

Confessions of a Belhar Reader – Dr. Robert J. Price Jr.

I write “The Confessions of a Belhar Reader” in support of the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession and doctrinal standard alongside the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dordt. I motivated to speak out the black and Reformed to encourage other people of color and women to avoid quiescence so that the affirmation of the Belhar as a fourth confession reverberates from many sectors of the diverse family of the Christian Reformed Church. It is not good that the Belhar conversation seems to be limited to white male voices. We need the totality of the whole community to speak out from diverse contexts and worldviews to truly discern the wisdom of God on the important decision to adopt the Belhar as a fourth doctrinal standard.

On the importance of having a totality speak out on the Belhar, consider the perspective of Herman Bavinck comments on the image of God in its totality can only be seen in humankind as a whole:

Not the individual man, and not even man and woman together, but mankind as a *whole* (my emphasis) is the fully developed image of God....The image of God is far too rich to be completely represented by a single human being, no matter how gifted he might be. That image can only be disclosed in its depth and riches in the whole of humanity with its millions of members. As the traces of God (*vestige Dei*) are spread out over many works of God, both in space and time, so that the image of God can only be seen in its totality in a humanity whose members exist both after and next to each other. (Dogmatics, 2:621-22 – Translation by Anthony Hoekema)

Richard Mouw also affirms the fact that the image of God can only be seen in the totality over against the select few.

One of the more fascinating proposals which has been made in theological discussions of the biblical notion of the “image of God” is that this image has a “corporate” dimension. That is, there is no one human individual or group who can fully bear or manifest all this is involved in the image of God, so that there is a sense in which image is collectively possessed. The image of God is, as it were, parceled out among the peoples of the earth. By looking at different individuals and groups we get glimpses of different aspects of the full image of God. (*When the Kings Come Marching In*. p. 47).

Bavinck and Mouw are right in underscoring the “corporate” dimension, and that no one human individual or group fully manifest the image of God since it is collectively possessed. Indeed, the same corporate principle should apply to the Belhar discussions in the CRC; no one individual or group should be the sole voices listened to, taken seriously, and understood. There are Belhar opinions of people of color and women that need to surface and given voice.

For example, when I think of the image of God distributed among the many tribes and nations and tongues, I am reminded of the genocide of hundreds of Native American tribes in

order to take their land for European colonization. Imagine all the native tongues and worldviews that expressed a unique insight into the nature and image of God. Indeed, much can be written about the triangular slave trade and the kidnapping of humans made in the image of God and forced into slavery. Never mind the fact that they had a worldview and a piece of the image of God. Again, no one person or group should have sole voice on issues like the image of God. By analogy, I hold that the Belhar conversations must transcend the voices of particular individuals or groups if we hope to truly discern the will of God on this weighty matter of making the Belhar a fourth confession.

### On Being Black and Reformed

My point of view refracts a unique perspective as a Black and Reformed ordained minister in the Christian Reformed Church. I am inspired to speak out because it is not good that a conversation of this magnitude seems to be taken captive by white males, in particular, with few, if any voices from people of color and women. And I write with the hope that others will share their stories of love for the Reformed faith and Reformed theology, but with concern for the contradictions of Reformed practice.

I endorse and sign the form of subscription as an ordained minister in the Christian Reformed Church. But my signing the form of subscription does not mean that I do not perceive contradictions and dissonance as I strive to maintain dialectical tension with my upbringing as a youth reared in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and religious training and formation in an Irish Catholic Church in the Englewood community of Chicago. I sign the form of subscription knowing full well that the Methodists that reached out to black slaves are considered by some “heretics” like their forefather Jacob Arminius. The Methodists embraced the free blacks that organized the AME church in Philadelphia in 1796; and the Methodists evangelized slaves, and many worked for the abolition of slavery. Again, I sign knowing that the Dutch colonizers and merchants profited bigtime from the slave trade that was justified by theological razzle-dazzle like double predestination, and the curse of Ham. I sign knowing full well that the Irish Catholics that lovingly nurtured and accepted me as a fully human being at St. Carthage School for three years in 1957-1960 were hated on in the Heidelberg Catechism as the anti-Christ (toned down later by subsequent synods with footnote retractions). Ironically, while the Irish priests and nuns were loving on us in integrated community drinking from the same communion cup with Negroes, the Christian Reformed Church colony in Englewood with four churches, two elementary schools and Chicago Christian High School all moved out to the suburbs rather than integrate with the “black horde” moving block-by-block across Halsted as the color line. So I sign the form of subscription with Latin prayers from the Catholic mass in the back of my mind. And I often think about the whites like the CRC churches that fled Englewood to avoid the realities of black ethnic diversity; and I think a lot about Father John Hayes, the parish priest at St. Carthage that showed agape love for us and accepted us as fully human beings. I am in ministry today largely because of the incarnational model of Father Hayes, a Catholic priest. Lastly, given the sovereignty of God that has brought me into the CRC, I consider it a privilege to write from my head and heart in support of the Belhar as a fourth

