

WHY I AM GRATEFUL FOR THE BELHAR CONFESSION IN THE RCA

by Tom Stark, retired Reformed Church in America pastor, Lansing, MI

It is important to know the background of the Belhar Confession, and to read it, before attempting to evaluate it. For those who have not read the Belhar Confession- it is four pages long, and can be found on the RCA website- rca.org/BelharConfession.

THE HISTORY OF THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRC) began with Dutch immigrants to South Africa in the 17th and 18th centuries. In 1857 it made a historic decision. They agreed to a request to allow churches to have separate communion services for whites and blacks. This led to two different results: "First, it led to the establishment of a separate racially based denomination (yet still under the ownership of the DRC) for colored or mixed-race members (1881, Dutch Reformed Mission Church) and later for black members (1951, Dutch Reformed Church in Africa). Second, what began as a 'pastoral accommodation' for violating eucharistic polity was eventually developed into an elaborate theology that sought to ground the separation of the races in creation. With its separatist theology of creation, the DRC became an avid advocate of apartheid as a government policy beginning in 1924. . . ." (from *Union in Christ*, 2011, p. 99, by Dr. Todd Billings, Professor of Reformed Theology, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI).

The white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (the DRC), was, in the 20th century, as thoroughly Calvinistic as any church in the world, with the same three doctrinal Standards as the RCA and the Christian Reformed Church- the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort. The DRC was sometimes called "the parliament at prayer", because their members dominated the government from 1948 until the fall of the relentless, dehumanizing system of apartheid. The Rev. Dr. Dirkie Smit was one of those who drafted the Belhar Confession in the Afrikaans language. Dr. Smit wrote of his experience as a first year student in an all-white seminary: "My first experience of reading Calvin was during the time of apartheid. [It was] an oppressive system of racial classification, exclusion and injustice. [It was] partly born within Reformed worship and partly built on theological justification provided by the Reformed tradition. Reformed professors had contributed to this justification [of apartheid]. Our professor in dogma was known as a Calvin expert and follower, who wrote his doctoral thesis on Calvin, in the Netherlands. He was also known, like many others who proudly carried the name Calvinist, as a staunch supporter of apartheid in church and society. In our context, being Calvinist stood for the ethos and ethics from which apartheid grew- and for many South Africans, it still does."

THE CONTEXT OF THE BELHAR CONFESSION

It is important to remember the context in which a black church is confessing its faith at the height of the power of apartheid. Similarly, a reader of the Canons of Dort needs to know the context- why the Synod of Dort was called into session, what errors the Remonstrants had been teaching, etc.

Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990. So it was in 1986 that the "coloured" daughter church (Dutch Reformed Mission Church) of the white Dutch Reformed Church adopted the Belhar Confession, a four page testimony concerning unity, reconciliation and justice. It was written in 1984 in Afrikaans, the language of the denomination, derived from the Dutch language.

The Dutch Reformed Mission Church, or DRMC ("coloured" in the old South African designation); and 3) the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa, or DRCA (black) united in 1994 to become the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa, with 500,000 confessing members. Both denominations had, and the new united church has the same three doctrinal standards as their mother church- the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort. The three Doctrinal Standards are the foundation on which the Belhar Confession stands.

THE CONTEXT OF THE BELHAR CONFESSION AND THE RCA

The context in which the Belhar was adopted by the DRMC in 1986 affected the Reformed Church in America 24 years later as the RCA moved toward adopting the Belhar.

1. The Rev. Dr. Dawid Kuyler, the Scribe of the Uniting Reformed Church, wrote to Rev. Harold Delhagen, moderator of the RCA's Commission on Christian Unity, on April 27, 2009 concerning the Belhar, and said, in part, "5. The Article 2 that you refer to and have problems with in terms, what it might or might not say about homosexuality, is of much importance to us. Confessions are not a-historical documents but historic. The historical framework of that particular article is the fact that the color of one's skin and your race were the modes of entry to church and society in South Africa, especially the church of Reformed faith. That practice clashed with what we understand the Bible is saying. In the face of this false doctrine we corrected the faith."

