

The Belhar Confession

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Sources: PC(USA); Presbytery of Detroit, Presbytery of Winnebago

WHY A NEW CONFESSION?

The 216th General Assembly (2004) called upon Presbyterians to confront the sin of racism in our history and in our midst. It urged Presbyteries and congregations to study the Belhar confession as a way to deepen commitment to dealing with racism and strengthen our unity. Study materials were developed and placed on the web:

<http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/confession/belharstudyguide.pdf>

Confessions arise out of compelling issues in a specific time and place which require the church to speak, interpreting the gospel in light of such issues, and equipping the church to be and to do what it believes. In so doing, the church reforms itself and bears public witness to the truthfulness of the gospel.

Because of the commonality of the expressions of human sinfulness across time and geographic space, and because of the truthfulness of the Word of God across time and geographic space, the Reformed Tradition believes that generations can witness to one another across time and geographic distance.

HOW DOES THIS HAPPEN?

To adopt a new confession requires

- 2/3rds vote of two consecutive General Assemblies
- Ratification by 2/3rds of the 173 Presbyteries between the two GA votes

WHY THIS CONFESSION?

- The Belhar Confession has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. It does not, however, mention apartheid, but rather seeks to address a far wider context.
- The Dutch Reformed Mission Church first drafted this “outcry of faith” and “call for faithfulness and repentance” in 1982, taking a lead in declaring that apartheid threatened the truth of the gospel. That church formally adopted it in 1986.
- Issues addressed:
 - Unity of the church and the unity among all people
 - Reconciliation within the church
 - God’s justice

WHAT DOES IT SAY *WE BELIEVE*? (excerpts from Article 1 and 2):

We believe in the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit.

Thus, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

We believe that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another; that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;

We believe that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted.

WHO DOES IT SAY *WE ARE*? (excerpts from Article 2 and 3):

We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.

that God's life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;

that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; ...

together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ; that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together, together serve God in this world;

WHAT DOES IT SAY *WE ARE SENT INTO THE WORLD TO DO*? (excerpts from Articles 4 and 5)

We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged; that God calls the church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;

that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice,

that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

WHAT ARE THE ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST including the Belhar Confession in Part I of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (our Book of Confessions)?

Arguments for adoption:

- 1) Belhar powerfully interprets the gospel around three central biblical and confessional terms of our Reformed tradition: unity, reconciliation, and justice.
- 2) Belhar is a powerful advocate of God's salvation at work in and through the church for the sake of the world and the healing of the cosmos.
- 3) The church has a special need to be instructed on the continuing dangers of violence and warfare, of the division between the rich and the poor, and between those of differing races, tribes, and peoples.
- 4) The unity of the church is our common calling in Christ. The church's unity is its mission.
- 5) Adopting Belhar would be a declaration of solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the Reformed tradition.
- 6) Adopting Belhar would announce to the Church in the world our commitment as Presbyterians to unity, reconciliation and justice, not just in our own nation, but also in the world.

Arguments against adoption:

- 1) Not timely: The apartheid it addressed in South Africa no longer exists.
- 2) Redundancy: The PCUSA has spoken clearly on racism in the Confession of 1967, which is already included in the Book of Confessions. The Belhar Confession is redundant.
- 3) A waste of resources to "talk" rather than "do": The church today desires to bring reconciliation through Christ to the world by doing the work of releasing the captives, bringing sight to the blind and binding up the wounded. Spending the church's time and resources to debate an outdated, 20 year old document – written to address apartheid in Africa – is wasteful.
- 4) Liberation Theology: The concern is that there are phrases in the Confession of Belhar, written from a Liberation Theology perspective, that could be used by other groups [read: LGBT] that consider themselves oppressed, to bolster their agendas in the church.
- 5) Failure to focus the Confession on the Lordship of Christ: The Belhar Confession emphasizes the unity of the Church, which is not a confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, but a confession about what the Church is or must do. Unity is not necessarily tied to Christ's Lordship, since unity may be achieved by other means.
- 6) The argument is that because unity is the main point of the Belhar Confession others have insisted on using it for issues that are "unbiblical." One of the contributors to Belhar, Allan Boesak, has sought to use it as a means to gain ordination for practicing homosexuals.
- 7) Speakers for the Reformed Church in America have suggested using the Confession as a solution for what they perceive as racism on the part of Israel. As one South African put it "If there is one situation in this world that contextually fits the antiapartheid struggle and its dynamics, for which the Belhar Confession was written, it must be the Palestinian situation, currently."
- 8) The issue of pluralism: At several places in the confession the word "church" is replaced by another category called "the People of God." The Belhar Confession uses this term to describe the church. The question has been posed: "Is it possible to expand this "People of God" terminology to

encompass the 'peoples of God,' including in this Jews and Muslims? And by this to provide a monotheistic platform for unity?"

Resources for arguments against Belhar: Advisory prepared by Sue Cyre, Theology Matters, May 2008