confession. So I will begin by turning the kaleidoscope of “confession” so that we can look at the issue of making the Belhar a fourth confession from many different perspectives.

### My Hope and Prayer

It is my hope and prayer that the debate will move beyond the objectified comparison of the Belhar as a doctrinal statement of faith by discussing the social context of apartheid as the heretical occasion of the Belhar itself. Those arguing that the Belhar should be limited to the status of contemporary testimony appear to have pressed the “mute button” to silence the groans of the oppressed who suffered under apartheid. The historical gaze starts by looking backward at the three standards and compares the new with the old without *empathy* or even acknowledgment of the contextual reality of apartheid, and the heinous hierarchical effect of apartheid on the people of God in South Africa which put whites on top, coloreds next, and blacks, of course, on the bottom. One key principle of hermeneutics is the reader must seek to understand the cultural and social context of the text in order to interpret its meaning. For example, when I sign the form of subscription, I sign with the awareness that the three doctrinal standards do have cultural and historical contexts that first need to be listened to, taken seriously, and understood as a basis for my commitment to Reformed theology. I cannot simply look at the documents in the abstract without also realizing the historical context and what was going on in church history during the Reformation in Europe. And I am reminded that even though the Dutch had the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dordt that did not deter their colonization of South Africa and the United States in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The history of Dutch colonization has a “dark side” that must be considered as part of the conversation. By analogy, shouldn’t the Belhar be read by first taking seriously its cultural and social context to determine its meaning? There is a dark side of the apartheid church and government that needs to be made plain so that the Belhar reader can engage both head and heart in making the decision to recognize as a fourth confession. Again, the conversation has been steered to a head only discussion about the documents in the abstract based on doctrinal content without recognizing the angst of the socio-cultural implications of apartheid; hence, my attempt to introduce heart and affect and empathy into the conversation.

My second hope and prayer is that there will be others, especially people of color and females, who will speak up and give voice to how the Belhar has application in their context. This conversation should not just be between white males that are for or against the fourth standard question. In fact, the actual setting of the Belhar locates the coloreds as the framers of the Belhar document. Contrary to the stereotype that the Belhar is a black/white thing, it was articulated by coloreds that sought to give voice to the gross injustice of apartheid. Coloreds were the people that were not of tribal descent, nor white. And the Belhar framers included women that joined in the chorus for unity, reconciliation, and justice. It is no secret that the Dutch Reformed church had a condescending relationship with the tribes and their churches leaving the coloreds and women as the best advocates for truth. The Belhar conversation should not be about white males only. Nor should it be stereotyped as a black and white issue. The “black and white movie” needs to be *colorized*. Surely there are people of color and females and more white males that will speak from the head and heart about the

need to adopt the Belhar as a fourth confession. This Belhar conversation is about unity reconciliation, and justice. Now, let's turn the confession kaleidoscope again.

### The *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo

For the first turn of the kaleidoscope, I am reminded of the "*Confessions*" of Augustine of Hippo. His transparent autobiographical account was written to confess his own youthful indiscretions, and to confess the faith anchored in the magnificent grace of God lavished on us in Jesus Christ. Like Augustine's *Confession*, I will give voice to my convictions for supporting the Belhar as a fourth confessional standard in the Christian Reformed Church. Using autobiographical reflection, I purpose to write with transparency and passion in support of the Belhar. Indeed, Augustine framed his classic with three forms of confession: *confessio peccati* (confessing sins), *confessio fidei* (confessing faith), and *confessio laudis* (confessing praise). By analogy, my confessions of a Belhar reader will include similar elements.

