

Seeking a Contextual “Cry From the Heart of Faith:” The Belhar Confession and Race in the U.S.

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At its 2007 General Synod meeting, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) acted to provisionally adopt the Belhar Confession for a two-year period of study and discernment.¹ If the General Synod in 2009 moves to adopt the Belhar, it will become one of the confessional standards of the denomination, added to the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort, all of which originated in Europe during the Reformation era.

Clearly, there is much to recommend this move. It would have a significant and positive effect on international ecumenical relationships, particularly within the Reformed family of churches. Raising the main theological themes of the Belhar – unity, reconciliation, and justice – to the level of a confessional standard would bring needed theological attention to important practical problems for the church in the world today. Adopting a confession that has come out of the southern hemisphere, out of the African continent, would have symbolic significance for the relationship of the RCA to the world church.² And finally the move would serve to advance the cause of reconciliation between persons of diverse racial backgrounds in its own context – a central goal of the RCA during the last eight years.³

But the move under consideration also raises a number of complex questions. These concern the fundamental meaning of a confession, the right time in which to adopt one, the translation of a confession from one context into another, and the actual content of a confession. These questions continue to stimulate both leaders and members of the RCA to think through what it means to be a confessional church; or, perhaps more precisely, what it might mean for their confessional church to adopt a new confession that has come out of another church in another time and place. In this article, I intend to propose ways to think through this decision by raising these questions anew. First, I investigate the original South African context out of which the Belhar Confession emerged. I then discuss the applicability of the Belhar to the U.S. context in which most members of the RCA live out their lives of Christian discipleship. In this connection, I pose to the RCA the questions, “why a new confession now?” and “why the Belhar?” – questions which provoke the need for sustained reflection and thoughtful answers at this time. My ultimate aim in this article is to point out possible paths forward, as the RCA continues its period of study and discernment.

The Emergence of the Belhar Confession: Response to Transgressions of Missions and State

The Belhar Confession arose out of a context of juxtaposed errors in ideology, theology, and missiology, all of which had resulted in massive violence, bloodshed, and the ostracizing of South Africa on the world stage. These errors had also resulted in an extreme policy of state-mandated white privilege, the aftermath of which continues to be felt today.⁴ The term used to refer to this policy was “apartheid,” an Afrikaans word that emerged to replace or discourage use of the word “segregation,” a word which seemed too active, according to Alan Paton.⁵ Apartheid means apart-ness or apart-hood.⁶ Outside of South Africa, apartheid was a term identified with hatred and became the foundation of race warfare, as well as the basis for feelings of superiority for those whose countries had not legally mandated a structure of formal race separation.

But it is important for this discussion to remember that the Belhar did not emerge only in a context in which apartheid was practiced and a multitude of laws and structures were enacted and constructed in order to keep people in their appointed places. The Dutch Reformed Church had been engaged in missionary activity for more than one hundred years before the Belhar appeared in 1982. Some of the strategies and foundational beliefs upholding the mission efforts of the Dutch Reformed Church fed directly into the issues that Belhar’s authors rejected in their confession.

To explain and interpret these efforts, C.J. Botha helpfully outlines the history of the formation of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC).⁷ The DRMC, with the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA), were born of mission programs of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRC). The history of and reasons for their forming predate the imposition of apartheid (1948), but the ecclesial and missiological structures they inherited from the DRC helped uphold and maintain the policy. Because the missiological strategies and operative belief stance of the DRC called for separate churches to be formed for “blacks” (DRCA), “coloureds” (DRMC) and Indians (RCA), the DRC helped to sustain the state policy of separation, even among Christians.

Botha names the controlling tendencies of the DRC over the life, ministry, and governance of the DRMC as a particular source of conflict.⁸ Not only state-sponsored racial separation and de facto baptism of white privilege but also fundamental questions of church polity lay behind the arising of the situation that brought forth the “cry from the heart”⁹ of faith that became the Belhar Confession. Central issues discussed and debated at the Synod of Belhar

concerned who was authorized to call a meeting of the synod of a church and what role white missionary pastors serving in the DRMC, while holding membership in the DRC, could legitimately play. As Botha notes, the Church Order of Dort, when it stipulated that “no church will dominate other churches, no minister other ministers, no elder or deacon other elders or deacons,”¹⁰ showed the error in the position that a committee of one synod could veto the decisions of another. Yet this was exactly the situation in which the DRMC continued to find itself in its relationship with the DRC. One church—a white church in a missionary relationship with a “coloured” church—was dominating another. In this regard, the experience of the DRMC had much in common with many African churches founded during the height of the nineteenth century missionary era.

