

Report of the Commission on Theology

The Commission on Theology met in Chicago, Illinois, October 16-18, 2008, and again February 16-17, 2009. The commission has a very full agenda right now, despite the fact that it only brings one paper to this year's General Synod. Because of the high volume of the commission's workload, some projects which we had hoped to present to the 2009 synod are not yet complete and will be brought to future synods. The commission hopes that the synod will understand the limitations faced by the commission and will be patient as the commission seeks to do its work.

Deacons in Higher Assemblies

The commission continues its work on deacons in higher assemblies (see *MGS 2007*, R-18, p. 103) and hopes to present its report to the 2010 General Synod, one year later than requested by the synod in 2007. The commission's initial efforts on this paper led to further insight and a refocusing of the direction of its study. This is why the commission is requesting the longer timeframe.

Marks of the Church

Similarly, the commission continues work on the request from the 2007 General Synod "to engage in a study of the historic 'marks' of the church, as articulated in the RCA Standards and in light of missional understandings of the gospel, and to consider the recommendation of the addition of a fourth 'mark' of the church, for report to the General Synod no later than 2010" (*MGS 2007*, R-20, p. 103). The commission hopes to fulfill this request with a report for the 2010 General Synod.

Common Translation of the Standards with the Christian Reformed Church

The commission continues to receive consultative reports from Todd Billings and Eugene Heideman, the RCA representatives on a joint RCA/CRC task force that is preparing a new common translation of our Standards for inclusion in a joint RCA/CRC hymnbook to be published in 2013. The commission hopes to review a draft of the new translation at its fall 2009 meeting and to bring a recommendation to the 2010 General Synod regarding the approval of the new translation for use and study within the RCA.

Christian-Muslim Relations

The commission also continues its collaborative work with a number of RCA missionaries with extensive experience in the Middle East, preparing a new paper that will help the RCA deepen and strengthen its life and witness among Muslim people. The principle objective of the paper is to address issues that have arisen since 9/11 and reassess how Christians may more effectively and winsomely engage their Muslim neighbors in a globalized world.

Reformed and Missional Lexicon

The commission has been considering the directive from the 2008 General Synod "to instruct the Commission on Theology, in consultation with the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship and the R-16/Reformed and Missional Task Force, to compile a brief theological dictionary in order to provide a common language for continued conversation, giving particular attention and emphasis to the terms "Reformed" and "missional," with report to General Synod 2009..." (*MGS 2008*, R-12, pp. 93f.). The commission

began its work in the fall by consulting with the R-16 task force to select the terms that might be included in the lexicon. However, when it attempted to produce a first draft of brief definitions at its spring meeting, it quickly realized that the project is more complex than might initially appear. Very brief definitions are more comprehensible but can quickly be faulted for what they leave out, particularly in a context where the approval of such definitions by the General Synod may lend to them a normative weight in the life of the RCA. Longer definitions gain in precision, but with diminishing effectiveness as educational tools. The commission is still trying to find the most effective way forward and would welcome further clarification from the General Synod. It also requests from the General Synod additional time to complete its work.

Conversation on Ephesians 4:11 and “Apostolic Ministry”

The commission has noted that increasingly in RCA circles, especially those involved in church multiplication (and in the RCA website sections on church multiplication), there is a strong emphasis on Ephesians 4:11 and the role of “apostles” or “apostolic leaders” in the life of the church, as well as discussion of the five-fold gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher in the life of the church. The commission recognizes that these emphases may pose some significant challenges to the existing order and ecclesiological assumptions within the RCA. In an effort to assist the church in reflecting on these issues, the commission has invited several leaders in the church multiplication movement in the RCA to engage in dialogue around these issues. That conversation is ongoing, and the commission has not yet decided whether it will produce a formal paper on the topic.

The Belhar Confession and “Our Call”

Finally, the commission offers the following paper for consideration by the General Synod. The 2008 General Synod directed the General Synod Council (GSC) “in collaboration with appropriate commissions and agencies of the RCA, to prepare a proposal to integrate, within the framework and language of Our Call, a commitment to the core values of the Belhar Confession: unity, reconciliation, and justice...” (*MGS 2008*, R-67, p. 267). This mandate was the focus of much of the commission’s joint session with the GSC and with other commissions last fall. As part of this consultation, the commission also met with Earl James, coordinator of multiracial ministries and social justice, who invited the commission to assist the church in thinking more theologically about issues of racism, justice, and public witness. As the commission considered what sort of contribution it might make to this effort to integrate the Belhar Confession into the RCA, and into the language of Our Call, it decided to offer this paper. It hopes that the paper will assist the church both in considering the relationship between the Belhar Confession and Our Call, and in considering the adoption of the Belhar Confession as a fourth doctrinal standard for the RCA.

