

## **Rev. Chris Schoon's Response To Rich Mouw Regarding Allan Boesak & The Belhar Confession**

In a recent posting on his blog (<http://www.netbloghost.com/mouw/?p=108>), Rich Mouw has offered a couple cautionary arguments against adopting the Belhar as a normative confession of the church. Given his respectable history of faithful leadership in the church, Mouw's perspective on the Belhar certainly has the capacity to influence the direction of the Belhar conversations in both the CRC and RCA Synods this summer. But before we embrace his position of not adopting the Belhar, I would ask that we take a closer look at his arguments, which in my opinion lead us down paths that the Reformed faith has traditionally resisted.

In his posting, Mouw argues against adopting the Belhar as a confession of the Church on essentially two grounds. First, he contends that because of Allan Boesak's intimate involvement in drafting the Belhar and Boesak's current argument in favor of gay and lesbian ordination based on the Belhar, we should question the theological adequacy of the Belhar. Second, Mouw argues that the Belhar cannot stand on its own as a normative confession because "it did not explicitly appeal to biblical authority." These are certainly weighty concerns. If the Belhar justifies gay and lesbian ordination—an act we are not prepared to affirm as biblically appropriate—we should be concerned and cautious in our embrace of the Belhar. More significantly, if the Belhar lacks biblical authority, we should question its adequacy as a binding confession of the church. Mouw's argument against adoption of the Belhar raise significant concerns with the proposals before the CRC and RCA Synods this year.

But in considering Mouw's concerns about Boesak's involvement, I am left wondering if we really agree with the implications of Mouw's concerns. First of all, do we in the Reformed tradition intend to give one person or even a small group of people authority to interpret the confessions of the Church? Denying the Belhar confessional status on grounds of an individual's use of the Belhar indicates that we have considered an individual's interpretation equivalent to or superior to the interpretation offered by the body of Christ as a whole. This step of individual interpretation apart from the affirmation or consensus of the broader Church is not one which the Reformed tradition embraces. Certainly, we need to discern with wisdom alternative interpretations offered regarding our confessions and even our understanding of Scripture. Because of the Holy Spirit's work in each of us and our understanding of the priesthood of all believers, we must take seriously alternative

interpretations being offered by individuals within the Church. However, the Church is under no obligation to dismiss its own authoritative interpretation because of the influence or suggested interpretations of any one individual, no matter who that individual is.

As such, Boesak's opinion does not outweigh the interpretation offered by the Church as a whole. To grant his opinion such authoritative status reflects a great distortion, both as an inappropriate exaltation of an individual's voice and an abdication of the body of Christ's responsibility to discern collectively the orthodoxy and orthopraxy that shapes the lives of those following Jesus Christ. To devalue the Belhar simply on the grounds of Boesak's opinion of how he would like to see the Belhar used as justification for gay-lesbian ordination is a dangerous step for the Reformed tradition to take. If we agree with Mouw's argument related to Boesak, I wonder if we should also question the sufficiency of Scripture simply because some people have used Scripture to propagate and justify atrocious sins in the name of Christ, including the various biblical justifications offered in support of the apartheid structures that the Belhar originally resisted.

Furthermore, in considering this argument against the Belhar based on Boesak's theology, we must also ask whether we accept Boesak's work within the authority granted him by the Church as legitimate or valid. This focus on Boesak is similar to the question raised by the early church (and at other times throughout church history) on whether the baptisms officiated by a heretical or immoral bishop or priest could be honored. The resounding response from the Church has been yes, the Church will honor those baptisms as long as the priest was functioning legitimately within the office. The lack of orthopraxy or orthodoxy of the individual is not the determining factor in the validity of the baptism or other action of priest. The determining factor is whether or not the official actions of the priest were conducted on behalf of the Church. In the case before us, the Belhar does not lose its validity as a document of the Church because of a perceived or real theological heresy on the part of Boesak. His actions in contributing to the crafting of the Belhar were undertaken under the auspices of the Church. To invalidate the Belhar on the basis of Boesak's current relationship to orthodoxy would necessarily mean that we also bring into question the validity of all other activities that he conducted under the authority of the Church. The actions of the office of the Church take precedent over the individual functioning within that office. As David Rylaarsdam pointed out in a recent email exchange about this issue, taking this position against the Belhar should also lead us to question the validity of the Nicene Creed, which had several original signers who held heretical positions with regard to their Christology.

