

Voting? On the Belhar

by Jerry Andrews

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I'd rather not. Let me explain.

I want very much for the PC(USA) to engage in sustained committed conversation over the things that matter—the Faith and the faithfulness of the Church. I believe that more than the loss of any one particular proposition of the Faith, the life of the Church has been diminished by the loss of the core conviction that the Church has a Faith without which she cannot live faithfully. Any conversation, anywhere, any time that has any promise to be a common conversation that is sustained, and to which presbyters commit to speak from the Faith and listen to the Faith has my support. I have been gladly engaged in several such conversations. I find hope there.

The consideration of adding to the confessional standards of the church a particular confessional such as Belhar is a grand church-wide opportunity for such a conversation. I welcome it.

In my role as Chair of the Ecclesiastical Committee of my presbytery, as part of our preparation for a vote, I have proposed this conversation in our common life. I hope for a good response and quality conversation that leads to greater faithfulness because the Faith has been newly attended to. But.

I will not be advising the presbytery to vote Yes on adding the Belhar Confession to our confessional standards for one simple reason: there is not enough time to give it the consideration it is due and which the Church should require before a decisive vote.

Confessions of Faith not only form the Church, they are formed by the Church. They, at their best and when we are at our best, arise from the hard work of advancing the theological mission of the

Church, often in controversy, always with difficulty.

Confessions of Faith, prior to adoption by the Church, are to be examined—read closely, studied carefully, understood fully. This work is the work of the Church. It cannot be assigned to a task force. The work of any task force early in the process is to recommend further consideration or not, and produce helps for the whole Church to examine it well. As a Church considering a confession, this is the place where we should be—using the helps provided to examine the document. Instead, the task force of the General Assembly recommended adoption of the confession without offering even its own examination (approval is not examination). The General Assembly, neither in committee nor plenary, debated any one sentence or even cited one phrase in its debates. It recommended that the Church adopt the confession without discussion of its content. This is not us at our best. General Assembly meetings seldom are. We, again, gave evidence of being an uncatechized Church, but now, most sadly, at the very moment we were to debate a standard of the Faith itself. Study materials are available from the Office of Theology, Worship, and Education. They invite you to use their materials. I invite you to accept their invitation.

Confessions of Faith, prior to adoption by the Church, are to be tested in a variety of contexts within the Church's life. Does it help you to teach the Faith to the Confirmands and to new believers? Does it help you to teach the Reformed Faith to your officers? Does it help as you preach, teach, and counsel? Does it sound certain sounds as the Church engages in mission and ministry? Does it advance the knowledge of the Faith in the disciple and help the elders to order the faithfulness of the congregation? Does it serve the shared life and

witness of the presbytery and the work of the General Assembly?

Not all these questions need be answered completely before adoption but they all need to be asked as the confession is invited into our common life. Belhar is just now being introduced. While some academics and ecumenists and others have a 20 year history with the document, the PC(USA) does not. Research Services tells us that 83% of ministers are unfamiliar with the Belhar Confession; 98% of elders and 99% of members are unfamiliar with it.

We are not ready to make an informed judgment on the Belhar. It has not been examined by us or tested by us. I do not recommend we vote Yes. Or No.

It has been recommended to us. Highly.

It is a word from the global south. That is very welcome. (I heard someone say at General Assembly, it would be the first word from Africa in our confessional documents. That is a failure to know the origin of the Nicene Creed, probably the Apostles' Creed, and a failure to recognize the profound reliance on Augustine and other African Church Fathers by the authors of all the Reformation creeds and the Westminster Standards.)

It is a word about racism. That alone recommends its study.

It is a word from a Reformed Church theologically divided in a nation long politically divided built by that Reformed Church, encouraging unity and righteousness in nation and church. Any part of that sentence sound timely?

Not to give the Belhar full consideration would miss an opportunity to engage in sustained committed conversation about the things that matter—the Faith and faithfulness. So let's begin. But let us not pretend we can finish before voting deadlines. The deadline for presbytery voting will not sufficiently permit either its examination or testing.

The Rev. Dr. Jerry Andrews is senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church, San Diego, CA. He is co-moderator of the Presbyterian Coalition.