

Overture to the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church of North America March, 2009

Classis Pacific Northwest overtures Synod 2009 to endorse the recommendation of the Interchurch Relations Committee to accept the Belhar Confession as a doctrinal standard of the CRCNA on par with the historic three forms of unity; and urges Synod to act this year to recommend to Synod 2012 the adoption of the Belhar as a fourth confession of our denomination.

Background on the Reformed Confessional Tradition

1. During the first and second century of its existence the leaders of the Reformed church were alert to the significant social and spiritual issues that affected the lives of its new constituency and the culture in which it functioned. Once these issues were identified, organized guidance was developed and given, directing believers to the Scriptures that showed the way forward for true followers of Christ.
2. This practice began in the 16th century with the formulation and adoption of our three basic confessions, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt. The issues addressed by each of these confessions respectively were, persecution by the Roman government, the need for instruction for the newly established community of Reformed believers, and serious intra-church controversy over the doctrines of Arminianism.
3. Unfortunately this practice of confession development lay dormant until 1982 when leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in South Africa prepared the Belhar Confession. Their people were struggling mightily under horrible conditions of injustice, racism, conflict and disunity both in the church and in the contemporary world. Like a laser beam, Belhar's words focus on relevant Scripture giving direction and comfort for the conditions they faced then and, indeed, face now as well. A history of the development of Belhar in the South African Apartheid context is laid out in the 2009 IRC report to Synod.

Reformed Response to the South African Initiative

1. Since its development in 1982 it has been adopted by the ("Colored"¹) DRMC, the ("Black") Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA), and, when these two merged it was adopted by their successor, the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa (URCSA) in 1994.
2. Both world-wide associations of Reformed denominations, the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC,) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) have encouraged consideration of Belhar by the Reformed community.

¹ This reference to mixed race people, although offensive to many in our culture, is more common and has been more acceptable in South African circles.

3. Belhar has been adopted by two European Reformed denominations, the Evangelical Reformed Church of Germany, and the United Protestant Church of Belgium.

4. In North America, the Belhar has been adopted by the Seattle First Christian Reformed Church and is now under consideration by the three mainstream Reformed communities, the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA.) The RCA and the CRCNA Synods will be presented with recommendations to adopt Belhar in 2009, and the PCUSA will address it in 2010.

A detailed report of the CRCNA Interchurch Relations Committee to Synod, 2009, provides historical background, traces the CRCNA 27 year history of consideration of Belhar, provides rational and grounds for its endorsement, and recommends Synod adoption in 2009 with subsequent reaffirmation at Synod 2012.

Belhar Confession Relevance to 21st Century North America

It is an unfortunate misconception that Belhar deals only with the issue of racism and that its relevance is largely restricted to the church setting in South Africa. Belhar's major issues are not only injustice, of which racism is a significant part, but also reconciliation and unity. For South Africans as well as for us, Belhar gives guidance for our relationships and actions within the church and also how Christ calls us to function as salt and light in the world beyond the church.

As Reformed North Americans we have experienced and do experience our own racism as well as a variety of other injustices. Both the Reformed church and the world around us have been fractured by conflict and disunity. A look at South African history for us is in many ways a look in the mirror. Consider the ways. Both have:

- * national historical roots in white colonialism.
- * a significantly Dutch heritage.
- * a traditional belief that our nation is the apple of God's eye.
- * a strong reformed theology based on the three historical confessions.
- * a covenantal orientation.
- * members who have justified racism through Scriptural interpretation.
- * subjugated and relocated native populations.
- * engaged in slavery for people of color.
- * admitted to specific acts of racism.
- * a sad history of church conflicts, fractures, and splits.

A serious focus on the Scriptural bases for Belhar reveals a greater calling for the Christian community than that which arises out of the injustice of racism within our own ranks. How many other types of injustice are there that affect fellow believers but also literally billions of others in the world around us? Belhar is a call to Christians and the church to be salt and light

and to lead in addressing injustices in areas such as poverty, hunger, disease, the environment, conflict resolution, and human rights to name but a few. Beyond injustice is the desperate need for reconciliation and unity in the church and among people everywhere.

In this technologically advanced world these injustices, disputations and conflicts are in our face at every turn. They are no longer in some other neighborhood, or some far removed corner of the world, they are in our living rooms. Everyone in the world is now our neighbor and there is desperate need of healing. Belhar spotlights the Scripture which calls the Christian, the church, to show the way. It is time for the CRCNA to follow our leaders' call to adopt this confession and implement it in our lives now.

Grounds

1. It is the task of Synod to adopt the creeds and confessions of the church (Church Order, Art, 47.)
2. The Belhar Confession has been studied by leaders in our Denomination and other Reformed communities for some 27 years and, in each case, has been determined to be Biblical and consistent with our other Reformed confessions and the previous actions of Synod.
3. There is little mention in the classical confessions of the central Biblical principle of God's justice and care for the poor and suffering. The Belhar fills this gap in the standard confessions.
4. The unity of the church, reconciliation of people in Christ, and God's justice and care of the suffering and poor are fundamental biblical principles that lie at the core of the Reformed faith.
5. The issues addressed by the Belhar Confession, Christian unity, reconciliation, injustice and racism are as relevant for the Reformed Church in North America and the world today as they were for the Reformed churches in South Africa under apartheid. Church splits continue, proliferating new denominations, often pitting brother against brother. The evils of racism following centuries of slavery, discrimination and abuse of minorities linger in most facets of North American society. Growing poverty and injustice are major worldwide issues affecting billions of people in nations around the globe.
6. There is historical precedent for the church to assertively move forward to inform and enlighten its constituency regarding the response required of Christians to the significant contemporary issues it faces.
7. In our reluctance to move forward from our attitude of awe and respect for traditional confessional formulations the church must not avoid its responsibility to lead as Christians struggle with the understanding and application of the Scriptures to a Christian way of life in the world. We diminish ourselves and the power of the Holy Spirit if we act as though confessional formulation must end with Guido de Bres or the delegates to Dordrecht.

8. Moving forward with the discussion and adoption of Belhar would provide a dramatic means, a practical answer to the longstanding search of the CRC and its component parts to address the issues of church unity, racism, discrimination and injustice. The last 25 editions of the Acts of Synod are replete with evidence of the quest by Synod and its various committees to find ways to move our people to bring salt and light to these contemporary issues.

9. The Belhar Confession is the only confession the global church has from Africa and the southern hemisphere.

10. Moving forward to address Belhar in cooperation with the RCA, provides an unprecedented opportunity to accomplish the objectives outlined over the past several years by Synods of both denominations to move toward unity and reconciliation, and cooperative efforts in ministry.

11. World crises of poverty, economic injustice, racism, and conflict, coupled with the explosion of technological advancement, provide urgency in the church's attention to these issues. Never in history has there been greater evidence of need for Christians to demonstrate their faith, to love their neighbor and to bring the Kingdom of Jesus into our global community. We can put this off no longer.