

ADDRESS TO THE GENERAL SYNOD OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

PELLA, IOWA - 10 JUNE 2007

Dear sisters and brothers in our Lord, Jesus Christ,

1. GREETINGS

It is indeed a great honor to bring you the greetings of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. We hope and pray that your meeting in these days will be fruitful, and that you will experience the powerful presence of God's Spirit. The Spirit brought us into the truth of Christ, and upon this Spirit we continually rely for guidance in the will of God.

I bring these good wishes on behalf of Dr Coenie Burger, the immediate past moderator of our general synod. He has asked me to apologize for not being able to accept this invitation in person. The words of my address are my own, though I trust it carries the confirmation of our moderator and the majority of our members.

I have been requested to speak on the topic of the Belhar confession from the perspective of South Africa and the DRC in specific. Let me immediately say that although the DRC has not yet formally adopted the Belhar confession, I was (as young theological student) convinced of the truth of this confession from the very beginning. A few years ago, I participated in an unofficial signing of the confession, and I really look forward to see it included in the new re-uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa.

You stand at the threshold of a very important decision regarding the confessional basis of the RCA. If the proposal before this synod is adopted, the path is cleared for the Belhar confession to become a provisional – and in two years' time – a permanent part of your church's faith foundation.

This is potentially a momentous event as you share with us the Three Formulae of Unity. The date of the last confession, the Canons of Dordt, is 1619 – almost 400 years ago! It is amazing that Reformed churches could for such a long time refrain from a confession that declares the gospel anew, addressing the challenges of different times and contexts.

2. ON THE WAY TO COMMON CONFESSION

In ecumenical circles we talk about a threefold process in the reception of important ecumenical documents like creeds and confessions: from common explication and common recognition to common confession.

2.1 The first stage is common explication.

I was impressed with the thorough work you have done over the last decade to not only study Belhar amongst yourself, but also to allow others – including the URCSA - to bring their perspectives with regular intervals to your general synods. That you

plan to send Belhar back to your congregations for another two years, is also wise. This gives ample opportunity for explication in the life of congregations before a final decision is taken.

2.2 The second stage is common recognition.

The big question Reformed Christians ask when they receive a new confession is: Do we recognize in this confession the truth of the apostolic faith? And there are two ways to determine this: testing the consonance with Scripture, and judging the confession against earlier confessions. Only if the test against Scripture is passed, do we “recognize” the truth.

There are numerous references in your study documents to the fact that Belhar speaks the Word of God for our times. You have already recognized what many others have seen: Belhar is the truth, because it is in accordance with the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. (Reformers stand on the quia view!).

You have also seen that Belhar confirms your earlier confessions. There is a deep consonance between Belhar and the Three Formulae of Unity (the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession and Canons of Dordt). A detailed study also shows the strong bonds between Belhar and the most ecumenical of creeds, the Constantinopolitan-Nicene Creed from 381AD.¹

However, true to the nature of confessions, they not merely repeat Scripture and earlier confessions – they speak anew. They provide us with new insight into both the heresies and truths of our time. You were right to weigh Belhar and found that she speaks with - but also beyond - our earlier faith heritage. The way in which unity, reconciliation and justice are confessed, have never been done like this before. Our forebears also could not speak like this, because they were true to the demands of the gospel in their own time, like Belhar is true to our time.

Indeed, you have recognized Belhar as a gift of God to the church in our day. That in itself was and is a very important act. You have taken a small voice from the South seriously enough to say: “We see in your faith our faith too.” Thank you for doing that, and therewith strengthening the church in South Africa.

2.3 The third stage is common confession.

Actual confession can only happen if the prior explication and recognition have been sufficiently achieved. You are at this synod at the threshold between recognition and confession.

There is no logical or necessary movement from stages one and two to stage three. Many churches reflect on Belhar and recognize in it the gospel for our day, but nevertheless do not confess. My own church – regrettably – still stands at this point, but has fortunately decided to accept Belhar as confession in the process of church re-unification.

¹ Piet Naude 2004. “Confessing the one faith: Theological resonance between the creed of Nicea (325 AD) and the Confession of Belhar (1982 AD).” *Scriptura* 85, 35-53.

There are a multitude of reasons for not confessing. Some are theological, and hang together with the view of confessions themselves:

Let us be reminded that “confession-making” is a particular Reformed activity. The greater part of the Christian family (like the Lutherans, Catholics and Orthodox sisters and brothers) can in their view not accept new creeds/confessions; and others do in principle not accept confessions at all (like the Free- and non-creedal churches). With the rise of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, confessions moved even lower on the agenda of the church.

There are also non-theological reasons for not confessing, although they tend to be presented, and sometimes are camouflaged, in theological language.

Some see in Belhar a political witness, true to the times and in accordance with Scripture. It should be read in conjunction with, and on the same level as *The Witness to the Peoples of South Africa* (1968) and the influential *Kairos document* from 1985, but not on the level of a confession.