The Issue of Apartheid

Apart from the broad and multi-layered history in Africa of the domination of black mission churches by white parent churches, the specific issue named as grounds for a *status confessionis* at the Synod of Belhar in 1982 was the policy of apartheid. More precisely, the issue was how that state policy was both upheld and maintained by the church, and how it impacted the ministry and witness of the church. The decision of the DRMC to name apartheid as grounds for a *status confessionis* in October 1982 followed a decision of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in August of that year to make the same claim.¹¹ A *status confessionis* existed in South Africa for the church because the church had come to believe that “the very essence of the Church and the credibility of the gospel itself were threatened [and] everything was indeed at stake.”¹² In explaining both historic situations where a *status confessionis* had emerged and the situation confronting the church in South Africa in the 1980s, D.J. Smit gives the following definition:

expressing *status confessionis* means that a Christian, a group of Christians, a church, or a group of churches are of the opinion that a situation has developed, a moment of truth has dawned, in which nothing less than the gospel itself, their most fundamental confession concerning the Christian gospel itself, is at stake, so that they feel compelled to witness and act over against this threat.¹³

Smit further adds that such a moment is “consequently never calculated or planned [and] in one sense it surprises all those concerned.”¹⁴

The Urgency of the Hour

Many who have commented on the Belhar and the circumstances in which it was written have noted the issue of timing. The letter that accompanies the Belhar names the situation of apartheid as the cause of the “cry from the heart” of faith, and notes the “intense need for liberation” at that particular point in time.¹⁵ Addressing the RCA General Synod meeting in 2004, Christo Lombard of Namibia spoke of the moment when the Belhar emerged as “*kairos*”¹⁶ and referred to the document as “forced from our hearts and lips and lives by desperate circumstances,” which allowed only those involved to speak of the moment and the Belhar “passionately.”¹⁷ Talking of the arising of a *status confessionis*, Smit observes that people who understand “the seriousness of confession” come to know that “an hour has struck from on high in which something needs to be said.”¹⁸

The issue of timing, of the specific moment that calls for confessing, is clearly important. P.J.J.S. Els notes that “the truth about God is never as vital as in the hour of crisis.”¹⁹ There are moments when the times call for the church to take a stand. Two key twentieth century events – the Holocaust in Europe and apartheid in southern Africa – are prime examples. These have often been compared by those reflecting on the issue of timing.²⁰ In crises like these, knowing what time it is, and knowing for what kind of action a particular hour calls, is crucial in the effort to follow God.

Dismantling Unjust Structures

The Belhar Confession was understood by its authors and by the Synod that acted to bring it forth as a call for “the dismantling of structures of thought, of church, and of society.”²¹ Apartheid and misguided missiological strategies had their roots in long-standing relationships between peoples whose skin color differed, both on the African continent and in other places. They were born out of the thousands of years during which these relationships were lived out. The peoples from Europe, whose culture and experience of life taught them different truths than those they saw operative in these other places, sought to re-assert their own truths by legislating boundaries and ways of being that of course advantaged them, often at the expense of the other. They did this so well in South Africa, in fact, that, according to Mary Stewart van Leeuwen, the system of apartheid made “all but the most determined white critics not only indifferent to, but unaware of the suffering taking place in the parallel worlds of white South African and (so-called) colored or mixed-race populations.”²² This arrangement was successful in its aims to a high degree. Working toward a dismantling of the structures that upheld this multi-layered, complex set of relationships would undoubtedly be an equally multi-layered, complex task. U.S. President Abraham

Lincoln, speaking in the context of that country's Civil War and the slavery practices that preceded it, wondered if the undoing of injustice might take, if the Almighty willed, an equal spilling of blood as that which came from the injustice that the undoing was seeking to address.²³ When they called for nothing more or less than the dismantling of the structures of injustice in church and society, in thought, word, and deed, the authors of the Belhar were calling for embarking on a journey that would take the churches and the people of South Africa many years, and perhaps many generations, to complete.

In South Africa, the Belhar Confession emerged out of a context formed by more than a century of domination of a parent church over a daughter church, a troubled relationship characterized by a dysfunctional dynamics of race that eventually found expression in ecclesial support for legal oppression. It emerged at a time when violence in South Africa had raised concern among international Christian bodies to the point that they found it necessary to issue statements declaring that the very gospel of Jesus was at stake there, and that the only response was to demand a thorough dismantling of the architecture upholding the system of persecution and separation. Having sketched the original context out of which the Belhar arose, I now turn to the context in which the RCA is considering it for adoption today.