2. When two committees reported jointly to the RCA General Synod of 2009, recommending the adoption of the Belhar Confession, they stated:

". . . we ask that the journal record the following as we join with the church in affirming that scripture is the only rule of faith and life and further that our confessions are historic and faithful witnesses to scripture. The commission acknowledges that the Belhar Confession does not negate the statements of the General Synod on homosexuality including the 1978 and 1979 statements. We want to provide clear understanding that the Belhar Confession, as a faithful witness to scripture, acknowledges that membership in the Church is 'true faith in Jesus Christ is the only

condition for membership of this church' (The Belhar Confession article 2)". (MGS 2009, p. 246)

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BELHAR CONFESSION:

1. How could it be helpful in the life of a church? That would depend on whether people read it, discuss it, and consider and learn from its unique historic context, and apply it to our day as to "Unity, Reconciliation and Justice".

For example, one of the Belhar's three primary emphases is unity. Presbyterian/ Reformed people in the U.S. have a striking record of disunity. See the article by Reformed Theological Seminary (Orlando, FL) professor Dr. John Frame: "Machen's Warrior Children" (online, 2003, 27 pp.). Some excerpts:

"A. I have enumerated 21 areas of conflict occurring in American conservative Reformed circles from 1936 to the present. [65] Under some of those headings I have mentioned subdivisions, subcontroversies. Most of these controversies have led to divisions in churches and denominations, harsh words exchanged between Christians. People have been told that they are not Reformed, even that they have denied the Gospel. Since Jesus presents love as what distinguishes his disciples from the world (John 13:34-35), this bitter fighting is anomalous in a Christian fellowship. Reformed believers need to ask what has driven these battles. To what extent has this controversy been the fruit of the Spirit, and to what extent has it been a work of the flesh?

"B. The Machen movement was born in the controversy over liberal theology. I have no doubt that Machen and his colleagues were right to reject this theology and to fight it. But it is arguable that once the Machenites found themselves in a "true Presbyterian church" they were unable to moderate their martial impulses. Being in a church without liberals to fight, they turned on one another.

"C. One slogan of the Machen movement was 'truth before friendship.' We should laud their intention to act according to principle without compromise. But the biblical balance is 'speaking the truth in love' (Eph. 4:15). We must not speak the truth without thinking of the effect of our formulations on our fellow Christians, even our opponents. That balance was not characteristic of the Machen movement. [66]"

2. How can the Belhar Confession be considered a "confession" of the church?

a. When reading the Belhar, and noting the 47 Scripture passages cited in it, and the many paraphrases and allusions to Scripture, it is clear that it seeks to have a strong scriptural foundation.

b. A confession may presuppose an already adopted confession: Dr. Todd Billings (*Union in Christ*, p. 59) says: ". . .the Synod of Dort was not seeking to write a summary of Reformed doctrine. It never attempted to write a general statement of faith-

a statement with a fully stated doctrine of sin, atonement, and salvation. Why? Because in its Dutch context, it already had a general statement of faith: the Belgic Confession. The Canons of Dort were written to provide a clarification of Reformed doctrine on a cluster of issues related to election, sin, and the assurance of salvation. As such, they functioned as a kind of explanatory footnote to the Belgic Confession, which gave a broad summary of Reformed doctrine. Thus, the Canons were intended to be received not by themselves but as a supplement to the Belgic Confession."

c. There are many subjects not dealt with in the Belhar. It doesn't aim to deal with all Christian doctrines- it is only four pages long. It asks to be considered as it deals with "Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice". It presupposes the basic doctrinal standards of the adopting denominations: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort.



d. **"BRINGING UP BELHAR AGAIN, by Thabiti Anyabwile, Pastor, First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman, G. C. Islands, from his Gospel Coalition blog**

First, Belhar could never stand alone as a confession. For it to in any way be sufficient as a statement, it must be confessed along with other historical and theologically more comprehensive statements. The CRC [cn. RCA] has added the Belhar to its other standards of unity—the Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dordt, and the Belgic Confession. Without these statements, Belhar lacks any definition of the Gospel or most other cardinal points of Christian belief. It must stand on the shoulders of these other confessions—and *secondary to them*—or else the entire Christian confession falls, in my opinion. Others have already noted this, but it warrants stating again.