Others see Belhar as too contextual, too specifically focused on the South Africa of the 1980’s to qualify as a confession of the ecumenical church. For them Belhar is an important declaration like Barmen and the Leuenberger Concordie from which we learn how churches spoke in their specific situation, but it is not necessarily to be wider confessed.

There are Reformed Christians who state that Belhar does not witness to the whole gospel like for example the Heidelberg Catechism, but only highlights important themes from the gospel. It is therefore a partial reflection of the gospel like a good sermon, but it is not a confession.

Yes, sisters and brothers, I do not take your possible act of confession at this synod for granted. In fact, from my experiences in the DRC, I speak to you with holy fear and trembling. Experience and study over many years have brought a fundamental insight:

The act of confessing is a gift and a miracle. It happens because the Spirit is like a wind: you hear its sound, but you do not know whither it will blow. We confess not, taught Karl Barth, because we think it is a good thing to confess. We confess because we have no other option. We confess because God has hit us on the mouth and we cry out: Credo! (I believe).

3. MOTIVATION FROM FOUR CONTEXTS

Why would I prompt and support you to actually confess? Why is it so important that you move beyond recognition to common confession? Let me attempt to motivate this from the four contexts of the church in South Africa, in the USA, in the broader ecumenical family of churches, and the context of the RCA specifically.

3.1 The South African context

I am glad to report that the family of Dutch Reformed churches have recently renewed their common commitment to re-unification in one church after the establishment of separate churches for different race/cultural groups in 1881, 1911 and 1952. At its general synod this very past week, the Dutch Reformed Church clearly said that the debate around unity is not longer about “if”, but about “how”.

Belhar has no doubt complicated that process as those who might resist re-unification can use Belhar as insurmountable obstacle: “We cannot so easily re-unite with a church that now stands on a different confessional basis”. From those in the URCSA who have accepted Belhar, the counter-claim is clear: “No re-unification is possible without Belhar.”

The re-unification is now planned to include Belhar in the bigger re-united church although it will not be required that every pastor undersign the confession on the first day. We are sure that the confession will grow in the new church through preaching, liturgy, catechesis and experience.

If the RCA would decide to confess Belhar, it would give our long and painful process a great impetus. It would – apart from the *Verenigde Protestantse Kerk in België* – be the first full adoption of the confession outside SA. This will send a powerful message that Belhar has been judged to be worthy of acceptance on equal footing with our existing Reformed heritage. It will tell that *semper reformanda* – so often repeated – does also include the reformation and renewal of our confessional basis.

Although SA has undergone a relative peaceful transition to democracy and we have a stable constitutional state, the challenges of unity, reconciliation and specifically economic justice, are still looming large. Your confession would show that SA and its new challenges are not forgotten by the churches in the Northern hemisphere. Your confession would be a sign of solidarity that you stand with us in the new struggles we face, as you and others stood with us in our struggle against apartheid theology.

Yes, you would do it for our sake.

3.2 The USA context

I had the privilege of having been a research guest in your country for the past six months. This is too vast and complex a nation to make quick and general conclusions. But allow me in all humility to say why I believe you also need to confess the issues taken up in Belhar.

Unity

The freedom on which the country has been built, has turned into a libertarian spirit in the church. Unity and re-unification amongst those churches that could and should belong together, are not always pursued with the necessary vigor. Schismatic actions and denominational divisions are not seen as counter-witness to the prayer of Christ in John 17, but rather as expression of religious freedom. Mission is replaced by market competition amongst churches where not new Christians are brought in, but existing

ones “re-circulated”. A situation can be reached where religious consumerism supersedes sound theology in a scramble to attract people and satisfy their religious and experiential needs.

The sensitivities of Belhar – that Christ has only one body and gave his own flesh to bring unity, and that visible unity in freedom is both a gift and a task – are urgently needed amongst churches in the USA.

Reconciliation

Recent events have shown the deep divisions in this great nation. Racism “is still endemic to our society” and there is a general denial of history under the cloak of sentimental, Hollywood-style “universal culture”, states Wiliam H Willimon.² There is still the continued need for a “black history month”, and black bodies are – according to James Cone – still lynched today “whenever a people cry out to be recognized as human beings and society ignores them.”³

The proclamation of Belhar that reconciliation is possible in Christ and that cultural and other “natural” differences are gifts for the up-building of church and society, should be heard loudly and clearly all across America.

Justice

As undisputed economic, military and technological leader of the world, there rests a huge responsibility on the USA to use its immense power wisely. There remains, therefore, a crucial task for theologians, ethicists and church leaders in the US to urge the political powers of the day to actively support global ecological initiatives, and in a rational manner renegotiate the terms of global trade toward a fairer and more just system.

Let us be reminded that the inter-relations of security, politics and religion have shown themselves to be the main building blocks of inhuman “Christian” ideologies in the 20th century. Apartheid is an infamous example of this.

Let us follow Jesus in his openness to the physical and spiritual needs of those marginalized by culture, religion, or economics. We hear his teaching that it is better to give than to receive, and that the eschatological judgment will be based on our action toward the weakest and the smallest (Mt 25). In the context of a self-serving agenda by the religious leaders of his day, Jesus teaches that those who cling to life will surely lose it, and that those who show mercy to others are blessed (Mt 5).

