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The Belhar Confession

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Editorial Committee: John Cooper, Duane
Kelderman, Kathy Smith.

Designer: Paul Stoub, Stoub Graphics

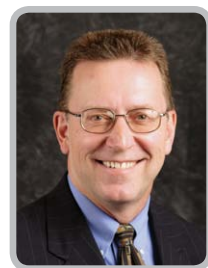
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CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
3475 MAINWAY, LCD STN 1
BURLINGTON, ON L7M 1A9
email: forum@calvinseminary.edu

from the president

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

From biblical times till the present, Christians have united the church, fought heresy, testified to outsiders, defied persecution, taught newcomers, and worshiped God—all by the use of creeds and confessions. Also by the use of catechisms, canons, and testimonies. These documents are of immense value, especially when people care deeply about them.

So it is with the Belhar Confession. Forged in the fires of racial injustice in South Africa in 1986, the Belhar Confession speaks eloquently to the need for unity, reconciliation, and justice in the church. The church should witness to these great realities, model them to the world, and become an agent for spreading them. All because of the costly work of Jesus Christ—the one through whom God was reconciling the world to himself.

In 2009, the Synod of the CRCNA, in an unprecedented move, proposed to Synod 2012 “the adoption of the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.”

Response to Synod’s proposal has varied, including among the members of our faculty. In this issue we expose some of our own thinking. Professor Mariano Avila writes movingly of how the Belhar is a cry from the heart “that we will never understand unless we hear it with our hearts.” Professor Lyle Bierma writes of the purposes of confessions and applauds the Belhar as an apt instrument for these purposes. Professor John Bolt provides a sobering review of global “blood sins” and commends the Belhar for its “powerful and necessary testimony” against such sins. But he observes that the Belhar lacks a gospel emphasis on repentance and forgiveness as the heart of reconciliation—and, really, the only real hope for it. Professor John Cooper frames his discussion of the Belhar Confession ecumenically: the CRCNA belongs to the World Communion of Reformed Churches, an organization big enough to include confessional churches, like our own, but also churches with progressive agendas and universalist tendencies. The problem with the Belhar is that it is ambiguous enough to be claimed as a friend by both kinds of churches. Professor Ronald Feenstra finds in the Belhar a compelling call to American Christians to embody the gospel message—which, like that of the prophets, *does* make God “in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.”

Read and see what you think.

Grace and peace,

Neal



Reflections

ON THE BELHAR CONFESSION

Confession of Belhar

September 1986

1. **We believe** in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.
2. **We believe** in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

We believe

- that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another (Eph. 2:11-22); that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16);
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted (John 17:20-23);
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one

another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity (Phil. 2:1-5; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; John 13:1-17; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; Eph. 4:1-6; Eph. 3:14-20; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 1 Cor. 11:17-34; Gal. 6:2; 2; Cor. 1:3-4);

- that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-11; Eph. 4:7-13; Gal. 3:27-28; James 2:1-13);

- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church.

Therefore, 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 a 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.

3. We believe

- that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ, that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Cor. 5:17-21; Matt. 5:13-16; Matt. 5:9; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21-22).

The Belhar Confession

- that 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 (Eph. 4:17-6:23; Rom. 6; Col. 1:9-14; Col. 2:13-19; Col. 3:1-4:6);
- that the credibility of this message 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;
- that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Synod 2009 adopted the following statement in introducing the Belhar Confession to the CRCNA:

As Synod 2009 brings the Belhar Confession before the church for consideration, synod shares with the whole church the profound nature of this moment in the life of the church and therefore one that must not be entered into lightly but rather with godly fear and trembling, humbly trusting that we will be faithful to the gospel. With these understandings synod proposes to Synod 2012 the adoption of the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

Since Scripture is the only rule of faith and practice, our confessions are and must be historic and faithful witnesses to Scripture. Synod observes that the Belhar Confession truly expresses the biblical goals of unity, reconciliation, and justice; the church's commitment to these goals; and the fact that "true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church" (The Belhar Confession, Article 2).

Synod further observes that, as a faithful witness to Scripture, the Belhar Confession does not negate the biblically derived statements of synod on homosexuality, including those of 1973 and 1996. Finally, synod recognizes that injustice and enmity between peoples are two dimensions of all-pervasive human sinfulness, for which every human being needs Jesus Christ as Savior.

Therefore, we 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.

4. We believe

- that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; 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;
- that God calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
- that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;

- that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right (Deut. 32:4; Luke 2:14; John 14:27; Eph. 2:14; Isa. 1:16-17; James 1:27; James 5:1-6; Luke 1:46-55; Luke 6:20-26; Luke 7:22; Luke 16:19-31; Ps. 146; Luke 4:16-19; Rom. 6:13-18; Amos 5);
- that 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;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology

- which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

5. **We believe** that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence (Eph. 4:15-16; Acts 5:29-33; 1 Peter 2:18-25; 1 Peter 3:15-18).

Jesus is Lord. To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory for ever and ever.

Note: This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the confession as it was adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986. In 1994 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). This inclusive language text was prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Making Shalom: The Belhar Confession

For years the CRCNA has made efforts to become a multi-ethnic church and to promote racial justice. The adoption of the Belhar Confession will help the CRC move closer to this goal, and will enrich the confessional character of our church by putting in a central place biblical teachings that are at the heart of the gospel. In addition, adopting the Belhar will help us in our ministry in the world, for the Belhar speaks in a powerful way to the sinful racist realities that are far from being eradicated from our hearts and societies. The Belhar comes to us with a concrete historical model on how to make *shalom* in the midst of the forces of evil and death.

Biblical Character

The Belhar has made three basic doctrines of the gospel a matter of confession:

- *The unity of the church.* In this respect, the Belhar goes beyond a formal and abstract oral confession; its meaning and concrete expression are vividly expressed through the context of one of the worst contemporary cases of crimes against humanity. Unity was at the heart of the eternal plan of God for the church (Eph. 1:9-10; John 17) and was fulfilled by Jesus, the artisan of *shalom*: Jesus' death on the cross (Col. 1:20-22) made a new reconciled humanity (Eph. 2:15), clothed with justice and truth (Eph. 4:24) and equipped to overcome the forces of evil (Eph. 6:14).
- *Reconciliation.* In its full expression, reconciliation is both with God and with each other (Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:14-18). This is one of the ways in which the Gospel describes the meaning of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension (Matt., Rom., 1 and 2 Cor., Eph., Col.).
- *A call to live God's justice* in practical terms. "Faith without works is dead."

