

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Assembly sends Belhar Confession to presbyteries for inclusion in Book of Confessions

June 18, 2014



Quinn Fox moderator of Committee 14, Theological Issues and Institutions reports in plenary at the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the PC(USA) in Detroit, MI on Wednesday, June 18, 2014. —Danny Bolin

General Assembly News

BOB SLOAN

By an overwhelming vote, the 221st General Assembly (2014) sent a proposed amendment to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s *Book of Confessions* that would add the Belhar Confession, which has its roots in the struggle against apartheid.

Before it can be added to the denomination's confessions, the Belhar would have to be ratified by 115, or two-thirds, of the denomination's 171 presbyteries – each by a two-thirds vote – within the next year. Then the 221nd General Assembly (2016) must again approve inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*. Belhar would join the 11 Eurocentric creeds and confessions in the second part of the PC(USA) Constitution. It would also be the first addition to the *Book of Confessions* in nearly 30 years.

The report and recommendations from the General Assembly Special Committee on the Confession of Belhar was approved 551-87, or 86 percent.

Based on the sub-themes of unity, justice and reconciliation, the Belhar Confession was written in 1982 during the period of South African apartheid. It was adopted as a confession of faith by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986 and has

since been adopted by numerous denominations around the world, including the Reformed Church of America.

The 219th General Assembly (2010) approved inclusion of Belhar by a vote 525-150-3, but it failed to gain approval by the presbyteries, falling eight votes short (108-63) of the required super majority.

At the 220th General Assembly (2012), a special committee was created to study Belhar and create educational material to be distributed both in print and online. It was this report that commissioners approved on Wednesday.

Committee on Theological Issues and Institutions and CE Moderator Quinn Fox, a teaching elder commissioner from the Presbytery of National Capital, chose to introduce the committee's recommendation to approve the Confession of Belhar by reading the opening paragraph of a letter written by the special committee to accompany the confession. The Committee had amended its recommendation to not have the letter accompany the confession in the amendment package sent to the presbyteries.

"The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is again facing a critical time in its history," Fox read. "We are rent apart by division and schism, we have yet to confront directly and confess the racism that has been a significant force in our own history, and we have shown a failure of resolve to make courageous stands for justice. We believe that the Confession of Belhar, a profound statement on unity, reconciliation, and justice in the church, comes to us as a word

from God for this particular time and place for the PC (USA)."

Responding to a question from a commissioner, Fox explained that after much deliberation, the committee felt "the letter might get in the way of the confession and give presbyteries reason to not be in favor of the confession." He said the letter would be available on the PC(USA) website and in education materials made available by the Office of the General Assembly.

Three people spoke in favor of approving including Belhar in the Book of Confessions.

Ruling Elder Commissioner Susie Krivenko, Presbytery of Elizabeth, said it is time "to use this confession to open conversations within our denomination about racism in our society."

Teaching Elder Laurie Hartzell, Presbytery of Lake Michigan, said, "Belhar claims unity as a gift and obligation. This confession can help mentor us through the power of the Holy Spirit into a new day."

Citing the theme of the 221st General Assembly, Teaching Elder Commissioner Chris Carasco, Presbytery of Charlotte, said Belhar was "the strongest reason we have to abound in hope. We need to hear it today as much as South African did in the 1980s."

The Assembly also

approved recognition of the 500th birthday of John Knox and the designation of October as the John Knox memorial month,

approved M. Craig Barnes as president of Princeton Theological Seminary,

heard a presentation by David Gambrell, associate for Theology with the Presbyterian Mission Agency, on an updated Directory for Worship in the *Book of Order*. Approved forwarding the draft of the proposed directory to the church for study and comment in consideration of submitting it to the 222nd General Assembly (2016) for approval,

heard a presentation by Kathy Wolf Reed, chair of Committee on Theological Education, on the denomination's 11 seminaries and the 100th anniversary of the Assembly Training School, and

recognized Jack B. Rogers and Cynthia M. Campbell as recipients of the Award for Excellence in Theological Education.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Major themes of the Belhar Confession explored in *Being Reformed* study

Presbyteries to vote on confession's inclusion in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions

July 15, 2014

Louisville

Explore what it means to be a confessional church and to meet and confess our faith in the face of racism in its various forms with *Being Reformed: The Confession of Belhar*.

This introductory six-session study focuses on the major themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice in the context of the Church's Trinitarian belief. It is written by renowned Presbyterian scholar Dr. Cynthia Holder Rich, who served on the Special Committee on the Confession of Belhar for the 221st General Assembly (2014).

The Belhar Confession emerged from South Africa as a witness of Christian faith against the sins of racism. Penned in 1982, the confession has been adopted by many denominations, including the Reformed Church in America.

The 221st General Assembly voted to include the confession in the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions*, but before it can be added two-thirds of presbyteries must also vote to approve. Then the 222nd General Assembly (2016) will vote to solidify the inclusion. If that happens, the Belhar Confession will be the first addition to the *Book of Confessions* in nearly 25 years.

Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding is a series of biblically based studies that provides adult participants with a foundational understanding of the Reformed faith. Each six-session study—written by well-known and respected scholars—features Scripture, prayer, in-depth commentary, and questions for reflection.

