

A Critique of the Belhar Confession

by Susan Cyre

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Presbyteries are being asked by the General Assembly to vote on whether the Belhar Confession should be added to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) constitution in the *Book of Confessions*. A majority vote by 2/3 of the 173 presbyteries is needed for the confession to be included.

The Belhar Confession, named after the town where the Confession was drafted, was adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa to denounce the sin of apartheid. The Presbyterian Church in our country also spoke forcefully to the sin of racism two decades earlier. The Confession of 1967, which is part of our *Book of Confessions*, confesses, “*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 down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary.*” (9.44) The Confession then goes on to list specific areas to be addressed such as housing, employment, and education.

Should the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) add the Belhar Confession from South Africa to our *Book of Confessions*? There are two reasons why the answer should be NO. First, although the Belhar spoke to racism in South Africa, the words of the Confession, as well as the understanding of some who interpret it, demonstrate that the Belhar Confession may be applied broadly to other issues. Second, the Belhar Confession posits a very different understanding of “unity” and “justice” than Scripture and our Confessions. Christian faith teaches that unity is a result of truth. In the Belhar truth is subordinated to unity.

The Belhar Confession Is Not Limited To The Sin of Racism

The Belhar Confession was written in response to apartheid, yet its major sections address “unity”

and “justice” with the sin of racism addressed briefly in section 3. The themes of unity and justice appropriately condemn the sinful “separation of people on a racial basis.” The language of Belhar, however, does not limit its application to the sin of racism.

Allen Boesak, one of the architects of Belhar, told members of his Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa in 2008 that the Belhar should be used to end discrimination against those who practice same-sex behavior. Boesak claimed, “Based on Belhar, the church should fully accept gay members, should perform gay marriage ceremonies and allow ministers in gay relationships to serve in the church.”¹ Although Boesak’s own church rejected his interpretation of the Belhar, the fact that he would see its potential for this purpose demonstrates that Belhar can be used in this expansive way.

Speaking to a group at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary this past April on the Belhar, Boesak told the group, “the demand for inclusivity goes well beyond the issue of race” to include “women, people with disabilities and those whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual.”²

There is evidence of an intent to apply the Belhar to same-sex behavior in the PCUSA. Cynthia Holder Rich, a member of the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns that initially brought the Belhar to the General Assembly acknowledged that the Belhar is being used to “press other issues.” She told a joint meeting of the PCUSA Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, the Advocacy Committee of Women’s Concerns, and the Advocacy Committee on Racial Ethnic Concerns that met in January 2010, “Theologians have used this document to press issues other than race....You may or may not know that that is part of the international conversation.... This document is about freedom. People of different sexual

orientations are not free and so this document could be used to free people.”³

The Reformed Church in America (RCA) is a Formula of Agreement partner with the PCUSA and has approved the Belhar. The RCA interprets the Belhar in their official study guide to go beyond racism “to all forms of exclusion” including same-sex behavior. The study guide uses the Belhar to apply to the Israel-Palestine conflict and always in a way that is pro-Palestinian. The RCA Commission on Christian Action has publicly said they use the Belhar in addressing issues before them that include: the farm bill, Sudanese refugees, the Iraq War, immigration, minimum wage increases and America’s embargo of Cuba.⁵

How will this expansive interpretation of unity be used in the church? The Rev. John Austin, of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City and member of the Special Committee that recommended to the GA that the Belhar be added to the Book of Confessions, said, “The church needs to be transformed by Belhar.”⁶ We should ask, since the church rejected racism more than 40 years ago, how will Belhar transform the church? What new teaching does Belhar confess that will transform the church?

Belhar Is In Conflict With Scripture and The Confessions

The Belhar Confession uses “unity” and ‘justice” differently than Scripture and the Confessions use them. The Belhar posits that since Christ’s work of reconciliation is completed, the church “must” manifest a visible unity. And “*anything* which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted” (italics mine). It then goes on to “reject any doctrine” which threatens this visible unity. In Belhar doctrine or the church’s witness to the truth is subordinated to “unity.” Scripture and the Confessions, however, view “unity” very differently. Scripture and the Confessions understand “unity” to be a result of accepting the truth that is revealed in Scripture and witnessed to by the doctrines of the church in the Confessions.