The RCA and the Belhar Confession

As I have shown, there are many good reasons for the RCA to adopt the Belhar Confession as one of its confessional standards. Among these include the fact that it is the first confession to arise from the southern hemisphere; that it is a confession by a people of a different racial and cultural background than that of the majority of RCA members; that it is a confession written in the twentieth century; and, finally, that it is a confession whose main themes – unity, reconciliation, and justice – are absent from the three historic confessional standards of the RCA. All these reasons are cause for joyful celebration and heartfelt gratitude for this gift from the church in South Africa; they argue strongly for its adoption.

Another important reason is the distinctively Reformed witness in the theology of the Belhar. Allan Boesak, one of its primary authors, spoke on this point at a conference in the months leading up to the Synod of Belhar. On behalf of the DRMC, he stated:

We believe passionately with Abraham Kuyper that there is not a single inch of life that does not fall under the lordship of Christ...Here the reformed tradition comes so close to the African idea of the wholeness of life that these two should combine to

renew the thrust that was brought to Christian life by the followers of Calvin.²⁴

The melding of the African idea of the unity and wholeness of life (*ubuntu*²⁵ and *Motho ke motho ka motho*²⁶) with the thought of a Calvinist theology standard-bearer such as Abraham Kuyper may sound as surprising to us today as it did to some who heard it when it was first spoken in 1981. Yet this startling joining of concepts, crossing cultures, histories, and racial boundaries, presents an opportunity to see both the Belhar and the whole of Reformed theology afresh. This contributes yet one more reason to look favorably on the Belhar's adoption.

Why a New Confession For the RCA Now?

Thinking about adopting the Belhar also raises questions. For the RCA, these have become pointed at this time. I do not presume to have conclusive answers to all these questions, nor is it even for me as a scholar serving with the RCA as a non-member to proffer them. I merely intend to make the following observations to assist in the dialogue occurring at this time in that church.

The first of these is clear: why a new confession now? What does it mean to a church to adopt a new confession? G.D. Cloete has defined a confession as "the church's response to the call of God in a concrete situation."²⁷ What does confessing mean to the RCA in its own concrete situation? For the DRMC in the 1980s, the gospel itself was seen to be at stake and the church at risk. Is the gospel at stake in the RCA today? Is the church at risk? In other words, is the RCA in a *status confessionis* at present, and if so, what is it concerning? Some have offered answers. Paul Fries contends that the *status confessionis* confronting the RCA is, indeed, the "gift and invitation of the United Church of Southern Africa" concerning the Belhar itself, and that the RCA "must and will confess either by adopting the Belhar or by refusing to do so. And by responding to 'the other,' however we choose, we will be changed."²⁸ Fries makes a compelling point about the importance of this time in which a choice is to be made. Is his estimation of the issue before the church correct? If it is, are there other aspects of this choice that need to be considered?

The Belhar Confession arose at a particular time, a time when the faithful understood the response of the church to the events that were transpiring to be "a cry from the heart" of faith. At this crucial moment, the situation there became clarified in a new way, so that apparent "truths" that had been understood as such for decades were shown to be lies.²⁹ The moment called for reading the signs of the times, a distinctly Christian act, to which we are called by Christ (Matthew 16:1-4). South African theologians called their brothers and sisters to find ways to correctly read the signs that were evident to those who

had adequate ears and eyes. This call continues to the present day. Russel Botman urges the church in South Africa today to read the signs of the times, because in his estimation, the times “call for a concrete manifestation of discipleship, inclusive and critical.”³⁰ What are the signs of the times for the RCA today? When read correctly, what do they portend? Do they call for a new confession for the RCA now?

Why the Belhar?

For a number of years, the RCA General Synod has named racial reconciliation as a key reason for the church to consider adopting the Belhar. To be sure, since in North America we do not live in a context of state-legislated separation of people by race, there is a sense in which a direct translation of the Belhar from the South African context to our own is questionable. Yet if we proceed with the understanding that adopting the Belhar Confession will equip the RCA to work toward racial reconciliation in our time and place, we can certainly present our own current crises in race relations as grounds to justify that adoption. Here are just a few of the many that the church should confront and address.