Second, Belhar makes an important statement against the sin of racial injustice and complacency in the face of it. The document takes the accomplishment of our reconciliation in Christ seriously. The first section meditates largely on Eph. 2:11-22 and Eph. 4:1- 16. It makes the case that while our unity exists in the already-not yet tension, that unity is nonetheless to be visible. And without that visible unity the conquering power of Christ is obscured, denied, and resisted. Belhar states these things clearly,

succinctly, and compellingly, in my opinion. What it rejects in section 2 is as compelling as what it affirms.

"We reject any doctrine:

which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;

which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;

which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as priceless gift is sin;

which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church."

It's in places like this that the Belhar grows longer teeth, and sinks those teeth into the deep tissue of abiding racial and ethnic prejudice. Willful separation, apathy, and despair must be countered with sober and serious gospel commitment, confessional resolve, and spiritual action. Too many statements intending to redress past prejudice have languished in the nether of generalization, platitude, and inaction. Belhar attempts some serious confession, and insofar as a local church and denomination are confessional, Belhar promises at least some serious examination of conscience and life.

Reading this section I was forced to ask myself: "Is it sin to not pursue unity in the church?" I answer "Yes! It is sin to neglect unity in the church." On two grounds: (1) such a pursuit is commanded in Scripture, which Belhar makes clear; and (2) to not pursue this unity betrays the reconciled nature of the new humanity; it is to deny who we are in Christ in the same way that to practice homosexuality is to deny the heterosexually gendered nature God created us with. Some won't like the comparison. But do you see the point? To deny our new humanity in Christ is in every way as fundamental a betrayal of Christian profession as denying heterosexual orientation betrays natural gender design. I think Belhar strikes at this well.

Third, Belhar calls the church to both word and deed on this issue. In essence, Belhar is a confession touching on the doctrine and mission of the church as the church. It calls the church into the work of pursuing justice. Again, some will be made nervous about this. But the statement is surely correct when it confesses: "*God's lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world.*" Now, to be honest, there's something in me that finds the last half of that statement a bit sappy or sentimental. And, yet, that's a problem in me—not with the

power of God's Word and Spirit to transform us, as He will do until the Day of redemption (Phil. 1:6).

The statement gives hope, even as it stands against apathy. The statement is necessary because so much apathy exists—apathy expressed *in the name of the gospel*. And there again, Belhar strikes a blow for deeper conviction and action when it says “*the credibility of this message [the gospel] is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity.*” Amen! Part of me wants to take my stand with Paul and declare “as long as Christ is preached” then this issue is secondary. But, I think on the strength of Galatians 2, Paul would say that such bias *denies* the gospel just as Peter denied it when he withdrew table fellowship with Gentiles.

The emphasis on deeds is critical, not “liberal.” Why? Without an emphasis on deeds of repentance—when there were so many egregious deeds of commission—we’re right back where we were. Which is to say, we’ve actually not left where we were—stuck in an ineffectual quagmire of lip-service. “Faith without works is dead.” And so is any resolution or evangelical communion that “confesses” racism as sin but has no expectation of resolute action against it and for reconciliation. “Bring forth fruit worthy of repentance” should be the banner.

So with Belhar, the church should “*reject any doctrine which, in such a situation, sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.*” The crafters of Belhar should have gone an important step further to also reject any doctrine that sanctions *voluntary* separation in the name of the gospel and Christ. Most of us no longer live in Apartheid-era South Africa or Jim Crow America. There are no laws in most Western nations physically prohibiting integration. We voluntarily segregate, and that tells us a lot about our hearts. We should reject any doctrine that makes such segregation easy when Christ suffered the torments of God's wrath to end in His own body our alienation from God and from each other.

