

Response to Douglas Fromm

By Gregg Mast

It is my privilege to express deep gratitude to Douglas Fromm for his excellent summary of the South African context of the Belhar Confession. He has provided us with not only a great deal of historical information, but with some cogent arguments for the inclusion of the Belhar in our own confessional identity. The conversation about the status of the Belhar in the Reformed Church in America (RCA) should begin with this question: What does the Belhar Confession have to do with us?

Allow me to suggest two responses. First, at the baptismal font, each newly baptized person is called to confess Christ. The words of the liturgy mandate that the minister speak the following words after the action of baptizing: “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only King of the Church, this child of God is now received into the visible membership of the holy catholic Church, *engaged to confess the faith of Christ*, and to be God’s faithful servant until life’s end.” From our earliest days, individual Christians and the church have been called to confess Christ, and so our consideration of the Belhar as a confessional document is one that grows out of our baptismal identity.

Second, the initial question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism remind us that we belong body and soul to our faithful savior Jesus Christ. Again, it is clear from this confession that has inspired so much piety and affection among us, that we not only belong to Christ, but also to each other; that our belonging is not only an issue of the mind or soul, but also the body, with all it feels and experiences. When one suffers, we all suffer; and when one rejoices, all rejoice. The organic unity of the church whispers to us that the painful experience of the South African Church that gave birth to the Belhar is our experience as well.

Fromm emphasizes this sense of belonging when he remarks: “Though their histories are quite different, the Reformed Church in America and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa share a common heritage; both are heirs of the Protestant Reformed Church in the Netherlands; we are related; we are family.” Fromm then goes on to observe that “the Reformed Church in America was planted and grew in the context of political, economic, and religious freedom in North America.” While this at first glance may have appeared to be true at least for the Europeans who joined the RCA, it clearly was not. Dutch and French immigrants as well as African and Caribbean slaves were all tainted by a lack of freedom that remains to this very day. Fromm is quick to

acknowledge exactly this when he describes the effects of racism on our cultural and ecclesiastical life.

In a very real sense the South African and North American experience have been remarkably and tragically similar. We all have lived with the demonic separation of the races. The denigration of people of color in our churches means the denigration of all people. In 1978, when I returned from a year of living in South Africa, I was invited often to describe the terrible injustice and ugly racism of apartheid. I inevitably began my talks with a letter which the audience assumed came from some racist South African preacher. Instead it was a letter by Bob Jones, III, who was at that time the president of Bob Jones University. It was a letter he had written to Senator Weicker of Connecticut about the issues of interracial dating and marriage. In part the letter reads:

We believe in regard to the races that the Bible in its entirety clearly indicates that God has separated people for his own good purpose. He has erected barriers between the nations – not only land and sea barriers but also ethnic, cultural and language barriers. God has made people different one from another and intends for those differences to remain.

In Biblical history, any effort to bring men together in oneness was judged and cursed by God. He wants the nations to remain segregated one from another. Any violation of God's original purpose manifests insubordination to him and no Christian has any business being involved in such practice.

It is clear from this quote from Jones, and more importantly from our own experience, that racism remains a most profound wound in the American body politic. The crucible of oppression in which the RCA and all American denominations were born remains not a legacy of freedom but of enslavement that scars our souls and experience to this very day. Perhaps not surprisingly, few RCA members would speak the words of Bob Jones, but there remain many who live out of his sense that God intends for races to live separate, and thus never equal, lives. Tragically, the South African experience of apartheid is very much our own.

If one agrees that the Belhar Confession has something to do with us who have been called into the Reformed Church in America, then the more specific question of our time together is whether the Belhar should become for us a confession on similar or equal footing to the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dort.

This question has been made more difficult, or at least more complicated, in the past decade by our entrance into the Formula of Agreement. This new ecumenical relationship has placed us in a dynamic and important relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church, as well as the Presbyterian Church and the United Church of Christ. What would it mean for one of the members of the Formula to adopt unilaterally a new confession that was not present when the formula was enacted in 1997? And if this question is a legitimate concern, will it lead the RCA to imagine a process of reception that will include not only internal conversation, but a dialogue that will encourage our ecumenical partners to participate as well? In other words, when the question is asked, what does the Belhar have to do with us, who are the “us”?

I would argue that the “us” includes not only our partners in the Formula of Agreement, but also our partners in the war on racism in the North American context. How would it be possible for the RCA to newly confess a commitment to reconciliation if we did not include those who have suffered most publicly from the sin of racism? It is for this reason that I would suggest that the process of reception for the Belhar embrace an intentional decade of conversation. While some may find such a proposal an attempt to thwart the process, I would argue that one of the significant gifts the Belhar can bring to the RCA is the opportunity to face our demons together. The prolongation of the process would provide the RCA with the time to address specifically what the Belhar is calling us not only to say, but to do, in our context. Indeed, I would suggest that we honor the Belhar and those who composed it with their hearts and at times with their blood, when we will not too easily speak the words that have come to us from the cross of South African apartheid. We honor the Belhar most eloquently when we are ready to pick up our own crosses and follow the one who leads us toward a life of hope and peace.