

Questions Frequently Asked by Those Considering the Belhar Confession

1. *What is the purpose of a confession, as people say they aren't too interested in our confessions anymore, especially the young people and people in new church plants?*

A: This is a valid question and there is truth to the assertion. But, why is that? Undoubtedly, there are various reasons but consider for a moment how and why our historical confessions came to be. In each case there were critical societal and spiritual issues facing the church of Jesus Christ: Terrible persecution by the Roman government;¹ an urgent need for instruction material for the newly established community of Reformed believers;² and serious intra-church controversy over Arminianism.³ (Faith versus works.)

In each case, church leaders stepped forward to create an instrument that focused the light of Scripture on the relevant current issues critical to the people they led. Perhaps our modern-day members can be forgiven for experiencing feelings of apathy over confessions as, while the Scriptures which they spotlight are as relevant as they have always been, the issues the confessions were initially written to address are not as apparent or relevant when living life in the 21st Century.

Examine the Belhar Confession in this context. As with the other confessions, Reformed leaders — whose people mightily struggled under the pressure of issues such as injustice, racism, conflict and disunity in the church of Christ and in their contemporary world — stepped forward to prepare a tool which focused the light of Scripture on these matters.⁴ For the members of the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa (URCSA), which adopted Belhar in 1986, there was no apathy surrounding this confession, nor is there in the present day. Like a laser beam, Belhar's words focus on the Scripture that helps to give direction and comfort for the issues they faced then — and, in many ways, issues they continue to face.

This is the context and purpose of confessions in the Reformed tradition. What is required are leaders who recognize that — as was the case in the days of Guido de Bres, Caspar Olevianus, Zacharius Ursinus, and Johannes Bogerman⁵ — the gospel message is in jeopardy, and the spiritual health and physical wellbeing of God's people everywhere are threatened. Essentially,

¹ Belgic Confession, in the Netherlands and Belgium, 1561.

² Heidelberg Catechism, Heidelberg, Germany, 1563.

³ Canons of Dordt, Dordrecht, Germany, 1619.

⁴ Belhar Confession, Belhar, South Africa, 1986.

⁵ Chief authors or proponents of the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt.

there is a paramount need for leadership. Such leadership was demonstrated in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1982,⁶ and it is still being demonstrated in the 21st Century by leaders of our Reformed denominations across North America and Europe, as they examine Belhar and see its potential to focus on the Scripture that gives encouragement and direction for believers to address significant issues experienced by people of the 21st Century.

2. Doesn't Belhar deal only with issues of racism?

A: Racism was a major issue for the black churches in South Africa, but it was by no means the only issue. Actually, racism was one component of the broader condition of a society rife with poverty, injustice and conflict. There are two other very significant and related aspects to the Belhar gift — reconciliation and unity.

In the hearts of the Belhar framers lived the Spirit-directed need for reconciliation and unity within the Body of Christ as revealed in God's Word. They also looked to Christ for a solution to the harsh and oppressive world around them. Remarkably, in the spirit of Christ, the leaders and the people of the abused, disenfranchised black church sought to address the wrong through a relationship of love and unity with those who had originally shared the gift of the gospel with them. For these brothers and sisters in South Africa, the Belhar not only brought clarity where Satan had brought confusion and human degradation, but it also brought courage to reach out to the white reformed church with its message of reconciliation and unity. The Belhar was a call to their gospel messengers, which said, in effect, "You taught us the Scripture, but look more closely; we, together, are not living according to its precepts."

3. How does Belhar, written in South Africa under Apartheid, apply to us in North America?

A. It is an unfortunate misconception that the Belhar's relevance is largely restricted to the church setting in South Africa. For South Africans as well as for us, Belhar gives guidance for our relationships and actions within the church, and also shows how Christ calls us to function as salt and light in the world beyond the church.

As Reformed North Americans, we are aware of our own history of racism and other injustices, both the Reformed church and the world around us have been fractured by conflict and disunity. A look at South African history is, in many ways, like taking a look in the mirror for us when we take the time to consider the similarities:

- national historical roots in white colonialism.
- a significantly Dutch heritage.

⁶ Belhar was written by leaders in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1982, and formally adopted by the newly merged URCSA in 1986.

- a traditional ethnocentric 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.
- involvement in slavery for people of color.
- admission of 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 which affect fellow believers, but also literally billions of others in the world around us? The Belhar Confession is a call to Christians and the church to be salt and light and to lead in the journey of addressing injustices in areas such as poverty, hunger, disease, the environment, wars and human rights, to name a few. Along with injustice is the desperate need for reconciliation and unity in the church and the world as a whole.