The Belhar shows how one of the main commandments of the Law, "love your neighbor as yourself," is expressed in concrete acts of justice to those who have been sinned against by those who abuse their power (Isa. 1:10-22; 3:16-24; 5:8; Hos. 8:14; 12:8; Amos 3:15; 5:11, 21-24; 8:5-6; 2:6-8; Mic. 2:1-2; 3:9-12; 7:3; Jer. 22:13; Matt. 25:31-46; Rom. 12; James 2:1-13; 5:1-6; 1 John 3:11-20).

Contemporary and Educational Significance

In the Belhar, *confession*, *forgiveness*, and *reconciliation* are not only practiced in liturgical actions; they are described as day-to-day practices by which a new society is being woven out of many broken pieces. A society brutalized, humiliated, violated, and raped at many different levels is being rebuilt with tears in the eyes and pain in the heart. This is a case of genuine costly grace, one of the few contemporary models of *shalom*-making that continues to inspire and challenge us. The Belhar expresses the firm determination of producing a society in which there is a place for everyone—a society in which every human being is valued, treated with dignity, justice, and respect regardless of her or his race, and has equal opportunities to flourish in *shalom*.

We make this confession not as a contribution to a theological debate nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand.
(Prologue)

The Belhar Confession is a brave and painful expression of faith, a "cry from the heart" that we will never understand unless we hear it with our hearts. It is a

by Mariano
Avila,
Professor of New
Testament



cry that comes out of the depths of human suffering—suffering that was legitimated and justified theologically by Reformed Christians. This was not a rare case or the only one in contemporary history. That is why the Belhar not only confesses the key biblical doctrines we believe in, but also repeatedly "rejects any doctrine and ideology" that goes *in practice* against them. This is a practical way to maintain healthy churches and to avoid *in everyday life* the things we declare to oppose.

As members of a materially rich denomination, sheltered from and alien to the unbearable sufferings of sisters and brothers in the majority of the world, we are welcomed to *commune* with them and begin to understand what it means to be a suffering, martyr church. If we miss this cry from the heart, this lament, we will have used our comfort and prosperity against ourselves. We will have lost a part of our humanity. We will have failed to honor God.

"In view of the times in which we stand," the regular confession of the Belhar will educate us to "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before [our] God" (Mic. 6:8) as we face our own challenges, temptations, and sins. The Belhar will train us to hear the many cries from the heart that today are being expressed in our cities, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and churches.

We are aware that the only authority for such a confession and the only grounds on which it may be made are the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God.... This confession must be seen as a call to a continuous process of soul-searching together, a joint-wrestling with the issues, and a readiness to repent.... Our prayer is that

Making Shalom

this act of confession ... will be reconciling and uniting. (Prologue)

The Belhar Confession can help the CRCNA by challenging us to avoid a common mistake made by our churches in North America: to repeat constantly and even cherish a rhetoric of multi-ethnicity and racial justice without taking it to its concrete and practical implications. Charles Villa-Vicencio, a South African scholar, says the Belhar Confession

challenges the uncritical affirmation of a “few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition” which are repeatedly affirmed within [our] church statements: reconciliation, justice and non-violence. In so doing it shows how even the most orthodox and pious Christian critique of oppression can be no more than a . . . conscience-saving exercise, while allowing oppression to persist.

We must ask ourselves in the CRCNA how our explicit commitment to a multi-ethnic church and racial justice shows in our political administrative structures, our budgets, our programs, our Christian schools and churches, our missionary efforts, our educational tasks, and our partnerships. The Bible makes the way a nation (or God’s people) responds to the “quartet of the vulnerable” (Wolterstorff) a central criterion of its health and

greatness; we have a lot to think about and do in our honest search to be a multi-ethnic and anti-racist faith community.

The Belhar is pertinent because concrete manifestations of evil are with us and continue to show their horrible faces throughout the world: *apartheid* as real walls of hostility that separate peoples (Eph. 2:14); criminalization of hunger; groups targeting and using violence against racial minorities; ethnic cleansings; and economic exploitation, to mention just a few. As Stephen Lewis says, “The real immorality is . . . for the most wealthy and privileged countries in the world to fail to respond adequately to the life-and-death struggles of hundreds of millions of impoverished people.”

Liturgical Significance

As a “call to a continuous process of soul-searching together, a joint-wrestling with the issues, and a readiness to repent,” the Belhar can help us in the CRCNA identify and repent not for only our individual and personal sins but also for those in which we participate socially and globally. The Belhar may help us to recover the practical implications of a cardinal belief of Reformed faith: total depravity. It is quite common to think of sin(s) just in terms of our own sinful nature; we rarely go beyond its personal and individual expressions. Sometimes, when we do look at the structural, social, and global realities

of sin, we in North America immediately move to our default mode: evil is found in *other* places, peoples, and races. From the position of our ideological silos we assign human sinfulness to those who are on the *other* side of a political party, of our geographical borders, of the racial walls, or of our fenced neighborhoods.

The Belhar can lead us to a deep and transforming *confession of sins and repentance*. And out of that confession we may be able to do another type of confession, this time of our faith. The Belhar teaches us to confess our faith in teachings that are at the heart of the gospel: *unity, forgiveness, and reconciliation*, over against the powers of death and evil in *their concrete historical manifestations*. And we urgently need to express our faith in terms that respond to all these realities that plague our world—even here in North America.

To stand in our CRC churches and confess through the Belhar our unity and solidarity with our sisters and brothers in South Africa, and in the suffering majority world, is a unique privilege we do not deserve and yet are graciously invited to do. To be able to hear the confession of faith emerging from the “cauldron of black Christian suffering and reflection” and to be willing to join it with a sincere and committed “Amen” is a miracle of God’s grace.

“Our prayer is that this act of confession . . . will be reconciling and uniting.”

Adopting the Belhar: Confession or Testimony?

The Christian Reformed Church is on the verge of doing something it has never done before: adopt another confession. Our other three confessions—the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort—were inherited from our parent denomination, the Reformed Church in America, when we broke away in 1857. We also supplemented those confessions with a less authoritative

“contemporary testimony,” *Our World Belongs to God*, in 1986. But in 2012, for the first time in our history, a synod will vote on adding a fourth confession to our standards of unity—the Belhar Confession (1986) from the country of South Africa.

