

## THE CASE FOR THE BELHAR CONFESSION

By Dr. Jerry Tankersley

Dear sisters and brothers,

As a member of the General Assembly committee of 15 that recommended the Confession of Belhar to the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly for addition to our Book of Confessions, I have been watching and listening to the online and printed debate about Belhar throughout 2010. It has reinforced my conviction about a number of the arguments being used for and against inclusion. These are my responses:

**First, our church is in great need of biblical and theological study, discussion, conversation, and prayerful consideration of what we believe about the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Our Book of Order declares that **“The church reformed, always reforming,’ according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.” G-2.0200**

For many years, my hope for the spiritual renewal of the PCUSA has rested in our understanding of the centrality of our Lord Jesus Christ, the authority of Scripture, the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the guidance we receive through the Book of Confessions, and the covenant community that holds us accountable to the six great ends of the church. What concerns me now is a seeming unwillingness of some in our church to engage the Confession of Belhar in faithful study in dialogue with the biblical and theological witness that informed its authors.

It is not often that the whole church is presented with an opportunity to amend the first part of our Constitution. To do so requires two-thirds of our presbyteries to ratify the proposed amendment. Rather than mobilize our sessions and presbyteries for serious conversation about **“who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do” (G-2.0100, Book of Order)** we have heard that the larger church is uninformed about the meaning of Belhar, that we need more time to read the Confession or to use the Confession in worship. Therefore, we need to postpone our consideration of Belhar for a more favorable season.

My guess is that that time will not soon come. Perhaps this unwillingness to engage the Confession is simply a political strategy to defeat the overwhelming recommendation of the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. At a deeper level, I suspect, is the general frustration we experience in the PCUSA with serious biblical and confessional discussions. Perhaps, because of our diversity, we have retreated from the classical spiritual disciplines shared in community. Thus, our potential unity and mission are fragmented and weakened.

Some have suggested that the Book of Confessions may be in danger of becoming a library of historical confessions of faith which the average pastor places on his or her book shelves, but rarely reads for the sake of personal spiritual formation, theological guidance, or enrichment. After nearly ten years as a member of the Company of Pastors with the daily Scriptural and Confessional readings, I have realized how much we pastors need this discipline for the sake of our souls and for our leadership in the church.

I have come to believe that from the grassroots of the PCUSA we have a crisis related to our understanding and living of the gospel. Leslie Newbigen, the British missionary to India, wrote that the world is waiting to see a church that not only believes the gospel, but also lives it. But what is the good news that we are called to believe and to do? Belhar powerfully interprets the gospel around three central biblical and confessional terms of our Reformed tradition: **unity, reconciliation, and justice**. Our committee's pastoral letter to the 219<sup>th</sup> G.A. said,

**“The Belhar Confession joins the chorus of witnesses to God’s story of salvation embodied in our Book of Confessions. This gospel story reveals the eternal purpose, plan, and will of God who willed ‘to gather up (or unite) all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth’ (Ephesians 1:9-10). For the sake of the new creation, the one Triune God, the Holy One of Israel, became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. In his life, death, and resurrection, God acted in human history to make peace, to break down dividing walls of hostility, and to reconcile the cosmos and humanity to God’s Self and us as human beings to each other. Through the blood of Jesus’ cross, God’s mercy and grace rescued creation and human history from a hopeless bondage to the powers of sin and death. Through the amazing grace of God and by the faith which comes through God’s love revealed in Christ, Jews and Gentiles, circumcised and uncircumcised, sophisticated and barbarian, slave and free, male and female, all were joined together for the purpose of becoming one family of God, fellow citizens of the reign of God, and a holy temple of the Lord, being indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. This salvation is of God and from God, God’s gift from**

**beginning to end (2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Galatians 3:23-4:7; Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 1:13-23; 3:1-17)**