Given the three forms of confession used by Augustine, it is apparent that the present debate focuses on only one type of confession: *confessio fidei*. That is, the debate focuses on confession as a faith statement, and confession as praise for the grace of God, but diminishes the confession of sin or omits it categorically. Why is it that we imitate Augustine in some things and not others? Augustine uses an autobiographical mode to be transparent about his sinful depravity, and he gives praise to the grace and mercy of God for calling him into ministry (even though he was a "baby daddy" and "big mama" Monica had to raise his orphan son). Why can't the discussion about the Belhar open up to include confession of sin? Indeed, this is one main blindspot when it comes to reading and interpreting the Belhar. The Belhar was not written primarily as a faith statement, or a praise statement, but addresses the "elephant in the room" of repentance and apology for the sin of racism. The Belhar includes the confession of sin dimension; and seeks sincere and genuine repentance, especially unity, reconciliation, and justice. Then again, it could be that the Belhar detractors could very well understand that the Belhar is calling for hegemonic abuse of power to cease and desist as anathema for real agape community, and subsequently make the discussion historical rather than contextual. To be sure, the Belhar calls for confession of sins, both personal and corporate. The Belhar is about repentance of the sins of collectives. The Belhar assumes the reader will take seriously the context of the 1948 takeover of the nation of South Africa by the Dutch Afrikaner National Party. Apartheid was the theological and political policy of the church and government. The church and government were intertwined under the presumed sovereignty of God; the 1948 National Party perceived and defined themselves as the "New Israel of God" with a divine cultural mandate to impose their will on the English whites, coloreds, and blacks tribes of South Africa mandating apartheid as the rule of law with the legal use of force to boot. Blacks were tortured, murdered, came up missing, all in the name of enforcing apartheid and the white supremacist regime in cahoots with the Dutch Reformed Church. Actually, the Belhar is gentle by not naming the gory details of the apartheid power structure, and calling for the confession of sin as vital for the walls of apartheid to come down and foster unity, reconciliation, and justice.

Indeed, Belhar detractors know full well the making the Belhar a fourth confession could lead to confession of the sins of collectives here in our own bailiwick. It could lead to an open discussion about the history of Dutch colonization. It could open a discussion about the history of how the Dutch accumulated great wealth through shipping ventures like the Dutch East India Company, and the Dutch West India Company. It could mean research into the role of Dutch capitalist in the slave trade. Making the Belhar a fourth confession could mean an open discussion (finally) about sins of collectives, and how Jesus Christ died not just for our individual sins, but for the sins of Dutch Afrikaners in cahoots with the Dutch Reformed Church to perpetuate apartheid and white supremacist hegemony. Maybe, there is no blindspot after all. Perhaps the detractors have their eyes wide open to the facts that there may very well be a need for the CRCNA to have a “truth and reconciliation line” like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa to confess sins, and give amnesty where needed, so that unity, reconciliation, and justice can prevail. Finally, before we turn the kaleidoscope again, we need to remember that the Holy Spirit does not want to be quenched by arid, historical, rational arguments, when the Spirit of God wants to work to humble us and unify us as a “people of God”. How can one ethnic group declare themselves to be the “people of God” and structurally segregate the races under their hegemonic rule and culture and expect God to bless them and the process? Does the present debate that focuses on two types of confession without acknowledging the reality of collective sin(s) and the need to confess sins like apartheid quench the work of the Holy Spirit? Remember: “Confess your sins one to another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16a; 2 Chronicles 7:14) applies to personal and collective sins.

### Confession and Legal Use of Force

We must be sensitive to how language is interpreted in other contexts. To be sure, the idea of confession among Blacks in the city of Chicago connotes the idea of torture and *forced* confession. Black males, in particular, have been victims of torture and police brutality. Confession can have a very negative connotation when applied to governmental authorities with police powers. A moratorium on the execution of death row prisoners was declared by Illinois Governor Ryan in 2000. It was revealed that dozens of Blacks and Hispanics had been tortured to make forced confessions by Lieutenant John Birge of the 51<sup>st</sup> and Wentworth Police District. The practice of torturing victims into making confessions became rampant across the city of Chicago. Birge was acquitted for the torture cases due to the statute of limitations. But he was sentenced for perjury and is serving a four year sentence. Meanwhile, innocent torture victims confessed to crimes they did not commit are being released many with lawsuits against the city of Chicago for condoning and covering up the practice.