In this technologically advanced world, these injustices, disputations and conflicts are in our face at every turn. They are no longer issues which we succeed in avoiding; they are not limited only to other neighborhoods or some far removed corner of the world — these issues are in our living rooms and touch ourselves and our loved ones. Everyone in the world is now our neighbor and there is a desperate need for healing. The Belhar Confession highlights key Scriptures which call the Christian, individually and collectively as the church, to demonstrate Christ's life.

4. Is it true that URCSA is motivated to have other denominations adopt the Belhar Confession as it is seen to offer aid in their unity discussions with the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa?

A. Without question, adoption of Belhar by European, North American or any other Reformed denomination would be welcomed by the URCSA with delight, and such adoption might even assist the South African unity talks. This can only be a positive step. The reality is that, while the DRC has concluded that Belhar is Biblical, some in its ranks harbor feelings of resentment due to its implied reflection on the abuses of Apartheid. That said, URCSA long ago ceased its actively voiced plea for help from other Reformed denominations.

5. Shouldn't we be afraid that by adopting the Belhar we will open up the homosexual issues in our churches?

A: Fundamental to the passage of the Belhar Confession is whether it is soundly based on Scripture. All of the Reformed communities that have studied it, including the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, have determined that the Belhar is Scripturally sound and is consistent with our other Reformed confessions.

The question regarding homosexuality usually arises out of consideration of Article 4, which states that, "...God...is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged and that he calls his church to follow him in this" Some fear that this focus on justice for reconciliation and unity with the "wronged" will somehow force the church to open its doors and its practices on a wider and more open basis to homosexuals. Concerned voices on this issue are amplified due to the recent deliberations in the URCSA over homosexuality; some there were of the opinion that Belhar has encouraged a change in their denomination's position on this issue, while others disagreed.

Neither Belhar nor Scripture provides us with a crystal clear description or a complete listing of what constitutes the "wrongedness" for which God has special concern. The churches' call to "search the Scriptures" was not ended by our other confessions, nor will it be ended by the passage of the Belhar. Those who have concerns surrounding this issue should take comfort in the actions of the URCSA, which has tabled the issue and sent it back to the church community for further consideration and study. If there is concern over our Denomination's position on homosexuality, it is another issue for another time.

6. Can't we improve on the language and write our own confession?

A. We could, of course, draft our own confession but what does this say about our need to accept it on our own terms? What is the motive? Modification of the document would communicate Western arrogance, sending the message that we believe we have superior ability to frame a confession of this significance. To some of our South African brothers and sisters, this would surely communicate a message of disrespect and paternalism; issues that go to the core of the factors which led us to the generation of Belhar in the first place.

Another consideration is that a redraft would, undoubtedly, consume considerable time and effort. We have already spent twenty-six years on the study of this gift, and now is the time to deal with the issues addressed by Belhar with paramount urgency. Two billion people in the world are starving, many for no reason besides economic injustice; 30,000 children die each and every day due to starvation and preventable diseases; the environment is in jeopardy; wars and conflicts abound. In short, the Belhar Scripture tells us that we must not delay our individual and corporate witness in addressing these matters.

7. Why not adopt Belhar as a contemporary testimony similar to what we did with Our World Belongs to God?

A: Utilization of historical confessions as lenses with which to focus on Scripture is part of the DNA of the Reformed community. Any action which does not accept Belhar as a confession on par with our other standards of unity but instead assigns it to a lower shelf, denigrates it, diminishes its importance, and sends the message of its lesser significance — not only to those who wrote it and offered this gift to us, but to our members as well.

8. Why do we think 21st Century church leaders are qualified to write something on par with our three historical masterpieces?

A: 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 actively pursue its role as leader as Christians struggle with the application of the Scriptures when dealing with contemporary events and issues; essentially, 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. Certainly, we don't believe that the Holy Spirit has ceased his working among us.

9. What difference will adopting the Belhar make to our members, our congregations and our Denomination?

A: Never in the history of the church has there been greater evidence of such an urgent need for Christians to demonstrate their faith, to love their neighbors, and to bring the Kingdom of Jesus into our world. We have no other confession that demonstrates this so clearly. Belhar applied rivets our attention to the words of our Creator, the message of our Savior as we serve as ambassadors of Christ to our rapidly converging global community.

We have great faith and trust that, by the power of the Spirit, the church's faithful use and application of the lens of Belhar will cause it to be an instrument of positive change and healing in our broken world. Individual members will search for and find new ways to serve; congregations will address their challenges in new ways; the Denominations will be invigorated; and the world will be able to see the power and presence of Christ more clearly in our midst.