**As a new humanity we are called to live this grace, to actualize who we are in Christ: the one, reconciled, just people of God. The citizens of the Kingdom of God, united in Christ, baptized into Christ, welcomed at the one Table of the Lord, are to be a light to the nations of God's peace and justice. The visible unity of the people of God and the transformed character of this people are to witness to God's salvation in a still broken, violent, and divided world. Through the fruit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ is to be built up in the love of God for the sake of God's mission in the world. (Ephesians 4:1-32) As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to be ambassadors of Christ's reconciling peace, justice, and love. To the degree that the church has failed to be God's people and to live into the reality of God's will, we are called to repent and to work for the transformation of our life together."**

Belhar is a powerful advocate of God's salvation at work in and through the church for the sake of the world and the healing of the cosmos. I encourage the leadership of all of our churches and presbyteries to make the time to study the Confession in the light of the Scripture references provided. Test its vision by bringing it into dialogue with the other Creeds, Catechisms, and Confessions of the Book of Confessions. I believe you will find that Belhar rises to the level of being accepted and embraced as one of the important confessional statements of our Reformed tradition from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jesus is Lord!

**Secondly, it has been argued that Belhar trumps the truth of the gospel with an unbiblical emphasis on the unity of the church.**

God's mission in the history of Israel which came to fulfillment in Jesus Christ and in the one new humanity (the body of Christ), united in the Spirit for advancing the reign of God, is the truth of the gospel. The promises of God were fulfilled in Christ. He was the incarnate Word of God's grace and truth. (John 1:1-18) Through faith in Jesus, we enter a personal relationship with the One who is the way, the truth, and the life. We are born anew of the Spirit of God and called to walk in the light and truth of the One who dwells within us. As we abide in him, the fruit of the Spirit grows within us and we are transformed to be like Jesus. Therefore, we are committed to preserving the truth of God's Word, of God's gospel.

I am convinced that this is the message of Belhar. In reading the Book of Confessions one does not read any one part of it as if it were the whole. Belhar will stand along beside the other witnesses made over the past two thousand years. The church's understanding of the truth in all matters of its life must be informed by the witness of Scripture and our confessional tradition. For this reason, we need Belhar to support our thinking about unity, reconciliation, and justice, in the light of the good news of God's salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Thirdly, it has been argued that Belhar embraces the theology of liberation in its concern for the poor and oppressed.**

The biblical narrative celebrates the material world of abundance as the gift of God. (Psalm 24:1) Economic wealth is not seen in Scripture or in our

Confessions as an evil. Rather, the Christian and the church are given stewardship responsibilities for building up the church and the world so that all people may participate and share in the Lord's abundance. Jesus taught that God is good and provides the food, the clothing, and the shelter that God's people need. (Matthew 6 and Luke 12) We are exhorted to seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness in the trust that God will provide. Wealth may be used by God's people as a gift for the greater good. Riches may also become an end in themselves and capture us in bondage to a god that instructs us to hold on to what we think will sustain our lives, which tells us that we always need more, but which will finally fail. The Apostle Paul's words to Pastor Timothy provide wise counsel. (1 Timothy 6:11-19).

Belhar is concerned for economic justice for all. It is deeply rooted in the biblical vision of the justice of God's kingdom. One could point to many important Scriptures. But for illustration, read Luke 1:46-56; 4:16-19; 6:20-25; 14:12-25; 16:19-31; Isaiah 58; Micah 6:8; Galatians 2:10.

Jesus presented himself to his hometown synagogue at the beginning of his public ministry as the Spirit anointed Messiah called to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and to declare the acceptable year of the Lord, (Jubilee), (Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:16-19). Jubilee was the 49<sup>th</sup> year within Israel in which debts were to be canceled, slaves set free, lands restored, and the rich and the poor provided a new beginning within a just society. (Leviticus 25) To be Jesus' disciples meant to follow him in his living under the reign of God's justice and peace in the kingdom. This was God's mission

through Jesus and it is God's mission through his church. We are called to be a Jubilee people.