But, Belhar's significant weakness is the lack of definition in the fourth section. The fourth section proclaims that “God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people” and “God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.” At this point, Belhar sounds much more like James Cone than the Bible Cone rejects as infallible and inerrant. To be sure, God is just. The writers of Belhar cite Deuteronomy 32:4—“He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” But are we ever told that God “in a special way” or in any unqualified way sides with the poor? The references listed in support of Belhar's claims hardly establish such an interpretation of the Scripture.

So, Belhar sticks its chest out to say, “*the church **must** therefore 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, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*” I rather like the sweeping universals and absolutes: “must... any... any.” What forms of injustice are okay for the church not to strive against? I can’t think of any. But the beauty or danger of this wording lies in the eye of the beholder. And that’s the rub. For not everything that people decry or march against may safely be called an “injustice.” We can with Belhar “*reject any theology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.*” Sure. But we’re still left with the nagging problem of precisely defining “injustice.”

Again, this is where Belhar must stand together with the other confessions of the faith, and why it must stand in second place to those confessions. It’s not as though the other confessions define “justice” for every generation. But they at least provide the necessary framework and raw munitions for doing so. They teach us about the inspiration, authority, and sufficiency of the Scripture. If those confessions provide serious boundaries for Belhar, then Belhar’s sweeping language actually calls the church out of sloth and into the fray while honoring the roles assigned to the church in the Scripture itself. But should the RCA or any other body lose its grip on the Scripture, then Belhar’s broad, undefined language includes a host of issues as “must” justice issues that contradict the Bible’s teaching. That’s no small threat or concern.

Conclusion

Would I toss the Belhar Confession aside for its weaknesses or adopt it for its strengths? I think I’d rather adopt it for its strengths while fighting for a clear definition of “justice” or “injustice” and working for reform of its soft spots. It’s a good but imperfect statement. I’m for these things. I think it calls for courage to confess this statement with Judgment Day honesty.

But if we’re confessing Belhar with the level of interest and applied earnestness with which we confess most statements of faith... well, then, most will say “why bother?” The more things change the more they stay the same.”

3. Why are some people alarmed at the Belhar's statement: "that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged"? The discomfort seems to be that in mentioning the "poor" that some sort of "class conflict" is introduced, or possibly they hear echoes of the old "liberation theology" (1950s onward, primarily in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America).

a. Dr. Richard Mouw, president (retired in 2013) of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, has written (2/8/11):

"Occasionally I come across fellow evangelicals distancing themselves from the notion of a 'preferential option for the poor.' [concept and phrase originating with Peruvian Roman Catholic theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, born 1928] This has been happening recently in the debates over the proposed adoption of the Belhar Confession by Reformed and Presbyterian denominations in North America. Belhar, the argument goes, espouses the "preferential option," particularly in its affirmation 'that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.'

"It just so happens that I had been reading the great Dutch Calvinist statesman Abraham Kuyper on the same day that I came across a contemporary Calvinist theologian faulting Belhar for its 'liberation theology' emphasis on God's concern for the poor. In a powerful address that Kuyper gave to a Christian Social Congress in 1891 (published as a little book, *Christianity and the Class Struggle*), Kuyper warns that 'you do not honor God's Word if ... you ever forget how both Christ, and also just as such His apostles after Him and the prophets before Him, invariably took sides *against* those who were powerful and living in luxury, and *for* the suffering and oppressed.'

"To be sure, Kuyper insists, we must also affirm a solidarity within the Christian community between poor and rich. 'In every Lord's Prayer,' he says, 'the poor prays *for the rich* that God may give him his bread for that day, and the rich prays it for the poor. Nowhere in this prayer is there a *my* or an *I*; but always *we* and *us*.' For all of that solidarity, though, Kuyper observes that when the Bible 'corrects the poor [it] does so much more tenderly and gently; and in contrast, when it call[s] the rich to account [it] uses much harsher words.'

