the anarchical chaos predominant in some Anabaptist circles. In doing so, however, they neglected the prophetic office of the covenant community that was present in the Old Testament era, beginning with the prophets Nathan and Elijah. They left unrecognized the demonic aspects of the state so prominent in Revelation 12-18.

As a result of the imbalance, the language of the confessions was used in later centuries to urge patience and obedience to the law in the face of injustice and oppression. Prior to the Civil War, the Reformed Church in America General Synod favored support of the African-American Colonization Society while rejecting the abolitionists. Negotiation and cooperation with management was favored in labor relations while strikes were usually opposed even when the mistreatment of the laboring force was recognized. Article 30 (Article 36 in the 1874 RCA *Explanatory Articles*) was interpreted to allow the General Synod to have a committee on prevailing sins or public morals that could deal with personal morality, but not a commission on social justice that would advise the church on broader public issues such as international justice or racial discrimination in education and housing patterns. In South Africa, the perspective of the three Standards favored the call for patience and obedience to authorities who upheld the harsh apartheid policies.

Adoption of the Belhar Confession alongside the three Standards of Unity would rectify this serious imbalance in the three Standards of Unity. It would recognize not only the virtues of obedience and patience, but also leave open the possibility of godly impatience with injustice and oppressive policies. It would recognize that civil disobedience can be a Christian virtue in opposition to the enforcement of unjust laws. It would encourage the church to give weight to the message of the Old Testament prophets and Revelation 12-18 as well as to Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:13-17.

Adoption of the Belhar Confession would restore the ecumenical and social significance of the Lord's Supper that is inadequately developed in the three Standards. The three Standards did not function to oppose the practice of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa of having separate Lord's Tables for blacks and for whites. It was only in 1982 that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches acted to call apartheid policies and separate Lord's Tables a heresy and a sin. That late recognition of the evil of separate tables remains a signal that the language of the three Standards is inadequate. The language of the Belhar Confession thus adds an important dimension to what is already there in the intent of the Standards of Unity.

Adoption of the Belhar Confession by North American Reformed churches would mitigate the nationalistic tendencies that are present in so many Reformed denominations. The Reformed tradition needs to incorporate the South African theological experience into its historic European and American confessional stance. Although the Belhar Confession spoke in the first instance to the South African situation, it continues to address attitudes and circumstances that prevail in many forms in every church, including North American Reformed churches. In North America the past is still very much with us, not only in terms of race but also gender, ethnicity, and immigrating populations. As a confession that originated in Africa, it would function in North America as a sign that the Reformed confessional tradition is intercontinental rather than simply European or North American in scope.

Finally, adoption of the Belhar Confession alongside the three Standards of Unity would help to clarify the role of historic confessions in relation to present day needs. Attempts to amend the language of sixteenth century documents to deal with twenty-first century issues usually serve only to create new ambiguities and problems as compromises are made in order to reconcile quite different historical circumstances and theological perspectives. By placing confessional statements of differing eras alongside each other, a greater intergenerational ecumenicity can emerge in which spiritual experience and urgency of the present is constantly informed, not overwhelmed, by the wisdom of our fathers and mothers.

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