- Affirmative action policies have been outlawed in many states, including Michigan, a state in which the RCA has a significant number of its members. In that state, the measure to outlaw affirmative action policies was called (not without a sense of perverse irony), the “Michigan Civil Rights Initiative.” While race preference is now illegal in Michigan, evidence of disparities on many fronts continues to mount.
- Nationwide, 78% of eligible white high school students graduated from high school in 2002. In the same year, 56% of eligible African-Americans and 52% of eligible Latino/a students graduated. Interestingly, there is some good news in this: even with this obvious level of disparity, African-American adults have narrowed a gap that has existed between them and white adults by earning more high school diplomas in recent years. On the other hand, the gap has widened with respect to college degrees. Thirty percent of white adults had at least a bachelor’s degree in 2005, while 17% of African-American adults and 12% of Latino/a adults had a bachelor’s degree.
- In the U.S., on average, one out of every three African-American males will be incarcerated one or more times during his lifetime.
- The federal government has taken notice of ethnic and racial disparities in health, education, and interface with the correctional system. Two programs, Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) of the Centers for Disease Control, and the Disproportionate Minority Confinement (DMC) initiative of the U.S. Justice Department, have been developed to address these disparities. REACH seeks to confront and

- lessen disparities proven to exist in access to and quality of health care for African-American and Latino/a citizens. One of their action areas is in the state of Michigan, which has regions particularly noted for the problems experienced in accessing quality health care by racial ethnic citizens. The DMC program was initiated after some years of research to prove that minority youth were much more likely to be confined in juvenile detention or in local, state, or federal prisons than their white peers, even when they were arrested for the same type or class of offenses.
- Seventy-five percent of white households owned their homes in 2005, compared with 46 percent of black households and 48 percent of Latino/a households. Home ownership is near an all-time high in the United States, but racial gaps have increased in the past 25 years.

The Accompanying Letter to the Belhar Confession can be compared to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail,"³¹ which King wrote to white clergymen in Birmingham, Alabama, who had encouraged King to wait and be patient until the time was right for change. Both letters serve as apologia for the urgency of the hour and the reasons why action has to be taken and taken now. Both call upon Christians to take a stand and live out the convictions of their faith. To be sure, today members of the RCA are not living in apartheid-era South Africa or in Alabama in the time of segregation and Jim Crow. Yet as the few examples above show, there are many issues that confront those with eyes to see and ears to hear. If the RCA chooses to adopt the Belhar in an effort to work toward racial reconciliation, is the church also ready to face the truth of racial disparities that continue to haunt King's dream of the day when all can come to experience life in freedom, liberty, and justice for all? Oliver Patterson encouraged the RCA to be "transformed by the renewal of our minds" and called for a variety of concrete actions to live out the Belhar Confession's adoption.³² Is the RCA ready to answer Patterson's call – to live into racial reconciliation and live out a ministry and witness to the goals of unity, reconciliation, and justice? Specifically, what injustices and disparities in U.S. society today is the RCA ready to confront and address, in living into their confession of the Belhar?

Conclusion: Options for the Path Forward

Out of the crisis of the era of apartheid arose a statement of great courage, wisdom, and faith that came to be known as the Belhar Confession and its Accompanying Letter. Since the end of apartheid, concern among some of the leaders of the communion in which the Belhar came to speech has grown about what some have called the church's "absence" and "silence" when facing continuing race and class disparity and evidence of injustice in governmental policies and practices in South Africa. Botman outlines the distress voiced by a number of South African theologians on what he terms the church's "slumber."

He quotes Jim Cochrane, John de Gruchy, and Robin Petersen in their analysis of the post-apartheid church in South Africa, whose praxis they understand as directed at “creating, maintaining, and developing membership.” This, they contend, leads to a “clericalism inherent to this praxis,” leading in turn to “ministers servicing members” as the chief end of their work.³³ Botman calls upon the post-apartheid church in South Africa to examine the meaning and content of Christian discipleship, and to take on the “theo-logic” of following Christ. He states that, “in a situation of enmity and injustice, God is revealed in a special way as the God of justice standing with those against whom the injustice is being done and God calls the church to stand where God is standing.”³⁴ Botman encourages exploration of the work of Craig Dykstra and other scholars and theologians researching Christian discipleship practices, and urges the church to move toward an emphasis on forming disciples. He is seeking a way to bridge the gap between the “content and intent of the [Belhar] confession” and the theology on the ground of the Black church in South Africa today. Botman believes that this goal will only be reached through training all church members in the practices of Christian discipleship, so that all members can offer their own wisdom to the ongoing task of discerning the vocation of the church in the world in this era. If this is made manifest, then

[the poor] will participate in practices that have inherent to them the ‘goods’ of a theological struggle for liberation and the redemption of humanity. In this way South Africa will feel the public effect of the practices of church unity, reconciliation, social justice and a critical loyalty to the state. These are the practices of the Confession of Belhar.³⁵

What wisdom discerned by Botman and other theologians in South Africa today can be put to use by the RCA? What are the practices of discipleship to which God is calling the church in North America? How can living out and living into the adoption of the Belhar Confession awaken the RCA from its slumber, and give the church the power and the will to be a voiced and not a silent communion on issues of unity, reconciliation, and justice?

