

# The Confession of Belhar and Our Common Future

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Brad Lewis, moderator of the RCA; Wes Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary; Doug Fromm, comrade in reconciliation and unity; Ed Mulder, former general secretary; members of the conference, and allow me to mention especially the Black Council of the RCA—I think specifically of Bill Howard and those who carried the torch further—I have a story to tell and the significance of Belhar to emphasize.

## **My Personal Journey with the Story of the Confession of Belhar**

The theological engagement with the central issues underlying the Confession of Belhar started on a beautiful day in Cape Town in the second semester of 1978, two years after the tragic events of 1976 when Hector Petersen and other children were shot on the streets of Soweto by the apartheid regime. We were then still struggling to make theological sense of the resistance to apartheid. Our professor of systematic theology, Jaap Durand, called us to order, saying, “You have been quite explicit about the legal, sociological, psychological, and political science reasons for your judgment on apartheid. I want to challenge you to find the theological essence of the judgment on apartheid.” I have a feeling that it was his way of giving us a reason to read Karl Barth’s work on “The Doctrine of Reconciliation,” since he gave this to us as reading material. One day in the spring of 1978 we arrived at a conclusion: apartheid has as its point of departure the irreconcilability of people of different race groups. It was thus against the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which takes its point of departure in the doctrine of reconciliation.

In October of the same year, the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, with Allan Boesak and others in the leadership, considered this theological conclusion. The Theological Commission of Synod confirmed this conclusive judgment and further indicated that if this theological judgment was affirmed by synod it would mean that apartheid was “anti-evangelical,” against the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The racism of apartheid was, therefore, a structural and institutional sin.

In 1982, Allan Boesak presented this position of the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa to the General Conference of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa, Canada. Again, this theological understanding was affirmed, but this time in the context of the Reformed ecumenical community. It was no longer merely the biblical understanding of a black, Reformed church on the southernmost tip of the Cape of Good Hope. The theological understanding that Christians are witnesses to reconciliation as the heart of the gospel of Christ became an ecumenical matter throughout the Reformed tradition and churches.

It so happened that the Dutch Reformed Mission Church had its following General Synod in the spring of 1982. The coherence between the decision on apartheid in 1978 and the Ecumenical Report about the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in 1982 deepened the debate at the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. This time around, I was an ordained member of that synod. The synod was led to a next moment of faith. The key to this next moment of faith was the understanding that if all of this were true, then the theological justification of the racism, divisions, and the injustices of apartheid is both idolatry and a heresy. We

were all deeply aware of the fact that we had entered a moment of faith that was even bigger than the church itself. We were all overwhelmed by how insignificant we all were, and even our church was, in a moment that belonged only to the Holy Spirit. This confirmation by WARC affirmed for many of us the identity of being black and authentically Reformed. It has happened too easily that being Dutch and Reformed became the defining features for any person sharing this great tradition. Belhar widens the ownership of the Standards of Unity to both black and white in Reformed churches worldwide.

At this stage the synod turned to Karl Barth for wisdom. The answer was eloquently presented to synod by the late professor Gustav Bam: if a church has stumbled upon a heresy it has no option but to confess its faith in the face of such a false doctrine. This is how the idea of a new Reformed confession in the twentieth century emerged.

The synod, as they seem to do everywhere in the world, appointed a committee to investigate an appropriate response for such a context of faith. Within days the committee presented the synod with a concept confession of faith, known today as the Confession of Belhar.

### **The Significance of the Confession of Belhar**

Although the history of apartheid forms the context of the emergence of the Confession of Belhar, it is never mentioned within it. Instead it lifts up the heart of the Gospel as a testimony of hope in the context of the full human condition. Its foremost significance is that it helps us read our world—the condition humanity has maneuvered itself into, and especially the suffering that we see worldwide in a new way. Eventually, it speaks to all of us from the very heart of the gospel. It speaks of good news in a divided world where hatred reigns. Its message of hope is woven together in the gift of and the calling to unity, reconciliation, and justice.

1. The fact that the Confession of Belhar is the first to emerge from a Reformed church in Africa is in itself very significant. More so, is the fact that it resulted from the struggle of black people with the essence of Reformed faith. As such, one can say the Confession of Belhar arose from the underside of modern history. It represents a Christian view on racism, natural division, and suffering from the context of those who suffer the realities of such human conditions.
2. The Confession of Belhar contributes significantly to the nature of Reformed confessional statements. These statements comprise the Reformed Standards of Unity, namely the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Belgic Confession (1561, revised 1619), and the Canons of Dort (1618-1619). The nature of Reformed confessions of faith is broadened by the Confession of Belhar to include the idea that Christians can derive confessional affirmations from social ethics. Fundamentally, it embraces the theological view that one's understanding of the church and of Christ expresses one's social ethics; that one's acting manifests one's way of being. The way you are the Reformed Church in America tells the story of your international social ethics, and therefore, the reality of your lived confession.
3. The scandalous absence in the Reformed Standards of Unity is a confession on justice. The significant contribution of the Confession of Belhar to the Reformed Standards of Unity is also a matter of contributing content of faith. The content it

adds, in complementing the existing standards of faith, is in its explicit confession of faith in God as a God of justice. The Confession of Belhar closes a loop in Reformed confessions by coming to terms with the revelation of God in relation to the realities of social justice. In this context it confesses that God is revealed as one who brings justice and true peace among human beings. Further, that in a world of injustice and enmity, God, in a special way, is revealed as the God of those who suffer in general and also of those who suffer as a result of poverty and injustices. In this addition to the standards of faith the Confession of Belhar has made a significant contribution to the content of faith in the Reformed community at large.