Not everyone in the CRC, of course, favors this move. Some have argued that the Belhar

by Lyle D. Bierma,
Professor of
Systematic Theology



Confession should first be modified, others that it be given the lesser status of a testimony, and still others that it be rejected altogether. In my judgment, however, the CRC is on the right path in what it is proposing. The Belhar should indeed be adopted, without modification, as a full fourth confession and not simply as another testimony.

Form of Unity

One way of supporting this claim is to look at the roles or purposes that confessions serve in our denomination, and then at how well the Belhar Confession fulfills each role. Four major purposes of confessions are implied in the titles of our three forms of unity and our contemporary supplement: we have a *Belgic Confession*, a *Heidelberg Catechism*, *Canons of Dort*, and a contemporary *testimony*.

In the first place, these documents serve as confessions. The word *confession* literally means “saying together.” Those who subscribe to a particular confession, therefore, say together, or voice in unison, what it is they believe. In other words, a confession is a form of unity, or one way of expressing the harmony of faith that Christians share across congregational and denominational lines.

The Belhar Confession provides the CRC with a wonderful opportunity to do precisely that. The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, a denomination of mixed-race and black people that composed the Belhar in the worst days of *apartheid* (legalized racial segregation) in the 1980s, has long been asking the CRC and its other ecumenical partners to say together with them these powerful words about unity, reconciliation, and justice. In the 1600s the Dutch brought to South Africa the gifts of three confessions born in the midst of religious conflict in Europe. Now a partner Reformed denomination in South Africa is offering the rest of the church a gift born in the midst of their own suffering—a rich explanation of the nature, message, and calling of the church in a broken world. Will the CRC heed their call to stand together with them?

Teaching Tool

Second, confessions serve as catechisms, or aids in the teaching and preaching ministries of the church. As summaries and interpretations of some of the central themes of Scripture, they can be effective tools in helping people understand the Bible and the basics of the Christian faith.

Not all confessions, however, have the same scope. Some, like the Belgic Confession, cover a wide array of doctrinal material. Others, like the Canons of Dort, are narrower in scope, providing

The Belhar will serve the CRC well not just as a confession, but also as a catechism, a canon, and a public testimony.

fuller explanations of certain doctrines that are treated only briefly in the other confessions.

The Belhar is more like the Canons of Dort than the Belgic Confession in this regard. It begins in Article 1 with a summary of the doctrine of the church that echoes the language of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 54: “We believe in the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects, and cares for the church through the Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.” The remaining articles of the Belhar function as a commentary or deeper reflection on this foundational doctrine of the church. To be “the church” challenges us to manifest ourselves as *one* church (Art. 2). “God’s life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of . . . irreconciliation and hatred” and “will enable the church to live in a new obedience” in the world (Art. 3). “The church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged” (Art. 4). These grand biblical themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice are not given much attention in our other confessions, and the Belhar would provide us with an authoritative tool for preaching and teaching this expanded doctrine of the church.

Standard of Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis

Third, confessions like the Belhar serve as canons, that is, as standards by which to measure orthodoxy (correct teaching) and orthopraxis (correct behavior) and to warn us against false teaching and wrong behavior. To be sure, North American

society today does not practice the legal separation of races, and churches do not try to defend it theologically. But those of us in the United States belong to a country that for hundreds of years forcibly transported millions of Africans to our shores, bought and sold them as property, compelled them to work as slaves, dehumanized and brutalized them, and often defended this with Scripture. We belong to a country in which, after the Civil War and Reconstruction, a number of states introduced an American version of *apartheid* that was often harshly enforced with vigilante violence. We belong to a country that even after the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in many ways still practices *de facto* segregation. And our track record is no better when it comes to our treatment of Native Americans in the United States and First Nations peoples in Canada. Adopting the Belhar, therefore, would hold us more accountable to combat the sin of racism that is still embedded in our hearts, our church, and our society.

Testimony

Finally, confessions serve as testimonies or statements of identity. They help explain to others who we are and what we stand for. In this role, the Belhar Confession would help the CRC to present a somewhat different face to the world than we have in the past. Our denomination has long been identified with Dutch (and, to a lesser extent, German) ethnicity, and this has sometimes led to racist attitudes and discriminatory practices among us. For example, in the early days of our mission work at Rehoboth, New Mexico, efforts were often made to stamp out the native Navajo culture and replace it with the more “civilized” culture of the white race. In 1920 the CRC synod chose to send its first overseas missionaries to China rather than West Africa because “the people in the Sudan are the type of people of whom one cannot expect the most in the kingdom of God” and “the conservative, intellectual spirit of the Chinese harmonizes more with the character of our people than the emotional nature of the African natives.” And some of us remember the controversial decision in 1965 by the Timothy Christian School board in Cicero, Illinois, to

▶ Adopting the Belhar

refuse to allow African American children to enroll at the school because of the fear of community violence. With its emphasis on racial reconciliation and harmony, the Belhar Confession would assist the CRC in offering a different public witness than we have sometimes done in our history.

Why Not Another Contemporary Testimony?

Some people who like parts of the Belhar but not the whole confession have suggested that we assign it the lesser status of a contemporary testimony. It should be remembered, however, that when the CRC created this category in the 1980s, it did so because it was introducing a brand-new document (*Our*

World Belongs to God) that could be tested, modified, and perhaps eventually adopted as the confession of a single denomination. The Belhar, by contrast, is not something new, tentative, provisional, or associated with just one denomination. It has stood the test of nearly thirty years as a bold proclamation of some of the fundamental themes in Scripture. Moreover, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa has from the start urged that it be adopted as a full confession by the broader church, and several denominations, including the Reformed Church in America, have already done so or are in the process.

Conclusion

The Belhar Confession is not a perfect document, as other writers in this issue

have pointed out. No human explanation or application of infallible Scripture ever is. Nevertheless, its teachings about the unity of God's people, the church's message of reconciliation, and Christian social responsibility pick up some of the dominant rhythms of Scripture. The Belhar thus provides us in the CRC with an historic opportunity to join voices with a partner church from the Global South, to engage biblical truths that are muted in our other confessions, to hold ourselves more accountable for sins of the past and behavior in the future, and to bear witness to our commitment to the visible unity of the church and the promotion of racial reconciliation and justice. The Belhar will serve the CRC well not just as a confession, but also as a catechism, a canon, and a public testimony.

Necessary Testimony— Flawed Confession?