This means liberation from the powers of sin and death. This calls the church to a cruciform identity and destiny in devotion to the righteousness of God's kingdom. This means sharing Jesus' spirituality and mission priorities. This is the reality the world longs to see and into which the church is called to live. It is a gift of grace from beginning to end, but it is the costly grace of God that finds expression in gratitude for God's gifts. This gratitude sets us on the path of self-sacrificing stewardship on behalf of the mission of God. This was exactly the argument that the Apostle Paul made concerning the Jerusalem offering for the poor which he was collecting. (2Corinthians 8 and 9) It is this spirit of grace and gratitude that is at the base of the Belhar Confession.

**Fourthly, it is argued that Belhar, with its emphasis on the reconciliation of the races, would be repetitive in the Book of Confessions.**

Since the Confession of 1967 addressed the issues of poverty and race so powerfully, why does the church need another Confession built around the themes of reconciliation and justice?

One simple response to this concern is that the great themes of our Reformed tradition flow through each document in the BOC. I believe that the church has a special need to be instructed on the continuing dangers of violence and warfare, of the division between the rich and the poor, and between those of differing races, tribes, and peoples. (Confession of 1967, 9.41-46)

Our nation's historical struggles with these dangers and divisions call us to be aware of the continuing legacy of a narrow nationalism, a controlling greed, and a heritage of racism in many hearts and social structures. The committee's pastoral letter to the G.A. and the rationale for adoption of Belhar, printed in the **Proposed Amendments to the Constitution—Part 2 of 3**, state,

**Today, like those in South Africa, we celebrate the remarkable transformation of our societies with the lowering of legal barriers; yet we mourn the painful legacies of long years of segregation. Inequalities of resources of education, of health care, of employment opportunities, of respect by society, have left both our societies with vast gaps between the life possibilities of the dominant white society and those of people of color. Recent political discourse has alerted us to the degree to which racism remains alive in our national life and lays responsibility upon the church to address it. P. 4**

**Fifthly, from reviewing arguments against the adoption of Belhar, it appears that many in our churches believe it will function as a tool for a gay rights agenda in regard to ordination and same sex marriage.**

In my own Presbytery, this fear was articulated as the elephant in the room. Indeed, after being pressed by a series of G.A. votes on the deletion of **G-6.0106b**, a deep mistrust of any action of the G.A. to amend or to change our polity or Confessional tradition has infected our life together. It is feared that Belhar may be misused, even as Scripture has been misread, dismissed, or neglected for the sake of achieving a recognition of behavior that many consider

inconsistent with God's will revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

This continues to be one of the major issues that divide our churches and which separates us into different theological affinity groups that promote their own agendas in regard to a number of issues before the larger church. We have a hermeneutical problem in how we read and interpret Scripture and Confessions. In this we are not unlike most Mainline Protestant denominations in the western world. The surrounding culture does not help; in fact, it often shapes and divides us before we are baptized into Christ. The consequences are that we have lost trust and civility in our life together. Our attitudes and speech toward one another further polarizes, harms, and wounds those for whom Christ died, but who hold different theological world views and personal identities not our own. As a people, we desperately need to come together in humility, grace, and openness to dialogue in submission to our authoritative texts and the illumination of the Spirit. Why? Because we are the church that Jesus came to save and to rescue from our own selves! We need God's wisdom and we need one another in pursuit of God's wisdom revealed in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

I cannot speak for the committee of 15 that recommended Belhar for inclusion in the BOC. These are my personal views. I believe that the committee of 15 desired to affirm that Belhar was about the gospel's power to unite, to reconcile, and to inspire God's mission of justice in our deeply wounded church and world. In particular, we were unanimous about Belhar speaking to the issue of racial justice in a nation that practiced apartheid (South Africa) and that its call

for unity, reconciliation, and justice had specific relevance for the church in America, given our history of slavery, Civil War, racism, and segregation.

We did not study or discuss sexual ethics in the light of Belhar. I suspect there were different points of views. What was important was that we enjoyed working together as brothers and sisters in Christ of different races, cultures, languages, and world views, yet united in our devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, to his mission in the world through us, and to our desire to affirm the integrity of our Reformed tradition. It was a glimpse of the coming kingdom of God and it was enriching to me spiritually, socially, and intellectually. It gave me hope for the PCUSA.

