

# The Confession of Belhar

**Item(s):** 16-12: Report and Recommendations from the Special Committee on The Belhar.

16-01 from Sacramento, with concurrences from Presbytery of Central Washington and Presbytery of San Joaquin.

**GA Committee Assignment:** 16 Theological Issues and Institutions

## **Summary of the business and what it wants the Assembly to do:**

The recommendation from the Special Committee (16-12) is to add the Belhar to the *Book of Confessions* as the twelfth document. (Rules for amending the *Book of Confessions* are in Chapter 18 of the *Book of Order*.)

16-01 and its concurrences ask the GA to discontinue efforts to add the Belhar to the *Book of Confessions*

## **Background:**

The Belhar Confession was adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa. It was, at that time, an answer to those particular churches who were involved in apartheid. The Confession's most basic focus is on unity within the church. It was helpful for those churches, in South Africa, who were in the process of overcoming racial separatism. The Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa asked the Reformed Church in America to adopt the Confession as a sign of unity. The RCA has now adopted the Confession; the Christian Reformed Church is also considering adopting the Confession.

## **Analysis of the business and how it would affect the Church:**

The Special Committee desires to uphold ethnic equality by adopting the Belhar Confession. It's doubtful that this is sufficient reason to add to the confessional part of our church constitution. The Belhar confession does not focus clearly enough on the Church's confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. Because of this lack of a proper focus on Christ and Scripture, Belhar is open to misuse. Both theologians and laity believe the Confession can be used to further the issue of the ordination of practicing homosexuals as well as the acceptance of same gender marriage. Belhar asks for its confessors to confess unity grounded in supposed human needs such as justice rather than in Jesus Christ.

One problem within the Belhar Confession is this statement: "we reject any doctrine which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church..." Using this quote, those advocating for same gender marriage or ordination of practicing homosexuals can conclude that the biblical teaching that marriage must *always* be between a man and a woman is to absolutize the conditions for marriage and bring separation to the body of Christ. In this case one must choose the Lordship of Jesus Christ and his Word over the potential of an unscriptural unity.

**An Advisory on Business to the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2010)**

*From the Joint Renewal GA Team*

Another problematic statement is “We believe ... that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the Lord of the destitute, the poor and the wronged ... that God calls the church to follow him in this; ...” That sounds right, but it isn’t. The Lord cares for the poor, the destitute, the wronged, but the Bible does not say he is their Lord in a special way. God calls his people to care for the destitute, the poor and the wronged, not because he is Lord of the poor in a special way but because he is Lord of the Church in a special way!

Because the Belhar Confession creates with this one subtle statement another relationship between God and the world—a relationship because of need, not because of God’s act of redemption in Jesus’ life death and resurrection—it opens the door to receiving heresy and antinomianism into the life of the Church.

The Sacramento Presbytery overture (16-01) answers the recommendation of the Special Committee by “commending Confessions that uphold the oneness of all believers.” The Sacramento overture has two important parts. First it upholds and affirms all sections of the Presbyterian Constitution, (*The Book of Order* and *The Book of Confessions*) which speak for diversity and ethnic equality. The overture’s focus on the confessionals is “A Brief Statement of Faith” and “The 1967 Confession.”

Secondly, it asks the 219 General Assembly *not* to adopt the Belhar Confession since it is a “complex” and confusing document which does not properly confess Christ, but instead opens the door to the ordination of unrepentant practicing homosexuals. As the overture rationale puts it, “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.”

**Pertinent Resources:**

[Reflections on the Belhar Confession](#), by Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Seminary

[Four Reasons the PC\(USA\) Should Not Adopt the Belhar](#), by Viola Larson

“A Brief Statement of Faith 10.3, lines 27-32” in *The Presbyterian (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions*

“The Confession of 1967, 9.44” in *The Presbyterian (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions*

The Report of the Special Committee on the Belhar Overture #14 and its concurrences.

**Action by GA that will help the Church:**

*Substitute Item 16-01 for the committee’s report.*