The Confession of Belhar is available at pcusastore.com. It also can be downloaded in user-friendly e-reader formats for Kindle and iBooks.

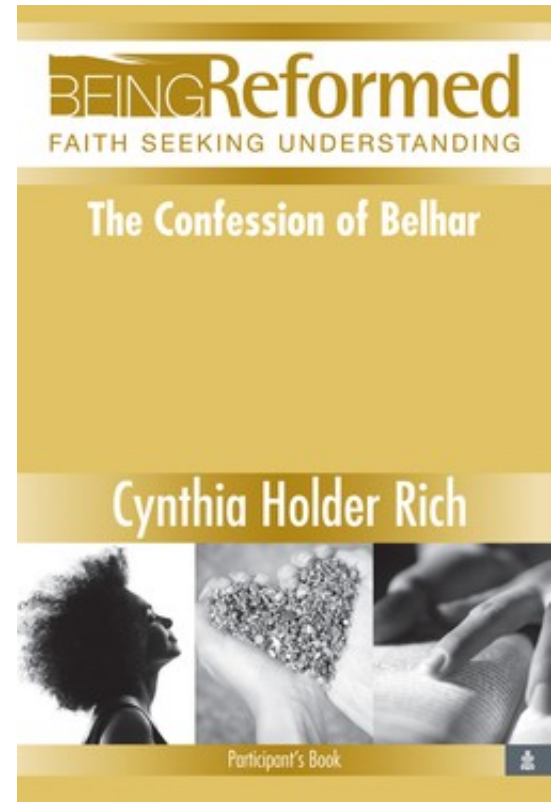
Learn more about *Being Reformed* at pcusa.org/curriculum.

Topics: Curriculum

Tags: adult study, being reformed, belhar, curriculum, cynthia holder rich

Ministries: Curriculum

Agency: Presbyterian Mission Agency



Congregational
Ministries Publishing

**ROBIN RUEFF, ASSOCIATE FOR
PROMOTIONS**

CONTACT PC(USA):

Phone: (800) 728-7228

Email: info@pcusa.org

100 Witherspoon Street Louisville, KY 40202 [Terms of use](#) | [Privacy policy](#)

*preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful . . .” (5.004) The conviction that the Word of God preached is the Word of God is not based on an overly high view of the preacher, but on the belief that when the Scriptures are proclaimed, the Spirit works through that proclamation. If it is the Word that is proclaimed, then what is preached is considered the Word of God even if the minister who preaches it “be evil and a sinner.” Because the Special Committee believes that the Confession of Belhar is derived from Scripture, thoroughly immersed in Scripture, and reflects the long arc of Scripture, it is confident that the claim that “it is a word from God” is faithful to our confessional tradition without any confusion of elevating it to the status of Scripture. We would commend the resource written by Steve Hayner and Mark Labberton, *The Bible and Belhar* (<http://www.pcusa.org/resource/bible-and-belhar/>).*

10. Who else has adopted the Belhar Confession?

The Reformed Church of America adopted Belhar in 2010 as a “Doctrinal Standard.” (<https://www.rca.org/BelharConfession/>). The Christian Reformed Church in North America in 2012 adopted Belhar as “an ‘Ecumenical Faith Declaration’ of the Christian Reformed Church.” (<http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/ecumenical-faith-declaration/confession-belhar>) Numerous Reformed Churches around the world have also adopted Belhar in some way (<http://wrc.ch/belhar-confession/>).

11. How many Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) presbyteries voted to adopt the Belhar Confession?

The tally of presbytery voting on Belhar following the 219th General Assembly (2010) was Yes, 108 and No, 63. An amendment to the Book of Confessions requires an affirmative vote by 2/3 of the presbyteries, or 116 votes.

12. Why is the General Assembly moving so quickly to consider the Belhar Confession again?

National Capital Presbytery submitted an overture to the 220th General Assembly (2012) to consider Belhar again. In the rationale for their overture, they wrote, “The Presbytery of National Capital, a multiracial inclusive presbytery with a history of activism in civil rights, voted on June 28, 2010, in favor of inclusion of the Confession of Belhar, in spite of knowledge that the denominational vote had already failed. The action taken now represents the presbytery claiming its prophetic voice.”

13. How do you respond to some of the early concerns about adopting the Belhar Confession?

The Belhar is not biblical. The Special Committee commissioned a resource to directly answer this question: “The Bible and Belhar.” You can find it at: <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/bible-and-belhar/>

The Belhar is not Christological. Belhar’s theological focus is on the doctrine of the church and on Christian living and ethics, but in its short text there are approximately 30 separate references to Jesus Christ (“Jesus Christ,” “Christ,” and “the Son”) and ends with the affirmation that Jesus is Lord.

The Book of Confessions is large enough as it is. There is no doubt that the *Book of Confessions* is a thick book. However, our tradition is one that recognizes the value of stating our unchanging faith in ways that speak to changing contexts for that faith. The Confession of Belhar does that for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

14. If the Belhar Confession is adopted, what will be the effect on the Presbyterian Church?

While the Special Committee strongly supports the adoption of the Confession of Belhar, it is even more interested in a deep engagement by the PC(USA) on the themes of Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice in a church where racial, cultural, and class divisions continue to divide us and weaken our witness to Jesus Christ.