The revelation of God as “in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged”, so eloquently confessed in the Belhar confession (article 4), is still as urgent as ever before.

² “Why we all can’t just get along. Racism as a Lenten issue,” *Theology Today* (53/4, January 1997), 485-490.

³ “Strange fruit. The cross and the lynching tree,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (Winter 2007), 47-55.

3.3 The catholic or ecumenical church

Just a few short remarks about our global situation:

Unity

If the churches in the world cannot show greater visibly unity, the world will not believe that God sent Christ as the savior of all humankind (John 17). Church union and re-union dialogues; dialogues amongst the great traditions of the Christian family with a view to celebrate common baptism and communion, are absolutely crucial in a world that yearns for precedents that unity is possible amidst diversity and deep historical separations. If we do not achieve more, Christ is re-crucified, and the power of the gospel denied.

Reconciliation

If the churches in the world do not demonstrate that we are counter-societies where there is no longer Jew and Greek, man and woman, boss and slave, how will the world believe in the power of reconciliation in Christ? If the churches are merely mirror-images of societal divisions between rich and poor, black and white, man and woman, educated and illiterate, we have become cultural-religious clubs that play church-church, but do not practically demonstrate God's embracing love (Gal 3:26-28). I often marvel at the fact that sociology ("birds of a feather...") is stronger than theology ("body of Christ") when it comes to the practice of being church.

Justice

If the churches in the world merely accept global economic, cultural and ecological injustices as if the powers behind these new configurations are blind, immutable laws of economics and politics, how will justice be established? Or have we resigned ourselves to the fact that many humanist efforts and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) with a clear vision have supplanted the churches in the spheres of public life?

4.3 The context of the RCA

Looking from the outside, Belhar has the potential to strengthen and sharpen the purpose and mission of the RCA. I think specifically of the purpose "to minister to the total life of all peoples... by all Christian good works", and the following of Christ in mission, "...in a lost and broken world so loved by God."

This will require discipleship, an important theme of the Belhar confession. Discipleship is not often mentioned as a core theme in Belhar. There is, however, no other way to read the fifth article that calls those who confess to turn their confession into reality.

A confession without action is like faith without works. The best way to dis-empower Belhar, is to accept it as confession and then nothing changes afterward; to see it as interesting, exotic product "out of Africa" with some curiosity value, but not as transformative Word of God.

I therefore wish to remind you: Confessing Belhar will raise serious questions for the RCA. You are best able to formulate them. My restricted view allows for the following:

*Do you love the unity of Christ's body more than your own tradition and history? Or have you become a typical denominational church that sees the boundaries of your church as the boundaries of the kingdom and of your own Christian identity?

*Are you willing to become a truly multi-cultural church that openly witnesses against racism, sexism and xenophobia no matter who is involved, and no matter how sensitive such witness may be politically?

*Are you – a rich, blessed, and middle class church in the North – willing to stand where God stood in Christ: with the outcast, marginalized, and socially marginalized members of American society and elsewhere in the world?

*Are you willing to follow Christ who did not cling to his Godhead, but humbled himself even unto the cross? Are you willing to be a kenotic church, a *doulos* (slave) church for the sake of others?

4. CONCLUSION

We all know that confessions in the earliest church did not start with dogmatic statements after careful deliberation by a synod commission. No, they were doxological utterances in reaction to the resurrected Christ. The early church did not “think up” the idea of Jesus Christ as Lord. This earliest confession was a reaction in praise and worship of their encounter with the post-Easter Jesus.

They could also not foresee what the ecclesial, political and economic consequences of that *kurios*-confession would be. In a sense, the act of confession is - humanly speaking - an irresponsible action, because you never know what might follow. When the DRM Church confessed in 1982 they and us in the DRC also did not know what would follow. It was politically dangerous and seen by some as ecclesial schism. We now know it was indeed a prophetic witness.

But exactly for reasons of uncertainty, Belhar is a confession both of faith and **in faith**. Because of his faith, the Scriptures tell us, Abraham left his land and his family *without knowing where he would come*. He sacrificed Isaac, his only son, because in faith he knew that the God of his faith-promise would provide – even if he (Abraham) did not know how (Heb. 11).

That is why we need to keep in mind the foundational theme of Belhar: Its reconfirmation of our Trinitarian faith, explicit in the first and last articles, and implicit in the three middle articles:

We are one because God is one; we seek reconciliation, but the three Persons of the Trinity exist in perfect, eternal co-existence; we seek justice, because the Trinity exhibits justice; and we are disciples exactly to make known the name of this God to the entire world.

The Triune God – so eloquently confessed in article one and praised in article five – is the One who not only called the church into existence, but is also the One who will keep it, now and forever more.

In the name of this God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit- I beseech you to confess. We in South Africa – and elsewhere - wait eagerly to hear good news from the RCA.

May God bless you.

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