4. The Confession of Belhar does not only complement the existing Reformed Standards of Unity, It also expresses a certain unity of confession for our modern world. As such it is a well woven confession. It weaves our faith in Christ as the bringer of reconciliation; our faith in the Spirit, who leads us in discipleship for the unity of the church worldwide; and our faith in God the parent, who is revealed as the “helper of the helpless” and “the parent of the orphan.” Our faith in the triune God is expressed here in the Confession of Belhar through the many ways in which we get to know God in God’s self-revelation. The real social and ecclesial implication of the Confession of Belhar is manifested in its woven unity of faith.
5. Belhar goes further than just being a confession of faith by indicating the different world that results from such an understanding of faith. It rejects the very nature of a world that requires or prescribes, explicitly or inexplicitly, that people should absolutize their natural, human, or social diversity and differences. It rejects the very nature of a church that does not embrace lived unity and living reconciliation as its way of being. It rejects a world and an ideology that justifies forms of injustice or a policy that refuses to resist such injustice.
6. Finally, the Confession of Belhar embraces the central notion in the Barmen Declaration: Jesus is Lord. With this confession one confirms the idea that nobody but Christ lords it over us and over our church. From this understanding grew our resistance against apartheid and our resistance against all powers that legitimate forms of injustices.

### **The Comfort and Challenge of the Confession of Belhar**

The Confession of Belhar is couched in doxological language. It honors God, embraces the comfort given in Jesus Christ, and glorifies divine grace as gift and calling. There is a difference between sentimental doxology and costly doxology. A doxology that costs you nothing is a denial of the cross of Jesus Christ. High sentimentality and low cost in our doxology contradicts the origins of Christianity and of the Confession of Belhar.

The doxology of our confessions, prayers, and hymns must translate into costly public living or deny sentimentally the very faith we express. Karl Barth held a strong opinion about this: “A declaration may be bold and clear, and centrally Christian...but so long as it remains theoretical, entailing no obligation or venture on the part of him [sic] who makes it, it is not confession and must not be mistaken for it” (KD,m,4,84).

It doesn’t matter anymore that the white Dutch Reformed Church accepts the Confession of Belhar as their own or that Reformed churches in Belgium, Germany, and

the United States of America adopt Belhar if it will not change the way Christians live in this difficult world. As Karl Barth states: "There are good and perhaps strong Christian words which are not confessions because they are merely spoken among the like-minded where they cost nothing and do not help to make visible the contours of the Christian community" (KD,m,48).

The integrity of Christians is at stake, at this difficult juncture of humanity, in the public, national and international way they live their unity with God, each other, and the full human community.

Both Barmen and Belhar affirm this important tenant of Reformed theology: the church belongs to Jesus Christ. This belonging should be reflected in the way the Christians live in this world. The notion of belonging distinguishes the church from any self-selected structure and from the natural forms of race, class, gender, nationality, and ideology. Calvin, the Heidelberg Catechism, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Barmen, and Belhar claim that our ecclesiology expresses our ethics. The way Christians live is a manifestation of their identity and their morality. Christians deny the deepest meaning of Christianity, not in their private lives, but in the way they live their unity, serve justice, and seek reconciliation.

The third thesis of Barmen and the clause on unity in Belhar are based on the Reformed claim that the church should not only express its obedience to Christ in its message, but also in its order, in its visible form and its structure. The unity in the church is not merely a matter of spirituality; it should be manifested in the church as public reality. Truth and form, doctrine and ethics, worship and social structure, and word and deed belong inextricably together. There is no room for contradiction here for whatever purpose, be it political, ideological, social, cultural, economic, or simply driven by events in the world.

These very important theological thoughts undergird the Christian comfort and calling. Christians take comfort in the knowledge and faith that they belong not to themselves, but to Christ. They seek to live this faith, build traditions of this belief, structure organizations to manifest this conviction, and order their communities to express it.

### **We Are All Called to Confess Belhar in Action**

It has been an honor to share these thoughts with you on this beautiful day of June 10, 2007, as a manifestation of my own journey of faith from 1978 to 2007, from Belhar (Cape Town), where we emerged with the first embryonic thoughts that gave birth to the Confession of Belhar, to Pella, Iowa, where you, as the synod of the Reformed Church in America, will consider your verdict on the comfort of and the challenge to confessing the same hope and obedience the world needs even today.

My brothers and my sisters, in considering the implications of the Confession of Belhar for the Reformed Church in America, you are actually challenged to confirm once again that reconciliation is the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and thus, that justice and unity are the indispensable public duties of the church of Christ in this divided world and at this terrifying time. You will be saying to the world and to Americans, if you are seeking ecclesial support for racism, disunity, and injustice or if you want a theological justification for racism, division, and injustice...don't come looking for it in *our* church!

God bless you.

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