

Report of the Advisory Committees on the Belhar Confession

Three times in its history, the Reformed church has developed confessional statements. In 1561, Guido de Bres wrote the Belgic Confession, in the face of great persecution, seeking justice from the king of Spain. In 1563, the Heidelberg Catechism was written seeking reconciliation between Lutherans and Calvinists who were at violent odds with one another. In 1619 the Canons of Dordt were composed to settle a theological dispute and bring unity to the church. The General Synod of that year confirmed these three confessions as standards of unity for the church.

For 24 years, the Reformed Church in America has been considering the status of another confession that has been put before us, the Belhar Confession. Like the confessions before it, it was written under persecution, confessing God's desire for justice and reconciliation among people at violent odds with one another, and calling for unity in the church. Previous synods have passed this confession forward and outward for consideration. This General Synod has been offered the opportunity to consider another significant step. You have been given the task of deciding whether this confession will be adopted as a standard for your church.

As moderators of the issue advisory committees, we were given three tasks: to listen, to summarize, and to make recommendations based on your advice. As fellow delegates, we want you to know that your voices have been heard. We heard the passionate voices, we heard the questioning voices, we heard the hopeful voices, we heard the doubtful voices, and we heard every voice speak out of a love for God and the church.

We want to thank you for offering your voices and, more importantly, for the way in which you offered them. We feel privileged to share with you what you shared with us.

Some of you found it significant that the Belhar Confession is a gift from the hearts of a marginalized people. Some of you would like to offer a gift of your own by adopting the Belhar Confession as a standard of unity. Some found in the language of the Belhar Confession the courage to take a stand and be held accountable. Some credited the Belhar Confession with the ability to raise our awareness of sins that we would otherwise ignore.

Some of you also spoke to us of your concerns. Some of you shared with us your fear that this confession about unity could result in division within our denomination; you felt that adopting the Belhar Confession is made more complex by the potential connection to our ongoing discussion regarding the topic of homosexuality. Some of you wondered if the Belhar Confession deserved the same status as our current standards. Some of you felt it was too broad in scope, and others felt it was too focused on the situation of another time and place. You affirmed that a confession only has value if it is embraced and used, and some of you said you could not be certain that we could adopt the Belhar Confession with integrity. Finally, some of you shared a hesitancy to add to our doctrinal standards.

We listened to all of your voices. Ultimately, most of the voices spoke in favor of the recommendation to adopt the Belhar Confession.

We noticed a number of overarching themes in those more prevalent voices that serve as your reasons for the support of the Belhar Confession:

- The Belhar Confession expands and balances the RCA confessions to encompass the whole of Scripture. It speaks to unity and justice in ways that the other confessions do not.
- The Belhar Confession challenges the church to the hard work of unity and it gives a vision for unity and reconciliation in the global church and society. Many of you said we are ready to rise to that challenge and see this as an opportunity for unity in the church and around the globe.
- The Belhar Confession will help us add unity, justice, and reconciliation to our denominational DNA. So many of you told us you were ready to act out your faith and appreciated the Belhar Confession's emphasis on action as a response to belief.
- The Belhar Confession heightens our awareness of injustices around us and brings focus to specific areas of injustice, such as poverty and racism.
- The Belhar Confession strengthens the vision of Our Call.

For these reasons, many of you see this as the right moment to adopt a new confession. Many of you see the Belhar Confession as contemporary and relevant, and as resonating with the next generation of church members and new Christians and offering a meaningful answer to the cries of the oppressed around the world. Finally, many of you see the Belhar Confession as clearly defining our mission to a lost and broken world so loved by God.

In light of the advisory committee discussions, we offer the following recommendations:

R-24 Advice:
(p. 194) To adopt recommendation 24.

R-38 Advice
(p. 233) To adopt recommendation 38.

R-63 RECOMMENDATION
(p. 103) **To deny overture 2.**

Reasons:

1. The prevalent opinion among delegates in the advisory committees was to deny the overture.
2. The advice to adopt R-24 makes this overture unnecessary.