

Multiculturalism and Diversity

by Viola Larson

The crèche at Peace Presbyterian was made up of beautiful, ethnically diverse, wiggling, sometimes shy, images of the Christmas story. I sat, watching with my family, as the children performed their parts in this multicultural church on the southern outreaches of the Sacramento area. Here, there is no need to be concerned with a Christmas scene that denies ethnic possibilities or the diversity of that first Christmas story. Instead here diversity sings silent night, holy night.

Better still, in the church I was visiting that morning, the church of my daughter and her family, there is no need to be concerned with the truthfulness of the story told. The incarnation, God of very God, God coming in the unique human, Jesus Christ, is always the story told and lived.

I thought of this experience as I read the latest issue of *Horizons*, the Presbyterian Women's magazine. This particular edition, January/February 2009, is entitled "Multiculturalism & Diversity."

The Belhar Confession, Unity over Lordship

Teresa Chávez Saucedo writes about the Belhar Confession in her article, "Confessing Our Faith in the Twenty-first Century." The 218th General Assembly voted to "begin the process ... to consider amending the confessional documents of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to include the Belhar Confession."

The Belhar Confession is a confession adopted during the awful time of apartheid in South Africa. The various branches of the Dutch Reformed Church in that nation were divided along absolutized racial lines. The situation was truly sinful and called for a confessional remedy. The Belhar Confession was the answer to apartheid in the church in South Africa. However, there are some problems with the PC(USA) adopting this particular confession. But first, I will make some clarifications concerning the reasons listed for using this confession.

Chávez Saucedo states that Belhar would be the first confession in our Book of Confessions "originating outside of the United States or Europe," but this is not true. In fact all confessional churches who uphold the ecumenical creeds of Christendom subscribe to creeds and confessions written or developed in Africa and the Middle East.

The Nicene Creed was first agreed to in Nicaea in Bithynia which is now Turkey. It was later expanded and revised in Constantinople, also in modern Turkey. The Apostle's Creed was further developed from several originals during the Donatist controversy in Northern Africa.

In The Second Helvetic Confession in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions four synods are mentioned and affirmed. Not only are the Nicaea and Constantinople synods listed but also Ephesus and Chalcedon. The Definition of Chalcedon was formulated in Turkey.

Chávez Saucedo suggests that adopting this Confession "would be a powerful witness to our ecumenical ties to the global church at a time when the center of Christianity has shifted to the global south." However, as current events show, the witness called for by the global church is for the western church to faithfully live out its faith. The unfaithfulness of some churches in the west in sexual matters is of far more concern to the Southern Cone than Reformed Churches adopting Belhar.

Chávez Saucedá states that “more than any other confession, the Belhar focuses on the life of the church itself.” She then goes on to point toward the racism that was a “historical” crisis for the church in South Africa,” and to equate that crisis to racism in the United States. But, while there was a racial crisis in South Africa and there was a racial crisis in the United States during the sixties, in the United States, in the present, there is a far greater crisis looming for the church. That crisis circles around sexuality and faithfulness within the church. And this is just where Belhar is not helpful.

The whole issue in the South African churches was separation because of race and the lack of church unity this caused. Therefore the emphasis was on unity and the sinfulness of the absolutizing of “natural diversity” and the “separation of people.” Anything “which explicitly or implicitly” maintained “that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the Church” was rejected in the Belhar Confession.

Any such consideration was rejected on the grounds that the church must be in unity in Christ. However, although supposedly aligned with the Declaration of Barmen, Belhar only at the end states that Jesus Christ is Lord. Unlike Barmen, the Belhar Confession is grounded, not in the Lordship of Christ, but in Christian unity. But unity only exists because of the church’s obedience to Christ as Lord; therefore, Belhar falls flat with the present crisis in the mainline denominations in the United States.

With Belhar the church would listen to the voices of those in their church community rather than the voice of Christ. Therefore “all” absolutizing might be denied on the grounds of Christian unity. In the American mainline churches when the argument for the ordination of self-affirming gays and lesbians is based on an understanding that heterosexuality is an absolutizing of sexual standards the Belhar Confession is unacceptable and incomplete.

And in fact just recently one of the fathers of the Belhar Confession attempted to use it to gain acceptance of the ordination of practicing gays and lesbians. The [Banner](#), the magazine published by the Christian Reformed Church in North America, reports that “Allan Boesak, a church leader and former anti-apartheid activist, presented a lengthy report on homosexual members to his church, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, at its general synod Oct. 2 (2008). He dramatically insisted that the church’s Belhar Confession demands the defense of the full rights of gay members.”

The Banner further reported that “Presenting this report to the synod, Boesak told delegates that the Belhar Confession demands that they move in this way. The Belhar, he said, was never meant to be just an anti-apartheid document, but a document against discrimination of all kinds.” While the synod in Africa rejected the committee’s report, it is unclear how the Confession would be understood among those in the PC(USA) who are pushing for the ordination of self-affirming gays and lesbians. The Declaration of Barmen is a much stronger and more faithful confession for the PC(USA).

This article is excerpted from Larson's review of the January-February 2009 Horizons Magazine, featuring "Culturalism and Diversity," on the website of Voices of Orthodox Women: www.vow.org.