I had personal experience with the police forcing confessions from two boys seven and eight years old for the murder of eleven year old Ryan Harris in August 1998. Ryan Harris was raped and murdered, and her body was discovered by the two boys riding their bikes behind the apartment buildings at 66<sup>th</sup> and Parnell. When they reported the crime to the police, the police took them to the 51<sup>st</sup> and Wentworth Station where detectives from the Birge Unit

interrogated suspects. The juveniles were in custody when the parents of the two boys were being held and questioned. But the parents were not allowed to be with their kids or provide a lawyer for them. One of the parents was a young man that I knew from my ministry in the Englewood community. His name is Eli. Eli was furious that he could not be present with his son. But there was nothing he could do because he was at the 51<sup>st</sup> and Wentworth Station where forced confession was a common practice. The police emerged with the two boys in handcuffs. They announced that they had a confession from the two boys; furthermore they had semen samples from the two boys as proof they raped Ryan Harris before killing her. The boys were taken into custody without bond. The news of depravity in Englewood spread rapidly to even the international news. Hyper-sexed black boys had raped and killed an eleven year old girl. Englewood and black males were at a new nadir of depravity; and the police were trusted and believed without any knowledge that there was a forced or manipulated confession.

Meanwhile, Eli went to the news with a public outcry against the 51<sup>st</sup> and Wentworth procedure of not allowing parents to accompany children during interrogation. He demanded an apology from the Police Department and Mayor Daley. No apology was given. Eli ratcheted up his demands for an apology; prophesying that “heads would roll” at 51<sup>st</sup> and Wentworth. It was also uncovered that there was no camera in the interrogation room to record the techniques used to extract the so-called confession. One of the top black lawyers in Chicago took the case. Judge R. Eugene Pincham was an excellent attorney that served as judge in the city of Chicago. Judge Pincham went to work on the case. And policies were reviewed regarding the interrogation of minors that parents and cameras be present to observe police tactics. And several police officers were reviewed and released as a result of the pressure from Judge Pincham and the black community. But this was not the end of the matter. One does not cause heads to roll at the 51<sup>st</sup> and Wentworth Station without consequences.

I received a call from Eli. His mother and two sisters lived on the third floor of an apartment in Englewood. Someone had entered the apartment in the middle of the night, poured a flammable liquid inside, and torched the apartment. And the burglar gates were locked from the outside. All three perished in the fire with no way to escape. I met Eli at Leak's Funeral Home on 79<sup>th</sup> and Cottage Grove in Chicago. We stood alone before the three caskets and both wept: mother and two sisters gone too soon. No way anyone can convince me that embittered police bent on revenge were not responsible for the three murders. Many blacks know that the “serve and protect” police motto does not readily apply to black folks.

DNA evidence proved Floyd Durr was the person that raped Ryan Harris. He was charged with the murder, thus the two boys were acquitted. There was a financial settlement for Eli's son and family, but it came as a mixed blessing. Last I heard, Eli's son is doing well; but the other boy got caught selling drugs, and is incarcerated. Being handcuffed and locked up when a boy should be in a classroom and home with family takes a psychological toll on a black male that imbibes the negative stigma.

This story about forced confession carries over to the Belhar discussion. The Afrikaner National Party came into power in 1948 using apartheid as a platform. The uniqueness of the apartheid government model was the yin-yang theocratic relationship of theology and politics to organize the city-state of apartheid. The apartheid *polis* controlled the politics, policy, polity, and the police. The apartheid theocratic regime had legal use of force. And torture and forced confession were everyday realities in apartheid South Africa beginning in 1948 when the national party took power, and lands in South Africa. And the apartheid church condoned torture and forced confession as normative to maintain white supremacy “by any means necessary.” Mandela was fortunate to be alive; hundreds of key leaders, especially messianic leaders like Steve Biko (born two days before me on December 18, 1946) “mysteriously died” by suicide, or falling down stairs while in detention by the South Afrikan Police.

The Calvinistic model that integrated church and state is vulnerable to abuses of power, especially human rights violations, based on the elite notion that the “chosen people” are ordained by God as *hegemon* to govern and lead. Calvin was not an ordained minister while he served as mayor of Geneva. Calvin developed a model of city-state that gave the power of polis, even police powers to the government officials who in turn taught in the churches obedience to the elected government officials. The Afrikaners’ view of themselves as chosen people ordained by God to govern and lead with covenant theology as the foundation for the political structure of apartheid hearkens back to the Battle of Blood River won against the Zulus on December 16, 1838. The crux of The Great Trek and the religious foundations for the future Afrikaner government are best summarized in the vow taken prior to the Battle of Blood River on December 16th, 1838.