"Kuyper was no friend of socialism. But he does observe with reference to James 5:1-4, that '[i]f words as strong as these were not found in the Bible, and if anyone should dare pen them now on his own initiative, people would brand him a crypto-socialist.'

"All of that seems to me to be exactly right; indeed it is profoundly biblical. And it certainly comes across as affirming something very much like a 'preferential option for the poor.' Let the debate over Belhar be waged on legitimate theological grounds."

b. James 5:1-4- Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. ²Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. ⁴Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. (NIV)

c. Consider Malachi 2:17; 3:5 (and other references to the poor):

Malachi 2:17, 3:5- You have wearied the Lord with your words. "How have we wearied him?" you ask. By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?" . . . "So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those

who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the Lord Almighty. (NIV)

d. From *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, by Dr. Gordon Fee, Regent [Seminary], Vancouver, and Dr. Doug Stuart, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Wenham, Mass.:

"In Matthew "the poor" are "the poor in spirit"; in Luke they are simply "you who are poor" (6:20) in contrast to "you who are rich" (6:24). On such points most people tend to have only half a canon. Traditional evangelicals tend to read only "the poor in spirit"; social activists tend to read only "you who are poor". We insist that *both* are canonical. In a truly profound sense the real poor are those who recognize themselves as impoverished before God. But the God of the Bible, who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, is a God who pleads the cause of the oppressed and the disenfranchised. One can scarcely read Luke's gospel without recognizing his interest in this aspect of the divine revelation (see 14:12-14; cf. 12:33-34 with the Matthean parallel, 6:19-21. . . ." (page 139)

e. Dr. Todd Billings, in his Union with Christ, expresses several concerns about article 4, but first he says:

"Article 4 continues by speaking about the church's call to justice. The interpretation of this article is somewhat more ambiguous, however, particularly because the language of union with Christ is not as explicitly present. Instead, the language is framed in terms of God being a God of justice and the church needing to "stand where the Lord stands" by acting with justice. One line in particular is troubling to some and championed by others: "that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged." This line is much debated and deserves some consideration with regard to what it is and is not claiming.

"First, many do not recognize that the opening parenthetical phrase is qualifying rather than intensifying. Here is the basic sense: God loves all of creation and all people; yet, precisely because there is injustice and enmity in the world, God is the God of the poor due to their special need. Thus the parenthetical phrase, 'in a world of injustice and enmity', qualifies the sense that God is 'in a special way' the God of some who are wronged.

"Furthermore, the Belhar's text suggests that radically reworking ecclesiastical categories such that 'the destitute, the poor and the wronged' becomes the constitutive definition of God's people is not the goal or intention. For as article 2 says, 'true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church.'" (pages 103-104)

f. Notice what RCA ministers promise in the RCA Declaration for Ministers:

They read the Declaration aloud and sign at Ordinations and Installations, declaring, in part: “Trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for strength, I pledge my life to preach and teach the good news of salvation in Christ, to build up and equip the church for mission in the world, to free the enslaved, to relieve the oppressed, to comfort the afflicted, and to walk humbly with God.” The Declaration surely does not refer only to spiritual slavery, oppression, and affliction.

4. Could the Belhar Confession be used to endorse positions which it does not really support? Of course. We remember how the white Dutch Reformed Church used the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dort to justify apartheid. But it would be unfair to argue that a distorted use of a document therefore discredits the document itself.

An early 19th century Unitarian leader is supposed to have said, “You can’t write a creed I can’t subscribe to.” Or sometimes the assertion is made, “You can prove anything from the Bible.” No- the church has to resist twisted statements: “The Canons of Dort teach fatalism,” “The Heidelberg Catechism is devotional, and has no doctrine”, “The Bible doesn’t teach the Trinity”, etc. The Belhar Confession may be twisted by supposed friends- any document could be.

