

The Belhar Confession

A pre-presbytery conversation

September 26, 2017

What is confession?

(1) Annunciation

- Confession **announces** what is real.
- What is real is the liberating work of God, and therefore what confession announces is the reality of freedom and dignity: the universal kingdom of God.
- Annunciation is gospel.
- Annunciation is first in the order of reality.

(2) Denunciation

- Confession **denounces** that which contradicts or resists the real liberating work of God—whatever dominates people or diminishes freedom.
- The kin-dom of God intersects our experience critically, exposing the many ways in which we learn to live with oppression. We experience the gospel as a “sword” (Matthew 10.34).
- Denunciation is first in the order of experience.

Experience and reality: two “rules”

(1) We need to pay attention to the **order of experience**: announcing the positive/affirmative while failing to deal with the way our experience contradicts it leads to otherworldliness that fails to deal with the problems of life.

(2) We need to pay attention to the **order of reality**: denouncing human failures without some vision of the kin-dom of God is a recipe for despair.

An example: early church proclamation

- In the early church, the oppressive forces that were identified were “sin, death, and the devil.” These were structures of destruction (“powers and principalities”) that **waged war** on humanity.
- So, the work of Christ (God’s liberating work) was seen as **victory** over sin, death, and the devil.
- We can see this two-fold legacy in our baptismal liturgies in which we are asked to (1) embrace the gospel, and (2) denounce the works of evil.

The Belhar Confession in context

*It is important to recognize
that what is **denounced**
often comes from **within the**
church.*

Apartheid South Africa and the Dutch Reformed Church

- 1652 and beginning of the slave trade in southern Africa: slaves were taught Christianity and the Dutch language, but the DRC began creating separate meetings for converted slaves.
- In 1857 this practice was formalized, leading to the establishment of “coloured” (1881), black (1951), and Indian (1961) reformed churches
- In 1924 the Dutch Reformed Church (white) urged the government of South Africa to adopt segregation policies based on the argument that “competition between black and white on economic level, leads to poverty, friction, misunderstanding, suspicion and embitterment.”
- Apartheid was finally implemented in the Republic of South Africa in 1950. The Dutch Reformed Church (white) developed and provided the scriptural, theological, and moral justifications for the law of apartheid. Though occasionally challenged within the family of churches, apartheid was not seriously challenged and in fact was vigorously defended by the DRC both by overt actions and by silent consent.

Where did reform in the church come from?

- In the late 20th century, theologians like Allan Boesak from the **Dutch Reformed Mission Church** and others began to question the legal and theological legitimacy of Apartheid.
- In 1982, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared a *status confessionis* (a moral and theological challenge to the church in which the integrity of its witness is at stake). WARC condemned Apartheid and urged international pressure on the South African government.
- Allan Boesak was elected president of WARC.

Annunciation: “reconciliation”

- “Reconciliation” is a vision of full human solidarity, where there is “no longer Greek nor Jew...slave nor free...male nor female, for [we] all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.28). This is the liberating work of God and the content of the gospel.
- However, “reconciliation” can appear abstract and divorced from social realities. There is a danger of actually hiding the forms of domination that actually exist: we may note that moving directly to “reconciliation” in situations of social conflict nearly always benefit those in positions of power.
- During Apartheid, the appropriation of land by whites in series of Land Acts beginning in 1913 caused permanent economic disparity that was largely uncorrected even by the election of the African National Congress under Nelson Mandela.
- So, as in the U.S., we are left with an economic legacy of racism that is not addressed by talk of racial “reconciliation.”

Denunciation: white supremacy

- At attempt to define “white supremacy”: an ideology and a set of policies that **construct an identity called “white”** and claim that those it describes are intrinsically superior to those who are not white.
- Although “white supremacy” does not appear in the text, the **“absolutization of natural diversity”** suggests that racial differences are “ontological” (that is, claiming that people of different racial backgrounds belong to different orders of reality. This is what justifies different standards of treatment, different rights, etc.).
- This “absolutization” is the justification for segregation of people and resources, and the legitimation for dominance. Thus it contradicts the message of the gospel.
- Again, it is the church that has provided the justification for this “absolutization” through a doctrine of the separate “spheres” of creation and providence.

Reading the text (backwards)

Only by beginning with the order of experience are we able to appreciate the context and therefore the concrete meaning of what is announced as gospel.

Belhar and the U.S. church

How does the Belhar speak to us here, today? The answer, perhaps, has a lot to do with what we make of the legacy of white supremacy in the U.S., **as well as the church's complicity in it.** Have white churches in the U.S. provided legitimation to white supremacy?

Simple comparison between S.A. Apartheid and U.S. Jim Crow

Apartheid

- Rigid racial categories and laws against intermarriage: an obsession with racial “purity”
- “Bantustans”: supposedly autonomous zones or “homelands” where black South Africans were compelled to live; travel restrictions
- Systematic economic disadvantage
- Political disenfranchisement
- Religious legitimation by DRC

Jim Crow

- Ditto.
- Segregated schools, neighborhoods, even walls.
- Ditto
- Ditto
- Role of the churches?