

## A Response to Paul Fries

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In responding to Dr. Fries' paper on the Belhar Confession, I must start by fully embracing Dr. Fries' decision to "slightly modify the title." "Why confess," "why actively speak," is a question that ensures that the conversation around the Belhar will not be about adding a document for the sake of accepting a gift from the church of South Africa, but rather about adding a confessional document because it is something we will *do*, something that we will let impact our life together.

As long as we are confessing, I must confess that I rarely confess our confessions that are *status confessionis*—I rarely speak them. Therefore I rarely actualize their influence in my individual life or in my church. Yes, I hold them to be faithful and historic, but I rarely engage them to the point of actually speaking them with my mouth—at least more than Heidelberg Q and A #1. I think Dr. Fries is right that until they are spoken, they are not actualized. As much as there are aspects of the Canons of Dort that make me writhe with discomfort, when spoken it actualized aspects of God's initiative in the saving act that we Reformed Christians hold as essential. My church is probably the lesser for this un-actualization of the Canons of the Synod of Dort.

There are other documents in our Reformed Church satchel, which do seem to me to be more often actualized. While "Our Song of Hope," never made it to the distinction of *status confessionis*, it has been my experience, in 12 short years of involvement in the RCA, that it is more utilized than any of our confessions other than the Heidelberg Catechism. I have frequently heard it read in worship, quoted in sermons, and I've sung it in various classical and congregational settings. It is spoken, and therefore it actualizes our humanity and identity as Reformed Christians. Also, I would argue, some denominational papers, on various issues, have risen to the top of denominational discussion and life, due to the topic they address and their particular relevance for the moment. The 1978 paper on homosexuality and the "Crucified One Is Lord" paper are two documents that seem to be "speaking" in the church at this time and in this place—actualizing, to some degree or another, our humanity. These are not papers of *status confessionis*, but as they are spoken, and spoken of, in that dynamic they form and reform us. Dr. Fries is right to suggest that "confessing" is in many ways weightier than simply making something a "confessional document."

The question then that I have for the church in response to Dr. Fries' paper is, "Are we ready to do the weightiest thing of all, which would be to regard the

Belhar Confession as *status confessionis* and then confess it!" Dr. Fries says it is unlikely, and I think that we should take his warning seriously. He longs for this confession to take hold and reform us, but he fears we will "archive it." As wrong as it is to archive any confession of the church, it seems especially wrong to "archive" a confession that rose up out of a struggle for human rights and dignity.

We need to be forthright that this confession is significant, and that it makes bold claims about the justice of God and the kingdom of God unfolding among us. As a confession about justice, it is a confession that will constantly be guiding us into uncharted waters, as new injustices arise and as old injustices are uncovered. When we consider the Belhar Confession we need look directly at the kind of real life justice issues it will call us to address, and we need to let the Belhar point its prophetic voice at us, its confessors – that we might confess our sins, before confessing with our lips this bold proclamation.

Are we ready to be in dialogue around the Belhar and what it means for the Palestinian and Israeli conflict? Are we ready to be in dialogue around the Belhar and to consider what it means for this war in Iraq that America continues to wage? Are we ready to be in dialogue around the Belhar and to consider what it means about global economics, immigration rights, and green house gas emissions? Are we ready to be in dialogue around the Belhar and consider what it means for abortion, for social welfare, for tax cuts for the wealthy? Are we ready to, as the Belhar says, "stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, righteousness like an ever flowing stream." If not, I'm not sure we're ready to make this *status confessionis*.

Maybe more challenging than the "justice of God," third movement of the Belhar, is the first movement, "the unity of the church." What is rejected in "unity of the church" is any doctrine which explicitly or implicitly maintains that "descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church." There are clauses and stances now in our life together as a Reformed Church in America that sometimes explicitly, and often implicitly, imply that human and social factors are to be a consideration in determining membership of the church. If we don't address in our polity, statements that limit some humans based on gender, sexual orientation or any other human or social factor, I don't know if we're ready for the Belhar Confession.

The Belhar Confession calls for real unity, not a compromised unity. In fact, the confession itself was presented for years, says our Orange Book of 2005, to a “mother church that did not want to listen.”

Dr. Fries reminded us that this confession comes as an invitation. I would suggest that we consider ourselves being “invited to be confronted by its message,” rather than simply “invited to add it to our list of confessions.” We, like the mother church in South Africa, might need to be confronted for a while, before we are ready to listen to it.

Dr. Fries is right, this is a weighty confession, and it becomes weightier still when we speak it. I would hope that the process for acceptance of the Belhar be long and drawn out, with regular forums and paper presentations about its implications for pressing social issues. For the aspect of the gospel message spoken in the Belhar confession is a message about the kingdom of God breaking in upon the earth. It’s a confession about how, those who recognize God’s inbreaking kingdom will participate, with God, in the work of unity, reconciliation and justice.