God does not grade our sins on a curve; before his holy face, big or little, a sin is a sin. However, not all sins bear the same consequences, and few have as destructive an effect as do blood sins such as racism and tribalism. These are the sins that degrade the individual identity, dignity, and worth that every human being possesses as God's imagebearer and replace it with an abstraction, a group identity classification, in order to gain advantage or do harm. The twentieth century will forever be known as the century of blood-based violence and genocide, beginning with the Turkish slaughter of Armenians (1915-18; 1.5 million killed) and ending with the horrors of the Yugoslav conflicts and the Rwandan civil war (1 million dead). When we include Stalin's forced famines in the Ukraine (1932-33; 7-20

million), the rape of Nanking by the Japanese Imperial Army (1937-38; 300,000), the Nazi Holocaust (1938-45; 6 million), Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution (50-70 million), and the killing fields of Cambodia (1975-79; 2 million), it is evident that our world is awash in a century's worth of blood and needs to hear a gospel word from the church that identifies sins of blood, condemns them, and points a way to healing, reconciliation, and unity.

Born out of the situation of racial conflict in South African *apartheid*, the Belhar Confession brings with it the promise of a clear gospel answer to our racial, ethnic, and tribal hostilities and bloodshed. And, undoubtedly, many of the Belhar's positive statements provide such a clear testimony. The Belhar confesses "that true faith in

by John Bolt,
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Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership" in the church and that "separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin." It rejects "any doctrine which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people" or which "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." This is a powerful and necessary testimony—the essential first step in confronting all blood sins.

The Belhar explicitly makes reconciliation (Art. 3) and unity (Art. 2) its goal. How does the gospel bring about reconciliation and unity? Ephesians 2 spells it out clearly: Christ is our peace; through his blood shed on the cross he has destroyed dividing walls of hostility and created a new humanity. This is the heart of all

reconciliation. “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. . . . And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that we who have been forgiven, who are reconciled to God, must now be ambassadors of reconciliation. And our message has three key ingredients: repentance, forgiveness, and faith.

While those three ingredients may seem obvious, that second ingredient may still give us pause in this situation. When it comes to racism, to ethnic cleansing and genocide, how can we ask those who have been victimized to forgive? It seems too much; who is capable of this? Thankfully, we have remarkable testimony from individuals as well as compelling examples from the nation of South Africa itself. Among the individual testimonies that have recently moved me deeply is that of Rwandan massacre survivor Immaculée Ilibagiza (*Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*), who bears witness to the power of God’s presence to her in prayer so that Satan’s evil is defeated by God’s love and forgiveness in Christ—a power that leads her to seek out her family’s killer and forgive him. When Nelson Mandela was released from his lengthy imprisonment to emerge as South Africa’s leader and eventual president in 1994, he showed a resolute determination to bring about reconciliation and avoid the payback of “victor’s justice” that has been so evident in South Africa’s northern neighbor, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. The obvious symbol of Mandela’s reconciling spirit—now captured in the film, *Invictus*—was his support for the previously all-white South African national rugby team during the 1995 Rugby World Cup that was held in South Africa.

A similar effort to avoid victor’s justice was apparent in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in South Africa after the abolition of apartheid and headed by Bishop Desmond Tutu. The TRC was an honest attempt at restorative justice and reconciliation. The Commission included all sides in the truth and reconciliation process; reports of human rights violations perpetrated by the liberation forces, including the African National

The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that we who have been forgiven, who are reconciled to God, must now be ambassadors of reconciliation.

Congress, were heard alongside those of the forces of South Africa’s apartheid state.

Remarkably, this note of forgiveness in the power of Christ is missing in the Belhar. In fact, the Belhar instead offers an alternative path to reconciliation and unity. It does not begin with the premise that we are all sinners who stand under divine wrath and need the grace of God, and that we find our unity in the blood of Christ that covers our sin and reconciles us to God. The Belhar of course does not deny this premise, and one could even make the effort to imply it from the opening statement confessing faith in the triune God who “gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit” and has called her “from the entire human family” and has done so since the beginning of the world and will do so to the end. However, this defense of the Belhar does not explain away the fact that it provides us with an explicit alternative way of conceiving reconciliation and unity that is, I believe, in considerable tension with its earlier declaration “that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership” in the church.

The key to this alternative path is the Belhar’s focus on the social, economic, and political arenas as the locus for achieving reconciliation and unity, rather than on our spiritual poverty. One statement captures this focus fully: “We believe 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 Belhar intends this as the hermeneutic key to the scriptural path toward reconciliation and unity because this claim about

God is followed by a correlative conviction about the church’s task: “We believe that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others” (Art. 4). In other words, we move toward reconciliation and unity by siding with the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. As one delegate to the 2009 synod put it: “It is time for those who are on top to come down and those who are down to move up.”

I am mindful of how terribly sensitive discussions of race are in our nation and in our church. All too often we seem unable to have honest political, economic, and doctrinal-theological discussions because we find ourselves in the midst of accusations about racism and privilege. It is therefore imperative that we elevate our discussion about the Belhar to the very highest plane. Church confessions are our declaration of *gospel* truth to the world; they are not for righting past wrongs, for creating climates of inclusion, or similar therapeutic purposes. My reasons for being unable to subscribe to the Belhar are biblical-theological and confessional. I strongly desire a testimony that exposes the sin of racism and points us forward to reconciliation and unity. I do not believe that the Belhar will or even can accomplish this. Not only does it fail to point to the heart of reconciliation through repentance and forgiveness, its practical consequence is to lock us into the dual categories of oppressor and oppressed, perpetrator and victim, rich and poor, black and white, with no mechanism for rising above them. This is particularly dangerous when, as was the case in South Africa, the powerful white community relinquished its power and moved to the other side of the fence. The Belhar makes no allowance for such a transforming event; in that respect its message is already obsolete in the country of its origin.

While I believe that the Belhar is flawed in these ways, I reiterate my conviction that the world needs to hear a gospel word from the church that identifies sin, condemns it, and points a way to healing, reconciliation, and unity.

Context and Confusion: What Does the Belhar Confess?

Synod 2012 will decide whether to adopt the Belhar Confession as a doctrinal standard of the CRCNA. There are powerful denominational and ecumenical pressures to do so. The Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa has urged us to adopt it. The Reformed Church in America already has adopted it. Those who challenge adopting it risk suspicion of racism or indifference. But the Belhar raises theological issues beyond social justice and racial reconciliation. Our decision will affect our confessional identity, our role in the newly-formed World Communion of Reformed Churches, and other ecumenical relations.