Smit’s reminder in 1984 to his brothers and sisters in the DRMC and other Christians in South Africa is cogent for us as well: that in speaking forth this new confession, “the Church will have to know that she has spoken with a bold word that now will have to be realized with acts of obedience.”³⁶ The RCA, in provisionally adopting the Belhar Confession, has taken a step toward the day when acts of obedience will be required of the church in its life and witness. The full adoption of the Belhar Confession can be a positive first step for the RCA, as part of a churchwide group of initiatives toward racial reconciliation. If the church understands this as one step and not the end of the road; if the church develops realistic and grounded plans to continue the journey; if the RCA

discerns ways to move forward in action and reflection from this good first step, this action can be a true turning point of faithfulness for the church. May it be so.

¹ Reformed Church in America *General Synod 2007 Minutes*, 276.

² *GS 2003 Minutes*, address of Rev. Greta van Wieren, 189.

³ *RCA GS 2000 Minutes*, 100; *GS 2001 Minutes*, 90; *GS 2002 Minutes*, 175; *GS 2003 Minutes*, 185-188; *GS 2004 Minutes*, 243; *GS 2005 Minutes*, 250; *GS 2006 Minutes*, 164-168; *GS 2007 Minutes*, 275.

⁴ Public Radio International's *The World*, 19 November 2007. www.theworld.org/?q=node/14147; accessed 21 November 2007.

⁵ Alan Paton, *The New York Times*, 24 October 1960.

⁶ *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, 2006, s.v. "apartheid."

⁷ C.J. Botha, "Belhar – A Century-Old Protest", in G.D. Cloete and D.J. Smit., eds., *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), 66-80.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁹ From the *Accompanying Letter* that was written and distributed with the original drafts of the Belhar Confession. The authors note that the new confession is not made "as a contribution to a theological debate nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel..."

¹⁰ *Dort Church Order*, art. 85, quoted in Botha 1984, 67.

¹¹ D.J. Smit, "What Does *Status Confessionis* Mean?" in G.D. Cloete and D.J. Smit., eds., *A Moment of Truth*, 15-16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵ *Accompanying Letter to the Confession of Belhar*, 1982.

¹⁶ Greek for "right or opportune moment."

¹⁷ *RCA GS Minutes 2004*, 218.

¹⁸ Smit, "What Does *Status Confessionis* Mean?" 19.

¹⁹ P.J.J.S. Els, "The Role of the 'Hour' in True and False Prophecy" in G.D. Cloete and D.J. Smit., eds., *A Moment of Truth*, 81.

²⁰ Smit, "What Does *Status Confessionis* Mean?" 16; and Mary Stewart van Leeuwen, "From Barmen to Belhar: Public Theology in Crisis Situations" in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 27:1 (2006), 23-33.

²¹ *Accompanying Letter to the Belhar Confession*, 1982.

²² van Leeuwen, "From Barmen to Belhar," 24.

²³ Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln's_second_inaugural_address; accessed 01 December 2007.

²⁴ Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1984), 87.

²⁵ A Bantu word referring to rightness in human relations and wholeness and unity in life.

²⁶ A Setswana proverb, literally translated "I am because you are".

²⁷ G.D. Cloete, "Let us Hold Fast our Confession", in G.D. Cloete and D.J. Smit., eds., *A Moment of Truth*, 93.

²⁸ Paul Fries, "Reflections on Confessing", in *Reformed Review* 60:1 (Fall 2006).

http://www.westernsem.edu/files/westernsem/fries_fa06_0.pdf.

²⁹ *Accompanying Letter to the Belhar Confession*, 1982.

³⁰ H. Russel Botman, "Discipleship and Practical Theology: The Case of South Africa," in *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 4:2 (2000).

³¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from the Birmingham Jail", in *Letter from the Birmingham Jail and I Have A Dream* (Atlanta: Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1963).

³² *RCA GS Minutes 2003*, 187.

³³ Botman, "Discipleship and Practical Theology: The Case of South Africa," 201.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁶ Smit, “What Does *Status Confessionis* Mean?” 65.