Moreover, the Belhar was not and is not a confession of Allan Boesak. The Belhar is a confession of the South African body of Christ. Having been adopted by that body, the Belhar comes before us as a recommendation by that South African body of Christ to the rest of us within the Reformed community of believers. The request is that we also consider and adopt the Belhar as an institutional confession of our faith together. This document is not the fruit of one individual and does not sit before us as a recommendation by any one individual or even a small group of people. Rather, the Belhar is already a document of a

portion of the body of Christ, including at least one congregation within the CRC. The confessional status of the Belhar is a question of what the Reformed community of Churches believes together about the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the Church, not about what Allan Boesak suggests it should mean.

Mouw's argument against adopting the Belhar because "it does not explicitly appeal to biblical authority" and therefore cannot stand on its own is perhaps a more significant concern. However, questions ought to be raised as to the use of this standard and the validity of it.

The argument that an explicit appeal to biblical authority be utilized as one means of testing the status of an official Church declaration is an interesting one. While it is good practice for us to point to the places in Scripture which form the foundation of our beliefs, employing this standard as a litmus test would actually place us in an awkward position for evaluating the sufficiency of the three ecumenical creeds of the Church. All three of these creeds are meant to be summaries of biblical truth and are understood to find their true meaning within the bounds of biblical authority. Though they do not contain explicit references to Scripture, the creeds form the boundary markers of our unity in the body of Christ. Additionally, the three current confessions of the Christian Reformed Church contain biblical references to one degree or another, but even among these there is wide difference in the level to which they appeal explicitly to biblical authority. Their validity as confessions of the Church rests not in their explicit appeals to Scripture, but rather in the Church's agreement that the confessions express biblical truth in a manner that is normative for the theology and practice of believers. To erect a new standard of explicit appeal would also necessitate a review of the adequacy of our current creeds and confessions.

Though this explicit biblical authority standard is a problematic standard to use, the Belhar as presented to us in the Christian Reformed Church for consideration at this year's Synod would certainly pass a test of this manner. The Agenda for Synod presents the Belhar with biblical references in order to more explicitly demonstrate the biblical roots for understanding God's character of justice, the unity of the Church, and Christ's work ongoing work of reconciliation in and throughout his body. The inclusion of the Scripture references as well as the report from the Interchurch Relations Committee demonstrates how the Belhar is rooted in Scripture and in our Reformed understanding of Scripture.

Finally, the Belhar need not and ought not be erected to stand alone. As a confession of the Church, the Belhar would be understood within a framework already established by our other creeds and confessions. The Belhar would rest, as the other creeds and confessions do, on the foundation of God's Word and in the context created by the other creeds and confessions. We do not interpret any of the creeds and confessions as stand alone documents. They are all to be understood as declarations of the Church that provide the people of God with a Reformed framework for understanding Scripture and living faithfully with each other before our Triune God.

Though we need to respect and honor Rich Mouw for his service to the Church, we would do well to disagree with Mouw's arguments against adopting the Belhar. Denying confessional

status to the Belhar based on Boesak's involvement would lead us into theological and ecclesiastic terrain that the Reformed tradition in particular has consistently resisted. Likewise embracing a standard of explicit biblical authority would apply a standard not consistently employed with our current creeds and confessions, and even if employed, contrary to Mouw's implication, the Belhar as presented to us for consideration at Synod would certainly meet the standard. Our opportunity and responsibility is to consider whether or not the Belhar ought to stand alongside our other creeds and confessions as a declaration of our faith. Our discussion and consideration of the Belhar will be best served, indeed the body of Christ will be best served, if we are able to engage the Belhar itself as a gift from one gathering of the Reformed communion to the rest of the Reformed communion, not as the byproduct of an individual with suspect theology or as a stand alone document somehow isolated from all other declarations and commitments of the Reformed faith.

Respectfully,

Rev. Chris Schoon