My view is this: Properly understood, the Belhar's condemnation of racism, expression of solidarity with victims, and affirmation of racial reconciliation in Christ are crucial implications of the gospel that we should endorse. But its theological perspective is problematically ambiguous. Because a doctrinal standard should clearly affirm doctrinal truth as well as the right action, we should not adopt the Belhar as a confession but as a contemporary testimony. Our rationale can provide valuable theological leadership in the WCRC.

Theological Ambiguity

The ambiguity of the Belhar is its openness to significantly different understandings of God's redemptive activity that are espoused within the WCRC. These perspectives yield incompatible interpretations of the Belhar, especially its allusion to an axiom of liberation theology: "God is in a special way the God of the destitute, poor, and wronged."

Some advocates read the Belhar broadly and progressively. Redemption means liberation not merely from racism but from all kinds of oppression and exclusion—religious, ecological, political, economic, so-

cial, cultural, gender, and even sexual orientation. Thus Alan Boesak, an original sponsor of Belhar and past president of the World Association of Reformed Churches, insists that it affirms committed homosexual relationships. Other prominent supporters infer the economics of the Accra Confession or Latin-American socialism, comprehensive prescriptions for global warming, and spiritual affirmation of non-Christian religions. These readings extrapolate well beyond the text.

However, other advocates, including original sponsors in the URCSA, reject such broad conclusions. Richard Mouw has challenged Boesak on gay marriage. The CRCNA synod of 2009 declared that the Belhar does not affirm homosexual practice, that sin is deeper than social strife, and that salvation comes through true faith in Christ alone. Confessional Reformed advocates typically focus on the Belhar's condemnation of racial injustice and affirmation of reconciliation in Christ. They deny that it implies a merely social gospel, liberation theology, religious inclusivism, or anything inconsistent with Reformed orthodoxy.

Theological Context

Why do well-informed readers understand the Belhar so differently? A key reason is the diversity of "Reformed" worldviews. The WCRC includes denominations with very progressive wings as well as confessional denominations. All WCRC members affirm "the sovereignty of God over everything in creation and redemption," but we understand that motto in different ways. Unless we face this situation candidly, we cannot participate in the WCRC with integrity, much less discuss the Belhar.

by John Cooper,
Professor of
Philosophical
Theology



To make my point, I distinguish two general perspectives—*confessional* and *progressive*—each on an end of a theological spectrum. However, I do not know their actual proportion or distribution in the WCRC, and I realize that they have been blended or blurred in a variety of ways.

The *confessional* perspective understands the Christian faith as stated in the Reformed confes-

sions (e.g., Three Forms of Unity, Westminster Confession), explained by Reformed theologians (e.g., Bavinck, Warfield), and spelled out in a redemptive-historical worldview that reflects the full teaching of Scripture (e.g., Abraham Kuyper, the testimony *Our World Belongs to God*). It affirms historic Christian supernaturalism—that the transcendent God acts in supernatural (miraculous) ways as well as in his providence within nature, human hearts, and history. It is evangelical in affirming that the gospel of eternal life in Jesus Christ calls sinners to repentance, faith, and obedience irrespective of their ethnicity, status, or quality of life. It promotes justice and reconciliation in the church because of our unity in Christ. It promotes justice and reconciliation in the world because of God's providence, Christ's rule, and the church's witness to the world's need for redemption through him. This perspective neither separates nor confuses church and world or this life and eternal life.

The *progressive* perspective likewise affirms the sovereignty of God over everything in creation and redemption, but in quite a different way. Its background is Schleiermacher, Hegel, and those Romantics who tried to trump Enlightenment anti-supernaturalism and secularism by asserting the immanence of God's activity in everything. God brings his king-

dom through the creative-redemptive development of nature, history, diverse cultures, and even the various religions, until all things are united in him. World history is redemptive history. Creation is the diverse and developing cosmic community of creatures in which God dwells. Sin is whatever human activities impede community, restrict freedom, and cause alienation among God's creatures—all of which alienate us from God. Salvation is the reconciling power of God—focused in Jesus Christ—that opposes and overcomes alienation. All dynamics that promote liberation, reconciliation, and inclusion of individuals in community are redemptive manifestations of God's coming kingdom. Accordingly, this perspective typically affirms universal salvation, as well as non-Christian religions and ways of life that promote reconciliation and inclusion. It therefore tends to regard the primary gospel mission of the church as improving people's lives, not winning converts or starting worship groups.

This general perspective is prominent among mainline academic theologians. It is behind much of the "missional" theology heralded in WARC and the World Council of Churches. It is also the source of the gender, sexual, socio-economic, political, cultural, ecological, and religious liberation theologies that some attribute to the Belhar Confession.

Not Kuyper

This perspective sounds like Kuyper because it emphasizes the sovereignty of God over everything and calls Christians to "transform" culture and society. The two viewpoints do share some common affirmations. Kuyper was familiar with this theology. He appreciated its emphasis that "every square inch belongs to God" as well as its call to engage the world, and he even borrowed a number of its terms (e.g. "organic," "sphere," "antithesis").

But Kuyper was evangelical—converted to Christ while already a minister in a Reformed church. As a biblical supernaturalist, he rejected this progressive theology's "pantheism"—its wholly immanent view of God's action in the world. He asserted "the antithesis" against its all-inclusive (thesis-antithesis-synthesis) view of creation, redemption, and the coming kingdom, in-

Why do well-informed readers understand the Belhar so differently? A key reason is the diversity of "Reformed" worldviews.

sisting on the ultimate opposition between the Kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of this world. Kuyper acknowledged God's providential rule and "common grace" in historical dynamics of justice and reconciliation apart from saving grace in Jesus Christ. But he did not consider them part of the coming Kingdom. Yet he (imperfectly) urged Christians to promote justice and reconciliation in church and society.

Because of the similarities, it is easy to confuse Kuyperian and progressive perspectives. For example, I was taught that H. Richard Niebuhr's "Christ transforming culture" represents Kuyper's view, whereas Niebuhr actually promotes the progressive position. I suspect that many CRCNA and WCRC members are not aware of the differences. For better or worse, "Reformed worldview" has come to include various blends of "Kuyperian" and "progressive."

The best solution therefore is to adopt the Belhar as a contemporary testimony, subject to the doctrine of the Three Forms and framed by Our World Belongs to God, our current contemporary testimony.

