

Should the Belhar Confession be Included in the *Book of Confessions*?

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In this presentation, I will offer some brief considerations on: (1) the historical backdrop to the Belhar Confession; (2) the theological content of the Belhar Confession; and (3) whether the Belhar Confession should be added to the *Book of Confessions*. My central thesis is that Belhar calls the church to reformation.

By the end of our time together, I hope that you will be persuaded that Belhar makes a powerful statement that we Presbyterians must heed. At the same time, I hope that you will also be asking yourselves: Does Belhar speak specifically into the situation that we face today as North American Presbyterians? Does it call us into the specific kind of reformation that we need as we face a secular, consumption-driven North American church and society?

And here I still have my own questions and doubts, as much as I learn from the Belhar Confession. I will be interested in your reflections, because they will help me to clarify my own.

(1) Historical backdrop

Legal apartheid first arose in South Africa in the twentieth century (1948). This system of separating people on the basis of race and ethnicity was rooted, however, in theology—indeed, in a particular form of Reformed theology—that had developed much earlier in South Africa. It was a theology that had emerged out of some circles of white Afrikaners (settlers of Dutch descent, who had lived in South Africa several centuries, considered it their home, and ironically had suffered at times under British colonizers).

Elements of this theology might surprise us at first: It claimed, after all, to celebrate diversity. God had created different peoples with different gifts and callings, South Africa, it was argued, had four major people groups: Whites (European descent); Indians (Asian descent); Blacks (indigenous peoples); and Coloreds (people of mixed racial ancestry). According to this version of Reformed theology, each of these people groups had to be preserved and protected, so that it could live out its specific God-given purpose.

In practice, however, what was promoted as a celebration of diversity was deeply distorted theologically. It came to mean legal separation of peoples in a way that guaranteed the social power and privilege of the white Afrikaners in relation to the other groups. Housing was segregated, as was schooling and medical care.

Tragically, the Dutch Reformed Church also divided itself into four churches based on these four people groups. These four churches did not worship together. They did not even receive communion together. And even though the churches, including the white church, did not have an entirely good conscience about this segregation, they long acquiesced in it.

In 1982, an ecumenical organization, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, under the leadership of South African Allan Boesak, declared apartheid a heresy and suspended the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa from membership. This action emboldened the colored church in South Africa, which later that year at its annual synod at Belhar, South Africa, adopted a draft confession composed by Prof. Dirkie Smit, a white Afrikaner. The colored church formally adopted this confession, the Belhar Confession, in 1986.

(2) Theology

The Belhar Confession raises a voice of protest against apartheid in both church and society. It sees apartheid as violating the gospel itself. Belhar's "no" to apartheid is firmly rooted in its "yes" to the gospel, and therefore the confession has, above all, a tone of affirmation, rather than being scolding or narrowly judgmental (see the accompanying letter to the confession). The phrase that resounds in Belhar again and again is, "We believe." And only because "We believe" do we also "reject" anything that opposes the gospel.

Belhar makes five major affirmations. Two are bookends to the confession as a whole: a short introduction that affirms the Triune God's calling the church into existence, and a short conclusion that affirms God's provision for the church even in times of legal or social persecution.

The confession's three central affirmations are developed more extensively. Let us take a closer look at each of them.

Part 2. The church as the reconciled community

It is notable that Belhar begins not with a word to society in general, but rather with a specific word to the church. And it begins not as a word to Christians as individual believers, but rather as a word to Christians as a believing community.

Moreover, Belhar is a word to the church not about what it should do to change society, but rather about what it should do to be true to its own identity. Belhar declares that God has reconciled us, the members of the church, to himself and to each other in Jesus Christ (the indicative). Therefore, be who you really are as the church (the imperative). Live out the new reality of your life in Jesus Christ.

I want to lift up one sentence of Part Two in particular: We believe “that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment.”

We Americans are aware of the rapidly growing diversity of American society. We increasingly encounter new immigrants from around the world, an ever-widening range of lifestyles, and a growing number of religious and spiritual options. We sometimes welcome this diversity, and we sometimes worry about it or even feel threatened by it.

Notice that Belhar neither celebrates diversity nor rejects it. Rather, it affirms that diversity in the church is good only to the extent that it enables us to serve each other in Christian love, to reach out to each other, and to deepen communion with each other. Diversity is not a good in and of itself, but neither is it inherently threatening. Rather, diversity is true, divinely-willed diversity when it becomes an opportunity for us to share our lives with each other out of our different backgrounds and experiences.

Part 3. The gospel as the proclamation of reconciliation

Only after speaking to the church about its identity as the reconciled community does Belhar turn to the question of the church’s message to the world. It is as though Belhar is saying: Only if we first take seriously how we live with each other in the church can we then proclaim the gospel with authenticity and conviction.