5. Can a candidate for ordination as a pastor in the RCA register dissent from the Belhar Confession? Yes, candidates could say to a classis that they disagree with the Belhar Confession’s sentence about the poor, because they believe it could be interpreted as justifying some illegitimate class distinction, or they could indicate some other differences with the Belhar. It is appropriate for candidates for ordination to indicate during an ordination exam any areas where the candidate is not in agreement with the RCA Standards- the Belgic Confession (1561), Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1619), or the Belhar Confession (1986), adopted by the RCA in 2010 as a fourth confession.

RCA pastors (but not elders and deacons) subscribe to those parts of the doctrinal Standards which are still binding on us. Parts of them are no longer binding:

a. When the American church became independent of the Dutch church in 1792 new “Explanatory Articles” were adopted which disavowed the statements about the Anabaptists in the Belgic Confession, Articles 18 and 36 (though unfortunately not in Article 34), and the European state-church arrangement described in the Belgic Confession, Article 36.

b. After 1792 The RCA version of the Canons of Dort no longer included the “Rejection of Errors” after each Head of Doctrine. “The conditions in America in 1792 were so different from those in Holland in 1618. . . . There were no Remonstrants demanding rights in RCA in 1792, and no law of exclusion was needed.” (Corwin’s *Digest*, 1906).

c. The RCA web site puts Question and Answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism (condemning the Roman Catholic mass) in a footnote, much like the Christian Reformed Church, which did special studies and concluded that part of the answer misrepresents what the Roman Catholic Church teaches today.

d. The Belgic Confession, Article 34, says "anyone who aspires to reach eternal life ought to be baptized only once without ever repeating it- for we cannot be born twice". Most RCA ministers would probably say, "If that is teaching 'baptismal regeneration' I do not agree."

e. Most of us would not say we "detest the error of the Anabaptists" [in not baptizing infants] (Belgic 34).

f. Pauline authorship of the book of Hebrews is asserted in the list of the books of Scripture in Article 4, Belgic Confession. The text of Hebrews does not identify Paul (or anyone else) as its author, so a minister would not have to agree with the Confession at that point.

g. The book of Lamentations is absent from the list of canonical books in the Belgic Confession, Article 4. Strong tradition linked Lamentations with Jeremiah, so there is no reason to interpret the Confession as intending to exclude Lamentations from the Bible.

When a member expresses an "exception" from the RCA doctrinal standards it is the same process as in other reformed denominations, like the Evangelical Presbyterian Church or the Presbyterian Church in Americas. Neither of those denominations require agreement with all the propositions in their doctrinal standards.

6. What about Rev. Allan Boesak, one of the authors of the Belhar Confession?

Boesak was a leading pastor in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church when the Belhar was adopted in 1986, outspoken in his writing and activity against apartheid. Boesak resigned from the ministry in 1990 because of an extramarital affair. He was later restored to the ministry but in 2000 went to prison for fraud, serving one year of a three year term. He always protested that he was innocent. He later received a presidential pardon.

Some are concerned because Boesak endorsed admitting practicing homosexuals to church offices, when he spoke at the fall 2008 synod of the Uniting Reformed Church. His views were rejected overwhelmingly. Afterwards he announced his intention to resign from the church.

Rev. Greg Alderman, pastor of Christ Community Church in Carmichael, California, was at that Synod in South Africa. He wrote:

"11/2/2008, Dear Friends,

A little over 3 weeks ago I returned from South Africa where I was representing the RCA to the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) at their General Synod. I want to share . . . something that I believe you will find extremely interesting. On Friday October 3, URCSA debated a report and its proposals brought by a special task force led by Rev. Dr. Allan Boesak regarding the church's response to the question of homosexuality. This was very significant, because Rev. Boesak is one of the key members of the team that originally drafted the Belhar Confession in 1982.