My Conclusion

The Belhar Confession is theologically ambiguous because it can be read from at least two disparate perspectives. Each interprets its biblical references and doctrinal assertions, including God's special relation to the poor and oppressed, differently. Neither one can justify itself or refute the other from the text of the Belhar. Original sponsors stand on both sides. Thus the Belhar is not clearly confessional or clearly progressive, but clearly ambiguous.

If it is theologically ambiguous, then it cannot perform an essential function of a confession—to clarify what the church teaches. The Three Forms are clear on what they address. But the Belhar is not clear even on some doctrines necessary for a confessional Reformed perspective on salvation, racism, justice, and reconciliation in church and society. Clarity is crucial because competing perspectives and ideologies—mostly progressive, a few reactionary—diagnose racism and prescribe remedies that should not be mistaken as Christian or Reformed.

Nevertheless, the Belhar has major historic importance for its courageous challenge to racism in church and society and its insistence that the gospel requires racial justice and reconciliation. Interpreted confessionally, it rightly bears the powerful doctrinal, motivational, and ecumenical significance it has within and beyond the CRCNA. These are strong reasons for adopting it.

What Should We Do?

Given these pros and cons, what is the best option? One solution would be to overlook the theological ambiguity, make the Belhar a confession for the sake of its message of reconciliation, and simply assume that it will be interpreted according to the Three Forms. But that could set up a serious problem. If the Belhar has equal confessional authority, then it can be used to reinterpret the Three Forms by applying the "read the past in terms of the present" hermeneutics that is common in progressive circles. That would result in a more ambiguous or progressive notion of confessional orthodoxy than subscription requires in the CRCNA.

Perhaps then we should make the Belhar a confession and official-

► Context and Confusion

ly define its doctrine according to the other confessions, as Synod 2009 began to do. But that would admit its ambiguity, deny it the same authority as the other confessions, and snub other views of the Belhar held in the WCRC. That option lacks integrity.

So perhaps we should affirm its mes-

sage without giving it any official status. The reasons are familiar. We already have our own statement on racial reconciliation, "God's Diverse and Unified Family." We have grown as a multi-ethnic denomination without the Belhar. And we will not become more diverse just because we adopt it. However, affirming the Belhar without official status may not do it justice.

The best solution therefore is to adopt

the Belhar as a contemporary testimony, subject to the doctrine of the Three Forms and framed by *Our World Belongs to God*, our current contemporary testimony. Then we ought to explain our reasons to the URCSA, RCA, WCRC, and other ecumenical partners. This is a defining moment for the doctrinal and ecumenical identity of the CRCNA. May the Lord give us the grace and wisdom to do his will.

The Belhar Speaks Today

Introduction

During one of the worst periods of apartheid rule in South Africa, some courageous South African Christians gave birth to the Belhar Confession, a balanced, biblically rich witness to the Christian faith. The authors of the Belhar Confession were suffering deep injustices, including racial segregation that was enshrined in law, enforced by violence, condoned or even supported by some Reformed churches in South Africa, and tolerated by Reformed churches around the world. Yet, instead of encouraging violent upheaval—or even righteous indignation—against injustice, the five main statements of the Belhar Confession strike the grace notes of (1) faith and hope in the triune God who has, and will, care for the church, (2) faith in "one holy, universal Christian church, . . . called from the entire human family," (3) belief that God has given the church a message of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, to be proclaimed both by word and deed, (4) trust that God works for justice and wants the church to join this cause, and (5) confidence that the church is called to do these things even if "human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence." In the Belhar Confession, God uses a church in which frustration and anger would have been justified to produce a biblical, balanced, and deeply true confession of the Christian faith. As has happened

throughout the church's history, God worked through harrowing circumstances to guide and enlighten the church.

Given the Belhar's many strengths, its sponsoring church (the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa) has asked Reformed Christians around the world whether the Belhar also speaks for them and to their situation. Is the Belhar's message limited to its own place and time (South Africa in 1982), or does it translate equally well to other places and times? More particularly, does the Belhar both speak to and give voice to Reformed Christians in North America? If so, does it hold the prospect of doing so not just today, but in the years ahead? Although complete answers to these and other questions lie beyond the scope of this essay, I contend that the Belhar Confession echoes biblical themes that North American Christians need to hear and embody in their witness to the world, even though some of the specific issues the Belhar addresses arise out of its unique South African situation.

The Belhar's Biblical Message

Despite having been written over a quarter-century ago in an environment very much unlike that of contemporary North America, the Belhar Confession provides a clear Christian witness that breathes the language and perspective of

by Ronald J. Feenstra,
Professor of
Systematic and
Philosophical
Theology



Scripture and speaks to North American Christians, challenging them to embody the gospel message. For example, in affirming that "Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another," the Belhar echoes Scripture's affirmation that Christ has broken down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile, making them together members of God's household and a dwelling place for God

(Eph. 2:11-22). In calling for Christian unity to "become visible so that the world may believe" that Christ has conquered the separation and hatred among people, the Belhar reflects Jesus' prayer that the unity of believers would proclaim to the world both the Father's having sent the Son and his love for Christ's followers (John 17:20-23). The Belhar's declaration that "God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ" mirrors Paul's statement that God "reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:16-21); its statement that the church witnesses to this message "both by word and by deed" reflects Jesus' demand that his followers bear fruit, doing God's will rather than just speaking the name of the Lord (Matt. 7:15-27). Finally, the Belhar's affirmations that God "wishes to

bring about justice and true peace” and 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” echo not only the Old Testament’s protections for the poor and its calls for justice (e.g., Exod. 23:6-11; Amos 5:24), but also Jesus’ declaration that he was anointed “to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18-19), his blessings upon followers who were poor, hungry, and reviled, and his warnings to the rich (Luke 6:20-26). These powerful and central biblical themes not only offer a challenge to North American Christians, but also offer a powerful summary of the biblical message as Christians speak and live out their witness to the world.

The Belhar Confession challenges the church to stand where God stands, which means standing “by people in any form of suffering and need” and standing “against injustice and with the wronged.” And as it follows Christ, the church “must witness against and strive against any form of injustice,” including witnessing “against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.” This is a message North American Christians need to hear and to embody. Like the teacher on the playground who takes special care to protect the student being picked on by bullies, God takes special care to protect “the destitute, the poor and the wronged.” So too, the church must stand by those who have been wronged and speak out against and resist injustice. In a culture in which the media and political rhetoric often encourage seeking one’s own interests, or perhaps the interests of one’s nation, the Belhar calls those who belong to Jesus Christ to seek the Kingdom of God.