Frequently Asked Questions About the Confession of Belhar*



* Produced by the Special Committee on the Confession of Belhar, www.pcusa.org/belhar

1. What is the Confession of Belhar?

The Confession of Belhar is a powerful confession of Christian faith that emerged in South Africa during the years of Apartheid. It is named for the city in South Africa where it was first adopted. It is a statement that focuses on three themes, Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice, in a church environment where racial separation made it impossible for brothers and sisters in Christ to worship together or come to the Lord's Table together. Churches around the globe have recognized the power and theological insight of Belhar as an expression of Scriptural truth for their own contexts.

2. What is a confession and how does it function in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

THE PURPOSE OF CONFSSIONAL STATEMENTS

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in *The Book of Confessions*. In these statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do. These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Reformed Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers. (*Book of Order* F-2.01)

3. Who wrote the Belhar Confession?

The Belhar Confession was originally adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church as it protested the sin of apartheid. Just a few years later it became the confession of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, the reunion of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. The two principal authors were Russel Botman and Dirkie Smit.

4. Does Belhar focus primarily on the church's unity or confessing Christ?

Belhar very clear proclaims the Lordship of Christ. The confession begins with an affirmation of the Trinity and ends with the most basic confession: Jesus is Lord.

The call for unity is in response to Jesus' prayer in John 17 that we might all be one. The call for reconciliation is our response to the reconciliation between God and humanity accomplished by Christ on the cross.

5. Is Belhar really just another way to promote church acceptance of homosexual ordination and marriage?

Belhar makes no mention of sexuality or marriage issues. Once a confession is adopted, the church may find that confession to shed light on a wide variety of issues; however, Belhar is focused on unity, reconciliation, and justice within a context of forced separation of races.

6. Why should we adopt a confession that addresses the issues of another country and the sins of another culture? Isn't Belhar just about one particular time and place?

"Confessions address the issues, problems, dangers and opportunities of a given historical situation." (BOC pp. xv)

Historically, the confessions have been a written response to particular situations. For example, the Westminster Confession spoke specifically to the role of the monarchy and the sovereignty of God. The Barmen Declaration addressed the sin of idolatry during the rise of national socialism in Germany in the 1930's.

In these cases, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has made the judgment that these confessions written in particular situations articulate for the PC(USA) who we are, what we believe, and what we resolve to do (F2.01). Only two of our eleven confessional statements were written by the Presbyterian Church. Each of the others has become our confession. The Confession of Belhar should only become a confession of the PC(USA) if the church determines that it, like these others, expresses our faith: "In these statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do."

7. Why should we, 21st century North American Presbyterians care?

The Special Committee on the Confession of Belhar has proposed that the General Assembly adopt an Accompanying Letter to express its conviction that Belhar is important for our church. It begins with these words:

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is again facing a critical time in its history. We are rent apart by division and schism, we have yet to directly confront and confess the racism that has been a significant force in our own history, and we have shown a failure of resolve to make courageous stands for justice. We believe that the Confession of Belhar, a profound statement on unity, reconciliation, and justice in the church, comes to us as a word from God for this particular time and place for the PC(USA).

We understand confession as both the church's response to human sin and as witness to our faith. Confession by the church is necessary because sin is present in social injustice and our conscious or unconscious participation in human suffering. Confession is not a way to cast aspersions or in any way denigrate, castigate, or delimit any person or group of persons. We the church are called to confess sin because the Word of God as revealed in and through the life of Jesus Christ and the Holy Scriptures calls us to bear witness to a just, loving, and compassionate Creator.

8. Why include a PC(USA) accompanying letter?

The Special Committee unanimously recommended Belhar because it believes that Belhar's confession of the faith in its time and place speaks to our expression of the faith in our time and place. The accompanying letter is the Special Committee's articulation of that connection—an effort to show how Belhar can shape our faith in twenty-first century North America.

The PC(USA) has not dealt in depth with issues of racism that divided the church in the past, and today, and the Confession of Belhar addresses the theological reasons for unity, reconciliation and justice. These theological reasons apply to our past and present context and the accompanying letter delivers a theological statement about how the Confession of Belhar is a confession for the PC(USA).

9. The Accompanying Letter refers to Belhar "as a word from God for this particular time and place for the PC(USA)." Does this mean that Belhar is being elevated to the status of Scripture?

The Westminster Confession says clearly that councils and confessions are a help to the faith and the understanding of scripture and are not to be equated with scripture or considered without error: "All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both." (6.175) The Special Committee would never want anyone to confuse Belhar with the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament.

That being said, our confessions have an interesting way of articulating how God's Word comes to us, particularly in the 2nd Helvetic Confession. This confession begins with an affirmation of the authority of scripture: "We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God . . ." (5.001) After expanding the depth of this conviction, the confession goes on to say that "The Preaching Of The Word Of God Is The Word Of God: Wherefore when this Word of God is now