BELHAR AND “OUR CALL”:

Theological Reflections on the Implications of a New RCA Confession for the Identity and Direction of the RCA as a Denomination

This summer, the RCA will decide whether or not to take an action that it has not done in almost four hundred years: it will consider whether to adopt the Belhar Confession for inclusion among its doctrinal standards, alongside the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort. This is undoubtedly a major decision, and the Commission on Theology believes it may be helpful to the church to explore how the adoption of Belhar might reshape and refocus our self-understanding and direction as a denomination. What are the implications of the adoption of Belhar, with its focus on

unity, reconciliation, and justice, for a denomination which believes that God is calling it to start new congregations and revitalize existing congregations, and thereby empower fruitful and faithful ministries for the glory of God?¹

This question of the relationship between Belhar and “Our Call” is further deepened by the action of the 2008 General Synod, which directed the General Synod Council to find a way to “integrate, within the framework and language of Our Call, a commitment to the core values of the Belhar Confession: unity, reconciliation, and justice, for report to the 2009 General Synod.”²

At issue in this mandate is the necessary link between our confession as a church and our actual lived practice. If we are to confess the Belhar Confession with integrity, such a confession must flow from our common life, and it must inform the direction of our life together as a church. How can we do this most faithfully and effectively?

One possible answer might be to add the concerns of the Belhar Confession—unity, reconciliation, and justice—to the existing agendas and programs of the church. Indeed, something quite like this was proposed in 2003, when the language of Our Call was adopted. At that time, an amendment to Our Call was proposed from the floor of synod, and was rejected by the 2003 synod. That motion involved adding a third overall goal to the twin goals of starting new congregations and revitalizing existing congregations: “developing and supporting efforts to care for the poor and seeking to create greater justice in our world.”³

Perhaps it is simply the case that the 2009 General Synod, in considering the adoption of Belhar, is simply more ready to consider such a change than it was in 2003. That might be true, but something more basic and important is also at stake here. The Belhar Confession is not simply a call to a program focused on care for the poor and seeking greater justice in the world. It is, at heart, a confession, an acknowledgement of and confrontation with the presence and lordship of Jesus Christ, mediated to us in the witness of Scripture through the power of the Holy Spirit. A confession is not first and foremost a social or ecclesiastical program; confession is rather what Christians do when they have met God face-to-face, and find that their lives have been irrevocably changed. Christians confess when they find that they can do nothing else except to confess a reality which far exceeds their own agendas, programs, ideas, goals, or visions. We do not confess to add greater weight to existing programs or goals; it is rather the case that our confession forces us to reconsider all our programs and goals, in light of God’s great purposes revealed to us in Christ by the power of the Spirit.

This is where we must begin as we consider the implications of the Belhar Confession for Our Call. Belhar confronts us with a radical vision of unity, in which all alienation, enmity, hostility, and conflict are overcome in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Because God’s great purpose is to unite all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:15-20), unity is both a gift given to the church in Christ, and also an obligation that drives the church into God’s future. Because such unity cannot be achieved on earth without the reconciliation of enmity, division, alienation, and hostility, the church embraces the reconciling power given to us in Christ, and commits itself to be shaped by that power in all that it does. And because such reconciliation cannot take place without a deeper experience of justice throughout the world, the church finds itself compelled to bear witness to a new form of life in Christ where all oppression is ended, where all life comes to its fullness, and where all of creation is restored to God’s gracious purpose.

What is the relationship between such a vision and Our Call? Quite simply, Belhar has the potential, not to replace Our Call, but rather to further ground and focus the denomina-

tional goal. By confessing Belhar, the RCA is saying that it is precisely our vision of the centrality of unity, reconciliation, and justice that drives us to start new congregations and revitalize existing congregations, building on the dynamic foundations of leadership, discipleship, and mission. To put it differently, Belhar is not an addition to Our Call, but rather enhances the basis of Our Call.