Is the Belhar’s Message Limited to South Africa?

Although the Belhar’s affirmations speak to and for the whole Christian church, some of its concerns are rooted in its particular, local situation. For instance, the Belhar says that the credibility of the gospel is compromised “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,” and that any attempt “to legitimate such *forced* separation by appeal to

Speaking from the pit of oppression and suffering, the Belhar affirms important biblical themes such as the triune God’s care for the church and concern for justice, Christian reconciliation as not only an obligation but also a gift from God and a witness to the world, and the church’s calling to follow God’s will even in the face of opposition and suffering.

the gospel” is “ideology and false doctrine” (italics added). This was an important and courageous declaration in 1982, when South Africa was ruled by a political party with close ties to white Reformed churches and when the government, with church approval, enforced apartheid laws. But does it speak to situations very different than the one from which it arose?

More specifically, is the Belhar’s message limited to South Africa in 1982, or does its message resonate for Christians in North America today? The Belhar refers to “a land which professes to be Christian,” but no country in North America professes to be Christian (despite perceptions and claims to the contrary). Furthermore, legally enforced separation of people, although practiced well into the 1960s in the United States, both North and South, no longer exists in North America, where blacks, whites, and Asians are free to live where they want. The native people of North America are permitted, but no longer required, to live in separate areas or reservations. In mentioning a “Christian” nation that enforces racial separation, does the Belhar limit its effectiveness in

speaking to North America? Does this part of the Belhar not apply to North America today?

Or does that let North American Christians off too easily? The United States, in particular, lives not only with the legacy of enforced segregation, but also the lingering effects of forcing millions of people into slavery. And even if separation on a racial basis is no longer *legally enforced* in North America, it still exists and it still leads to “alienation, hatred and enmity.” Even among Christians and within churches, there is often *de facto* separation along racial lines. Given that such separation is not legally enforced, Christians have no excuse for perpetuating or accepting it. Although the Belhar focuses on enforced segregation, it should motivate us to overcome the segregation and alienation that exist *voluntarily* among us, thereby becoming a community of people reconciled to one another and proclaiming the gospel of reconciliation and justice in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The Belhar Confession is one of the church’s treasures. Speaking from the pit of oppression and suffering, the Belhar affirms important biblical themes such as the triune God’s care for the church and concern for justice, Christian reconciliation as not only an obligation but also a gift from God and a witness to the world, and the church’s calling to follow God’s will even in the face of opposition and suffering. Important biblical themes resound throughout the Belhar Confession, making it an important statement giving guidance to Christians today, including those in North America. Although some of its specific concerns arise out of realities in South Africa in 1982, nevertheless the Belhar’s message is needed not just in South Africa but in North America and elsewhere. The Belhar Confession provides a clear witness to those both inside and outside the church, articulating the gospel message and its implications for authentic Christian faith and life.

This is an edited version of an article that appeared in Perspectives, May 2008.

Alumni Reflections—From Study Group to Support Group

by CTS Alum Joel Schreurs, Pastor of First Christian Reformed Church, Denver, Colorado

Seven of us, then fresh-faced seminarians, pulled our chairs around a table on the frigid fourth floor of the library. We cracked open laptops and copies of *Lambdin's Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*, stacked flashcards into tidy columns, and dove into the day's assignment. We dug through dictionaries, sketched out clausal diagrams, parsed *perfects* and *piels* and *puals*. We wanted to be—or at least felt called to be—ministers. And for that to happen, we needed to learn a little Hebrew.

Those afternoons in the library were not spent in vain. We got to know our Hebrew, but along the way, we received another gift that has proved equally valuable for our lives in ministry: we got to know one another. In those afternoon study sessions, we learned about the joys, sorrows, fears, and foibles that our friends toted around in their spiritual backpacks. And by the end of our four years together, we were not only looking to one another for help in parsing Hebrew verbs, we looked to one another for help in parsing our lives. We not only wanted to make sense of the ancient biblical story together, we wanted to make sense of our *own* stories together.

We did this most pointedly during our final semester, in the dark prayer room behind the chapel where we gathered once a week. We wondered with each other—and with God—about the next chapter of our lives. *What are our gifts? What kind of ministry is—or is not—a good fit? How are things coming with that church in California, or New Jersey, or Ontario? What is exciting about that possibility? What is frightening?* We examined the questions from every angle, and came to know more of each other and our callings.

The callings we discerned together landed us in different corners of North and Central America after graduation—from California to the Dominican Republic to British Columbia to Colorado to South Dakota. Regular face-to-face interactions were no longer possible. However, not long after graduation, we formed an online discussion group that we coined “The Anxious Bench” (after the bench placed near the preacher at the revival meetings we learned about in church history).



Front Row (left to right): Brenda Ypma, Heather Immanuel Knetsch, Jill Schreurs, Becky Ochsner, Brian Ochsner

Second Row: Sid Ypma, Mark Knetsch, Chris Pedersen, Ann Blystra, Alison Renkema

Back Row: Joel Schreurs, Nick Blystra, Joel Renkema

Not pictured: Kim Pedersen.

During the past four years, we have used this forum to exchange hundreds—if not thousands—of messages. Sometimes, we come desperate for some insight into Sunday's preaching text. More often, we come seeking advice on how to handle the challenges of ministry. *I think I stuck my foot in my mouth Sunday morning—what should I do now? How should I deal with a difficult council member? What would you say at the funeral of this young person?* We share our experiences, offer whatever insight we can, and together come to know more about ourselves, and how to faithfully serve Christ and his church.

My six friends on “the bench” have taught me invaluable things about God, his church, my calling, and my work. But two years ago, at a retreat center in Big Bear, California, I realized that the greatest value of our friendship is not so much in what I have come to know, but in *being known*.