From my perspective, the issue of sexual orientation and behavior needs to be addressed out of biblical texts that call for the embrace of sinners into a transforming fellowship of the people of God within which persons may struggle in responsible freedom with sins of all kinds and seek acceptance, forgiveness, healing, and transformation. I believe we are all (hetero-sexual, homosexual, etc.) deeply broken and wounded in our sexual orientations, attitudes, and behaviors. I believe the power of God's gifts of grace, mercy, love, and justice bring discipline, self-control, transformed identity, and a deep desire for personal holiness of life according to the will of God revealed in Scripture. Inevitably, the church will have tension and conflict over issues of ethical behaviors in many areas. I do not wish to see a church that is either legalistic or libertine, but a church whose behavioral norms reflect the integrity of the gospel and three thousand years of God's people's struggles to be a light in a spiritually and morally confused world. The Confession of 1967, 9.47, witnesses to this concern.

**The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time.**

Therefore, I have been and continue to be an advocate of G-6.106b and its inclusion in the Book of Order. This will remain my conviction until a convincing case can be made from Scripture that there is no biblical sexual ethic to which Christians are responsible. These are my convictions. I believe these convictions are nurtured by God's intentions within creation (Genesis 1 and 2), by Jesus' words (Mark 10:2-12), and by the Apostle Paul's teachings (Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6 and 7, Galatians 5, Ephesians 5:3-32, Colossians 3). I am aware that many will not agree with me, but I hold this conviction as being consistent with my advocacy of Belhar.

What this means also is that I am committed to working for the unity, reconciliation, and justice of God's kingdom within the church and within our larger society. This is not a time for us to threaten schism from the church for which Jesus died. Our church is big enough and strong enough for us all to stay at the visible Table of the Lord as God's chosen, forgiven, and transformed people. This means bearing the cross of our Lord's suffering for a broken world and continuing to love even those with whom we disagree. It means learning from those with whom we disagree.

It would be helpful for the whole church to read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, **Life Together**. In a troubled time in the history of Germany, in full support

of the 1934 Theological Declaration of Barmen, Bonhoeffer argued that life together in Christian community is always a gift of God. He confessed that we all bring certain expectations into the church. These he called “wish dreams”. The result is that we work hard to press the church to conform to our notions of what persons ought to be and what churches ought to do. Sooner or later our “wish dreams” are shattered and we discover the central truth of the gospel that we have life together only in and through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. But this grace is not cheap grace. This is the costly grace of God that works for the transformation of every dimension of our body and soul.

This too is God’s mission in the life of the believer and the church. C.S. Lewis, in **Mere Christianity**, argued that each day the believer clothes himself or herself with Christ. We dress up like Christ knowing that we are not Christ and that we stand in the righteousness of Christ alone. The amazing truth is that God is at work in and through us to make us “little Christ’s”. Most of us thought we were only in for a “cosmetic remake”. Sooner or later we realize that God is doing a complete rebuild of our house, of our lives, and it hurts. It may take a life time, but God is determined to restore us into the persons he created humans to be from the beginning. So the church lives between the already and the not yet of the New Creation. In this in-between time it suffers, it is riddled with conflict and heresy. Yet God is faithful to God’s justified, sanctified, and glorified people. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. (Romans 8:28-39)

In conclusion, I believe this is a **kairos** time for our church. In this time we may be encountered by God in a new way. We may come to pray as if our lives depended upon it, and they do. We may discover one another in a new and life

saving way. We will likely discover how much we have in common in Christ. A whole new level of trust may emerge in our fellowship. Ancient fears and hostilities may be calmed and healed. Our preoccupation with our own inner dysfunctions may be transformed by a new outward seeing and listening to a world that is moving toward chaos and self-destruction, yet which still has persons and voices that are waiting to bless us. Out of this stressing time of our history may be born a deeper freedom in Christ, for Christ, and for the world for which he lived and died and for which he still lives and prays. Jesus is Lord and he is coming soon. Our Lord come!

Grace and Peace,

Pastor Jerry Tankersley

Laguna Presbyterian Church, Laguna Beach, California