Why is it that the RCA wants to start new congregations and revitalize existing ones? Why is it that Our Call sets these goals upon the dynamic foundations of leadership, discipleship, and mission? One cynical answer is to say that the RCA has finally gotten anxious enough about its numerical decline that it has gone “all in” on an aggressive program simply to survive as a denomination. By this view, Our Call is driven fundamentally by the fear of death—the death of the RCA. Although a humble honesty must acknowledge that our motives as a denomination are not always pure, and that some of our actions may have indeed been driven by the fear of death, the adoption of Our Call in 2003 was also a moment of deep conviction—that God’s purposes for the RCA were far from over, and that the RCA has been entrusted with good news for the whole world. The deepest and truest motive behind Our Call is the conviction that God’s Spirit is still at work in the world, calling us out into the world to start new congregations and revitalize existing ones, not for our own survival, but for God’s glory. Ultimately, the RCA adopted Our Call not out of anxiety, but out of obedience to the leading of the Spirit of God.

The adoption of Belhar can be seen as the deepening of this core conviction. What Belhar does is to add texture and specificity to our vision of what the Spirit of God is doing in and through the church, on behalf of the world. When we start new congregations in response to Our Call, we do so because congregations form the basic context where the unity, reconciliation, and justice God intends for the whole creation can first be tasted and offered to the world in word and deed. We revitalize existing congregations so that they are empowered to be salt and light in their contexts, so that God’s great reconciling purposes can be made manifest to the world around us, to the glory of God. In this sense, the adoption of Belhar further clarifies the motives that drove the adoption of Our Call in the first place.

But the adoption of the Belhar Confession will not simply reinforce our existing agenda as a denomination. It will also reshape and refocus our work in several important ways. One of the ways that Belhar will challenge us as a denomination is to challenge a notion of growth for its own sake, as if simply increasing the numbers of the RCA were the final destination to which God is leading us. Such a preoccupation with numbers alone can all too easily become the ecclesiological equivalent of cancer, where growth leads not to deeper strength and effectiveness, but rather to the proliferation of churches that have lost their shared sense of unity, confession, and conviction. Although Belhar doesn’t address directly the growth of the church, it implicitly warns against any approach to the growth of the church (or any other aspect of the church’s life) which undermines the unity of the Church for which Christ died—the unity that stands as the core gift and obligation undergirding all of the church’s life and witness. In this sense, Belhar’s call to unity, reconciliation, and justice tempers and focuses the growth goals of the church, and keeps us centered in Jesus Christ and his gracious purposes for the world.

Secondly, Belhar places before us with particular emphasis the work of Christ in reconciling races, peoples, and cultures where there has been alienation, hostility, oppression, and indifference. Here as well, Belhar has the capacity to lend focus and specificity to Our Call. The adoption of Belhar will call the RCA to continue to deepen its emphasis upon cross-cultural and multiracial ministry. This is a call that is “close to home” for many RCA churches, where neighborhood changes have challenged the ability of churches and classes to continue as mono-cultural, mono-racial, and mono-ethnic groups. The adoption of

Belhar would be a statement by the RCA that its future lies in starting and revitalizing not just any sorts of congregations. Rather, the focus would fall more heavily on welcoming the diversity in our midst, in order to become more authentically multiracial and multiethnic congregations and classes.

Such a refocusing of denominational energies will not always be easy. It may not always be the most financially lucrative approach for the denomination. It may well place urban ministries as a higher priority for the RCA. It will certainly challenge approaches to church multiplication that only target “niches” of like-minded people for new church starts. It may slow down growth that otherwise might be possible with a more consumer-driven approach to congregational revitalization and multiplication. If the RCA is serious about adopting the Belhar Confession, then it must carefully consider how such challenges might lead it to refocus its understanding of Our Call, not to abandon the call to church revitalization and multiplication, but rather to deepen our grasp of the sorts of churches that God is calling us to start and revitalize.

Finally, Belhar has the capacity to deepen our understanding of the unity of the church. It has become fashionable for many denominations to seek to live by maxims such as “doctrine divides, but mission unites.” While it is often true that a concrete focus on mission can reframe some of our doctrinal or ecclesial disputes, and help us to realize what is truly important, such maxims will ultimately fail the church by forcing us to pit our faith against our missional practice. Maxims such as this represent a kind of “quick fix” for the church, an attempt simply to bypass old conflicts, rather than to resolve them. Such “end runs” will not have staying power. If Our Call is interpreted apart from the call to confession expressed in Belhar, and indeed in all our confessions, it may itself run into such dead-ends.