Jesus Christ as he is revealed in Scripture unites people from different races, genders and classes.

Paul writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The Galatians passage does not say that beliefs or behaviors do not matter. Rather it says that each person regardless of class, gender or race finds salvation in Christ alone. Later in Galatians 5, Paul gives a long list of “acts of this sinful nature” and concludes, “those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Clearly, while race, gender and class do not affect salvation, “acts of this sinful nature” can affect salvation. What individuals believe and therefore how they live matters to their salvation.

The Belhar appears to say that beliefs and behavior do not matter and should not threaten unity when it claims “*anything* which threatens this unity...must be resisted.” The rationale in the report sent to the General Assembly from the Special Committee on the Belhar Confession similarly states that *convictions* are subordinate to unity when it declares, “This confession expresses clearly our own church’s longing for unity across barriers we see in our own situation of different spiritual gifts, backgrounds, *convictions*, languages and cultures, both within our church and across denominational lines” (italics mine). Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 12:12ff that spiritual gifts should not divide us. The Galatians 3:28 passage would apply to languages, backgrounds and cultures. However, there are *convictions* that divide us. For example, some Presbyterians, even clergy, reject the sacrificial atonement of Christ or reject the clear words of Scripture on sexual behavior. Aren’t these among the important theological and moral teachings where what is true must divide from what is not true?

The Barmen Confession in our *Book of Confessions* was forged in response to Hitler’s imposition of his ideology on the church. In confessing Barmen those believers refused to subsume the revelation of Scripture to the German state’s ideology and thus they broke the unity of the German Evangelical Church, the state church, by forming the German Confessing Church. They confessed in Barmen, “*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 in 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 beside this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation" (8.11-12) Those believers refused to elevate "unity" over revealed truth.

The Preface to the Barmen declares, "In opposition to attempts to establish the unity of the German Evangelical Church by means of false doctrine.... the Confessional Synod insists that the unity of the Evangelical Churches in Germany can come only from the Word of God in faith through the Holy Spirit." (8.01)

The Second Helvetic Confession shows this relationship between truth and unity, "unity consists not in outward rites and ceremonies, but rather in the truth and unity of the catholic faith. The catholic faith is not given to us by human laws, but by the Holy Scriptures...."

In contrast to these confessions, the Belhar places unity above everything including revealed truth. The Belhar confesses, "we reject *any doctrine*, which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of *diversity* and in despair of reconciliation" (italics mine). Is this "diversity" related to sexual behavior? Or to beliefs about the nature and work of Christ, or to birth status like "Jew and Gentile, slave and free"? Belhar isn't clear.

Scripture and the Confessions are clear that false beliefs and sinful behavior cause disunity. It was the false priests and prophets that Jeremiah condemned who proclaimed "peace, peace" when there could be no peace because of Israel's idolatry and sinful behavior (Jer. 6:14). Jeremiah was

viewed by the false priests and prophets as the unity breaker. Ahab called Elijah the "troubler of Israel" because Elijah's condemnation of sin destroyed unity. And Jesus said he came not "to bring peace but a sword" (Matt.10:34). We should seek unity but it cannot be at the expense of truth. Scripture and the Confessions are clear that as long as sin continues in us, unity cannot be realized fully. To attempt to produce unity apart from truth, as the Belhar does, is to deny truth matters and to put "truth and falsehood on a level" which the *Book of Order* rightly calls "pernicious." Presbyteries should vote NO to including Belhar in the *Book of Confessions*.

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1. "Boesak quits 'anti-gay' church" by Neels Jackson, www.news24.com/New24/South_AfricaNew/0,,2-7-1442_2404899,00.html
 2. "Apartheid foe Boesak speaks to Louisville Presbyterians," by Peter Smith, Courier-Journal.com, April 26, 2010.
 3. "Committees support elevating Belhar to confessional status" by Carmen Fowler, The Layman, Posted Wednesday, January 27, 2010, www.layman.org/news.aspx?article=26703
 4. The Reformed Church in America Study Guide, www.rca.org/belhar; <http://images.rca.org/docs/aboutus/BelharGuideComplete.pdf>
 5. "Why Not Belhar?" by Kevin DeYoung, *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, January 2010 Essay; www.rca.org/Page.aspx?pid=6245
 6. Layman, January 27, 2010.

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