So, if we fight and squabble among ourselves, our words about God’s reconciling power will ring hollow. If we divide into different parties and factions, our words about

new life in Christ will be dishonest. If we practice oppression and hatred within the church, our words about love and communion will be hypocritical.

But if, on the contrary, God's reconciling power is evident in our midst, our message to the world will be genuine, and it will be nothing less than this: Discover a new way of life together. Discover that there is a way beyond irreconciliation and hatred, a way beyond bitterness and enmity.

Let me lift up again one phrase in particular: the church "can open new possibilities of life for society and the world."

As North American Christians, we sometimes wonder what if anything we should say about the litigious, contentious society in which we live. Belhar gives us new confidence that the gospel finds ways beyond the intractable political impasses of our day. Where liberals and conservatives are unable to agree, where no compromise seems possible (people in D.C. know about gridlock!), Christians can be certain that God nevertheless calls us to take another look and to see new possibilities that we have not seen before. Sometimes it is not that one side is right and the other is wrong, but rather that God is calling us to discover possibilities beyond the ones already on the table.

Christians can be sure that God is always guiding different sides to discover new possibilities for life together that they never could have imagined just on their own.

Part 4. God as the Lord of justice

Now, finally, Belhar turns to the God who calls the church into being. Traditional Reformation confessions begin with the doctrine of God and end with the doctrine of the church. Belhar reverses the order: It begins with the church, but then affirms that the

church can be the church only as it knows the living God. Either way of ordering a confession is possible—what matters is that one ultimately leads to the other.

Again, let me refer to a key phrase: the church “must stand where the Lord stands.” Delving deeply into the Scriptures, Belhar reminds us that God stands on the side of the oppressed, and so must the church.

Unlike some of the documents in our *Book of Confessions*, Belhar is not a case of the powerful speaking to themselves about what is right or wrong. Rather, Belhar was born as a desperate cry from powerless South Africans to powerful South Africans. Belhar therefore challenges us as North American Presbyterians also to listen to Christians in other places who cry out to us, the world’s privileged and powerful, out of their powerlessness.

But notice, too, that Belhar does not define justice in the terms that we North Americans most often use. It does not speak first of all of fairness, or respect for each other’s rights, or equal opportunity. Belhar certainly assumes all of these things, but it insists that justice, from a biblical perspective, is something more: Justice is also a way of life in community where we share our very lives with each other. Justice means reconciliation. Justice is characterized by people reaching out to each other, forgiving each other, and building each other up.

(3) Should the Belhar Confession be added to the *Book of Confessions*?

Just as Belhar spoke powerfully into its own time and place, it clearly speaks a word to the church in other times and places. It issues a prophetic challenge also to us as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today.

- Will we live as a reconciled community despite the real tensions and disagreements in our denomination?
- Will we look for new possibilities for American society to overcome political impasses between blacks and whites, citizens and immigrants, rich and poor, or even the Tea Party and the Move On organization?
- Will we listen to the voices of Christians who call out to us from places of powerlessness, and will we share our lives with them and allow them to share their lives with us?

Most of us would say that we certainly have good intentions to do all of these things, and one could therefore argue that adopting the Belhar Confession in the *Book of Confessions* would confirm our good intentions.

But confessions are not just about us and our good intentions. Rather, the question before us is whether the Belhar Confession is the specific word that God gives us to confess in our time and place, just as colored South Africans believed that they must confess it in the 1980s.

There is no question that we must study Belhar and learn from it, but it is not as clear to me whether God is asking us to speak Belhar specifically in response to our time and place. I will not try to resolve this question right now but refer you instead to an article that I recently wrote for the *Presbyterian Outlook*, in which I said that the church had at least three options: (1) yes, adopt Belhar as the word God has given us here and now; (2) no, do not adopt Belhar, because God has given us a different word to confess (even though we can and must learn from Belhar); or (3) wait and study Belhar further, because we do not yet know whether to say yes or no.

I cannot and should not try to answer this question for you, about which of these options is right. Thank goodness that we discern God's will for us together. We need each other's questions and insights. We need to listen to each other, even as we seek to listen to God. Such is the spirit of Belhar itself.

But, in conclusion, I will say this: What is much more important than adopting or not adopting Belhar is whether we will live by Belhar. It would be the greatest injustice to Belhar itself if we adopted it but did not allow it to change us.

To put it as sharply as possible: We should only adopt the Belhar Confession if we are ready to repent of our sins as a divided, contentious Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and therefore ready to be freed into deeper communion with each other.

I am not sure that we are there yet, but I am glad that Belhar puts the question squarely before us.