By contrast, Belhar confronts us, perhaps in a deeper way than we in the RCA have faced before, with the basic and foundational unity of the church as both gift and obligation. To join in confessing the Belhar Confession is to say as a denomination that unity is not merely a luxury that we will pursue only so long as it is expedient to do so. Rather, Belhar reminds us that our unity is absolutely foundational to our identity. If our own only comfort in life and in death is that “we are not our own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful savior Jesus Christ,” then Belhar confronts us with a necessary and unavoidable corollary: Because we belong to Jesus Christ, we also belong to each other, and must accept that unity as both gift and obligation, whether we like each other or not, whether we always agree with each other or not, whether we always are able to understand each other or not. To confess Belhar is to accept this unity as a given, and to commit ourselves to the practices of reconciliation and justice which allow this unity to manifest itself ever more deeply in our lives and in our world. And yet, this unity to which Belhar calls us can never be restricted to denominational unity, even though it must begin there. The gift and obligation of unity, and its attendant practices of reconciliation and the pursuit of justice, do not belong to the RCA alone. If our unity flows from our union with Christ, this is a gift and obligation that invites us into practices of unity, reconciliation, and justice not just within the RCA, but also with the wider church. This too calls us into a deeper engagement with the phrase in Our Call which speaks of “working together with all the partners that God provides.”

The Commission on Theology would like to make one further comment on the RCA’s consideration of the Belhar Confession for adoption. This observation concerns the relationship between the Belhar Confession and our other confessions, should the Belhar be adopted as a fourth doctrinal standard by the RCA. The commission notes that the Belhar Confession does not claim to be a general statement of faith like the Belgic Confession, or even a broad document for teaching like the Heidelberg Catechism. Its confessional func-

tion is rather much more akin to the Canons of Dort, written to address a focused set of issues not fully addressed in our existing standards. Moreover, there are statements in the Belhar Confession which, taken by themselves, might be subject to misunderstanding, if they are interpreted apart from our other standards. For example, the Belhar states that “true faith in Christ is the only condition for membership in this church.” It goes on, in the rejection of errors, to reject any doctrine “which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.” These statements arose from the need to reject the use of race or ancestry as a means to divide the church.

But such statements, taken out of the larger context of Reformed confessions (and outside of the original context of the Belhar Confession), might conceivably be interpreted by some to suggest that the children of believers should not be considered members of the church by virtue of their “physical descent” from their parents, and thus should not be baptized as a sign of their incorporation into the church. Yet such a view is explicitly contradicted both by our Liturgy, which states that baptized children are “received into the visible membership of the holy catholic church,” and is also contradicted by the Belgic Confession, which states that by baptism “we are received into God’s church” (Article 34). Similarly, the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of how the infant children of believers are, by baptism, “received into the Christian church” (Q&A 74). It is also worth noting that the practice of infant baptism is not an issue of controversy in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, and this potential (mis)reading might well surprise many in South Africa!

Such problems, first of all, can be addressed by recognizing that we acknowledge that all of our confessions are “historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God”¹ which must be interpreted in light of their original context and intention. But such potential problems can also be forestalled if the Reformed Church finds a way to make it clear, as it adopts the Belhar Confession, that in freely and fully adopting Belhar, the RCA continues its deep commitment to its existing doctrinal standards, and interprets the Belhar Confession within the framework of its other confessions and creeds. In fact, the adoption of the Belhar Confession offers to the RCA the opportunity to deepen its confessional identity as a whole, and to integrate more fully its confessional and missional identity.

Given all these considerations, the Commission on Theology commends the Belhar Confession to the RCA, and encourages the church to reflect carefully and deeply upon the implications of its adoption for our common life. Belhar has the capacity to deepen and transform our shared life. May God lead us into this new chapter in our lives!

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To approve the document “Belhar and ‘Our Call’” and to commend the document to churches, classes, and synods for use in considering the adoption of the Belhar Confession; and further,

to direct the General Synod Council to make use of “Belhar and ‘Our Call’” in its attempts to integrate the Belhar Confession into the implementation of Our Call. (ADOPTED)

Endnotes

- ¹ Taken from the RCA ten-year goal statement. For the entire goal statement, see the *Minutes of General Synod 2003*, p. 66; or, on the www.rca.org homepage, click on “Our Mission and Call.”
- ² *Minutes of General Synod 2008*, p. 267.
- ³ *Minutes of General Synod 2003*, p. 66.
- ⁴ Language from *BCO* Formularies 1, 3, and 7.