Boesak led his team to draft a 70-page report to the synod regarding their understanding of how URCSA needs to handle the issue of homosexuality. Of special note in the report is the section regarding the application of the Belhar to this issue In this section, Boesak says of the Belhar's application on the question of homosexuality, "Our commitment and calling to unity and reconciliation require that homosexual persons, as confessing members of the church, have access to all the offices of the church, including the office of minister of the Word." Boesak took the role of a confession to be the overriding hermeneutical interpretation tool in how the church understands Scripture.

Many of you will remember that during the debate on the floor of our General Synod in 2007, concern was expressed that Belhar would be used as a hermeneutical tool on the issue of homosexuality as a sort of Trojan Horse to finally push the RCA into accepting homosexuality as normative. Assurances were given by many that the Belhar would never be used that way. The fact that one of the architects of the Belhar Confession- the Rev. Dr. Allan Boesak- believes that the Belhar Confession compels a church that accepts it to embrace and normalize homosexual behavior is problematic to the argument that there is no way Belhar would ever be used in this way.

I was concerned how URCSA would respond to one of their respected teachers pushing this kind of application of the Belhar. URCSA's General Synod overwhelmingly voted to reject Boesak's interpretation of how Belhar applied in this case. At the same time, they reaffirmed their belief that all people- regardless of labels that others or the people themselves apply-are eligible for membership in Christ's church by faith alone, and that homophobia or the rejection of persons who are made in the image of God for any reason is to be rejected by Christ's Church. These beliefs are natural consequences of a proper understanding of the role of the Belhar. Where URCSA said the report presented by Boesak went too far was when it called for the church to call homosexual behavior normative, and during the debate it was specifically noted that many believed that this was a gross misapplication of Belhar.

I share this with you today because I wanted you to see from my perspective how one of our sister churches handled a difficult issue (that we face) in the light of Belhar. I believe URCSA's example is instructive for us that our standards will continue to be used in the right way if we understand where our standards come from. Our standards are born out of the church's need to understand the culture through our study of the Word of God. They help us to speak prophetically to the culture and the church, but they are not meant

to be used as a tool to override and explain away particular passages of Scripture that we find uncomfortable in the name of living out our creed. Standards are never to be elevated to such primacy that they are placed above Scripture and considered more authoritative than the Word of God itself.

I was blessed having watched the URCSA apply Belhar and interact with it in a multitude of ways. They modeled again to me what it means to live by a creed in all aspects of our lives.

Blessings,

[Rev.] Greg Alderman, Christ Community Church, Carmichael, California”

[Greg was elected vice-president of the RCA General Synod in June 2013.]

What does this say to the RCA? We do not need to let Allan Boesak’s recurring problems determine our response to the Belhar Confession.

7. What are other examples of what the Belhar Confession might do for us?

a. A Jewish student in Boston came to believe in Christ as her Messiah. Her parents reacted strongly. Her baptism was solemn. The pastor knew what a costly step this was for her. Later she prepared and led a small group Bible study on John 9 at a training weekend. The evaluator afterwards mentioned that there had not been much application. She said that had been a hard part for her in her preparation, since she hadn’t seen any applications in the text. He mentioned the blind man’s parents, who distanced themselves from him. He thought that would surely leap out at her. She was amazed. She hadn’t seen that.

We know we don’t necessarily “get it” when we study scripture. The Belhar Confession introduces us to the work of fellow believers who have struggled deeply to see what Scripture teaches about “unity, reconciliation and justice.” We may have something to learn.

b. A Kenyan pastor spoke at InterVarsity’s Urbana student missions conference. He mentioned how tensions developed between Western and national leaders in an African congregation. Finally, a mediator assigned leaders of each group to preach on two consecutive Sundays. The theme for both of them was to be the main message of the story of Joseph. The western speaker emphasized that the main message is that, no matter how difficult life may be for you, God will always take care of you. The African speaker emphasized that the main message is that, no matter where you are, you must always be concerned for your extended family.

We read and apply with cultural eyes, and exposure to “cross-cultural eyes” can enlarge our understanding of God’s Word. The question may not be who is more correct, but

what we need to learn from scripture through the experience of brothers and sisters in Christ from a different cultural context.