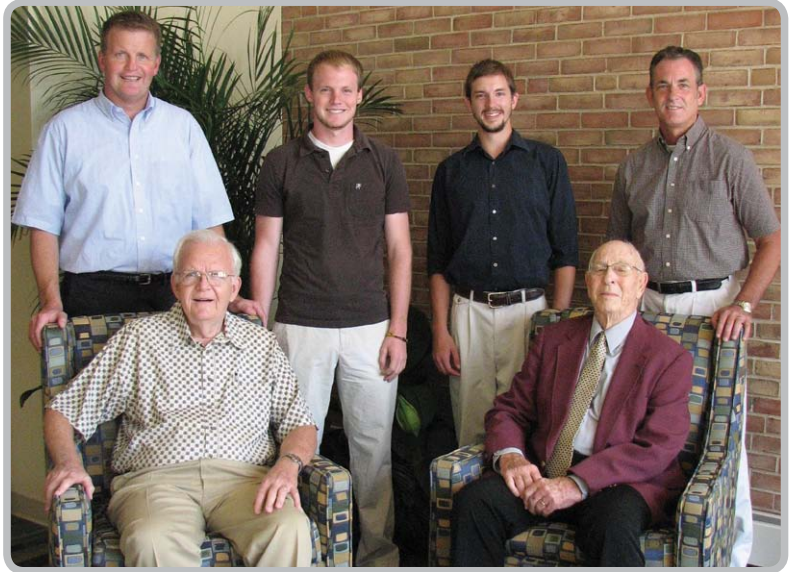
The seven of us—with our spouses and a facilitator—had come to Big Bear through a Peer Learning Grant from Sustaining Pastoral Excellence. For three days, we shared our lives in a way that simply was not possible over the Internet.

Through laughter and tears, we talked about life in ministry. We confessed our fears—that we were failing the church or our families, that we were never going to make a difference, or that we had somehow ended up in the wrong place. We pulled back the bandages and let each other look at the wounds that had been inflicted on our hearts—the harsh words spoken, the accusations that seemed to come from nowhere, the sometimes crushing loneliness. We also celebrated the ways we'd been used in spite of it all—the sermons that had connected, the relationships that had been formed, the people who seemed to be inching their way toward Jesus. We each took turns talking while the others patiently listened, and we realized there were people who could identify with us, people who *knew* us. We rejoiced because we were not alone.

Our conversations that weekend in Big Bear may not have made us better preachers, more effective administrators, or more compassionate caregivers. But they have sustained and nurtured our ministry in marvelous ways. My friends and I on “the bench” will always be grateful for them.

New Branches, Deep Roots at CTS

We're thankful for new branches at CTS this year in the form of 103 students who come to us from eight different countries and twelve denominations. We're also thankful for deep roots represented by two seminarians who are fourth-generation CTS students! Tyler Greenway and John Medendorp are honored to follow in the footsteps of their fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers—all CTS grads and CRC pastors. Leonard Greenway (Class of 1932) and John Calvin Medendorp, Sr. (1921) started the tradition, which was followed by those pictured here: Seated are Roger Greenway (1958) and John Calvin Medendorp, Jr. (1951); standing are Scott Greenway (1991), Tyler Greenway, John Christian Medendorp, and John William Medendorp (1986). Grandfather John Medendorp, Jr. commented, "Four generations is quite something! I thank the Lord for it; this is a tribute to God's faithfulness."



Ministry to Muslims

Seminarian Victor Perez spent his summer leading worship services and Bible studies in Estes Park, Colorado, for "A Christian Ministry in the National Parks" and ministered to a group of Muslim students from Turkey there. This is Victor's testimony:

When I started my summer internship in the YMCA of the Rockies, I couldn't even imagine the cross-cultural experience I was about to have there. I knew that part of my assignment was to be a witness of the grace and love of Jesus Christ. But to whom and how should I be a witness? People came to the Y from the US, Japan, China, Spain, Venezuela, Columbia, and Turkey. Some were Christians, some Buddhists, some Muslims, and some were not religious and not sure what they believed.

Every day I looked around the dining room for somebody sitting alone who seemed to be worried or sad. Something in my heart pulled me to the table of my Turkish friends. They were in America for the first time and their English was limited, but between the eight of us we were able to have a conversation. Since English is my second language, I understood their struggle and helped them with some translation. They had no transportation, so I offered them my car. I took them on a hike and on a camping trip. They wanted to be respected,

so I respected them. They wanted to be accepted and loved, so I accepted and loved them. My Turkish friends think I did a lot for them, but they did more for me by allowing me to serve them in the name of Jesus Christ.

When we shared a meal, we also shared our faith and what we believe. They asked how many Bibles I have, and I answered, "There is only one Bible." Benjamin replied, "No! You have four bibles: Matthew, Mark,

Luke, and John." The door opened for me to talk to them about the good news, the gospels of Jesus Christ. While hiking in the mountains they shared a traditional Turkish love story with me, and asked if I knew any love story like that, opening the door for me to share my testimony of God's work in my life. I shared my favorite Bible verse—Proverbs 3:5-6; they translated these verses for me in Turkish, and I read it to them in Turkish.

Now that I am back at CTS, I see how God worked through it all. To the question, "To whom should I witness?" my answer now is "To the world." To live a Christian life, I need to have fellowship not only with those who are like me, but also with those who are different.

To the question, "How should I be a witness?" my answer is "By living out my Christian beliefs and by being myself in Jesus Christ." It is not about what I do, but about what the Holy Spirit does in me. It's all about having relationships that glorify God.



**Victor Perez and
Turkish Friends**

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A Prayer for the Beginning of a New School Year

“Take, O take me as I am; summon out what I shall be;
set your seal upon my heart and live in me.”

Lord God of all, we thank you and praise you for the men and women you have drawn together here in this place—your children who have come here empowered by your Spirit with the gifts and passion to serve and honor you.

We thank you for the faith communities represented here, which have formed and taught your children to walk in the path of Christ.

We thank you for the community here at Calvin Theological Seminary, not only an academic institution, but your daughters and sons gathering together to worship you and love each other.

We praise you for the story of redemption and salvation, which has become our story. We thank you that at Calvin Seminary we can learn and grow and be equipped to share this story throughout the world.

We pray for each of the new students here, who come with excitement and energy, but also anxiety about what lies ahead.

We pray for sharp minds and discipline in their studies, and sensitivity to your Spirit and call.

We pray for the families of these students, who have joined them on this journey of education. We pray for patience, encouragement, and love.

We pray for the faculty. We pray that you will enliven in them a renewed vigor for the material in their classes and for the training of women and men for your service.

We pray for the staff, for their supportive and strengthening role to both the students and the faculty throughout this coming year.

As we begin this journey together—new students, families, faculty, and staff—we desire, Lord, this morning and every morning that you take us as we are. Take us as you have created us, and use us. Touch us, live in us, and make us yours for your service and for your glory.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

—by *Vanessa Lake, Administrative Assistant to the Vice President of Academic Affairs, 8/23/10*

