

Ovt 014

On Commending Confessions that Uphold the Oneness of All Believers, and Discontinuing Efforts to Include the Belhar Confession in the Book of Confessions—From the Presbytery of Sacramento.

The Presbytery of Sacramento overtures the 219th General Assembly (2010) to do the following:

1. Commend all current and past efforts of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to establish church-governance standards that embrace equality among believers without regard to race or ethnic background, as expressed in the Book of Order.

2. Commend to the Church those confessions of the PC (USA) that uphold the oneness of all believers, including the Brief Statement of Faith and the Confession of 1967, and counsel all members of the PC (USA) to fully and purposefully live out their words, which must be fulfilled in reality in every arena of Church life, particularly those sections that read: We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father. In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community. (Brief Statement of Faith, 10.3) God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love, he overcomes the barriers between brothers and breaks the down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all men to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. Therefore, the Church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellowmen, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess. (Confession of 1967, 9.44)

3. Discontinue efforts to include the Belhar Confession in the Book of Confessions, adding the following comment: Since the Belhar Confession has at times been linked by some theologians with the Declaration of Barmen, it should be noted that the focus of the Declaration of Barmen rests squarely on the Lordship of Christ, as he is identified in the Old and New Testaments. Examination of the message of the Belhar Confession needs to be done in light of this profession from the Barmen Declaration: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." (John 14:6), "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.... I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved." (John 10:1, 9.) Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation. (8.10–8.12)

Rationale

The Belhar Confession is a complex and somewhat confusing document, which some parties-- theologians as well as the ordained and laity--have attempted to use to press issues other than racial equality. This overly broad application of the Belhar Confession to champion liberation theology in general or same-sex causes in particular produces a conflicted response to its antiracism message. The confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) already contain clear and explicit directives against racism. They are far more applicable to the present context and less likely to introduce a confusion of issues. The Belhar Confession, written in an entirely different setting for a political purpose, would add controversy and confusion to our most foundational treasure of confessional documents. The confession of the Church is always the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. University of Dubuque Theological Seminary dean and noted Karl Barth scholar Arthur C. Cochrane wrote: A Confession is therefore not the publication of the opinions, convictions, ideals, and value judgments of men. It does not set forth a program or system of theology or ethics. It is not a set of principles or constitution for a fraternal order, social service club, or a religious society. It is not a political or ethical, religious platform. It does not bear witness to certain events, powers, figures, and truths in nature and history that may be championed by certain groups in society. It confesses Jesus Christ as the one Lord, the one justification and sanctification of men, the one revelation, and the one Word of God which we have to hear, trust and obey in life and in death. Thus, the Belhar Confession, for all its strengths for its time and setting, does not qualify as a confession of the church for all times in all places, since it centers on local circumstances rather than on Jesus Christ.