My brethren and fellow countrymen. At this moment we stand before the Holy God of heaven and earth, to make a promise if He will be with us and protect us, and deliver the enemy into our hands so that we may triumph over him, that we shall observe the day and the date as an anniversary in each year, and a day of thanksgiving like the Sabbath in His honor; and that we shall enjoin our children that they must take part with us in this for a remembrance even for posterity. (*The Role the Dutch Reformed Church Played in the Rise and Fall of Apartheid – Jennifer Nelson*)

The victory at Blood River was commemorated as a sign and proof that the Afrikaner were the chosen people. In 1948, the Afrikaner National Party won the all-white general election based on the apartheid platform. Dr. Daniel Malan, former minister in the Dutch Reformed Church the first National Party Prime Minister, expounded on the relationship between apartheid and Christianity in a letter to the Rev. John H. Piersma, a minister at Oakdale Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan:

The Church believes that God in His wisdom so disposed it that the first White men and women who settled at the foot of the Black Continent were profoundly religious people, imbued with a very real zeal to bring the light of the gospel to the heathen nations of Africa. These first

South Africans lit a torch which was carried to the farthest corners of the subcontinent in the course of the last three centuries and whose light now shines upon the greater part of all non-White peoples south of the Equator. (*The Changing Face of Religion and Human Rights: A Personal Reflection* – Clemens Neumann)

In the same 1954 letter, Rev. Dr. Daniel Malan articulated his views on the Afrikaner as the chosen people of God destined for political authority.

Apartheid is based on what the Afrikaner believes his divine calling and Privilege – to convert the heathen to Christianity without obliterating his National identity...The traditional fear of the Afrikaner of racial equality (equalitarianism) between white and black derives from his aversion to miscegenation. The Afrikaner has always believed very firmly that if he is to be true to his primary calling of bringing Christianity to the heathen, he must preserve his racial identity intact. The church is, therefore, highly opposed to inter-marriage between black and white and is committed to withstand everything that is calculated to facilitate it. (*The Changing Face of Religion and Human Rights: A Personal Reflection* – Clemens Neumann)

### Church as Factory for Racist Heresy

The sad reality is that the church would be the factory manufacturing vile racist attitudes. Hitler derived his hatred for Jews from the writings of none other than Martin Luther himself. Luther had a despicable attitude toward Jews. And as he neared the end of his life, he experienced a terrible case of hemorrhoids. And as his pain and suffering grew worse with blood in his stools, Luther spewed venomous diatribes against the Jews. On one hand, we have the original Protestant Reformer who championed “justification by faith,” while on the other hand, his anti-Semitism is well documented. Hitler quoted the vile anti-Semitic remarks and attitudes from the writings of Martin Luther himself, e.g., “On Jews and Their Lies.” Indeed, Hitler justified his Nazi pogrom to wreak havoc on Jews as the main threat to Nazi white supremacy grounded in the theological reflections of Martin Luther.

Hitler also borrowed his propaganda tactics from the film *Birth of a Nation* based on a book written by an American Baptist pastor in New York City named Rev. Thomas R. Dixon. His book *The Clansman* was championed by the KKK as vitally necessary to halt the “Africanization” of the South after the Confederate defeat in the Civil War. Again, the KKK was church-based with a theology of white supremacy as a given without concern with contradiction or moral dilemma. In fact, there were hundreds of white churches that understood it as their duty as a Christian to become members of the KKK and serve with honor and dignity in obedience to the Lord. The film *Birth of a Nation* became one of the all-time box office hits with viewers exceeded only by *Gone with the Wind* and some contemporary films like *Star Wars*. The director, D.W. Griffiths is considered by many to be the father of modern day Hollywood. And the film was endorsed by President Woodrow Wilson from Virginia. Wilson had a debut in the

White House the very next day after it debuted in Hollywood. Members of the Supreme Court attended the White House viewing. The point is this: racist ideology of white supremacy was born in the church through vile racist preaching from ministers like Rev. Thomas R. Dixon, then the poisonous message we propagated through the new technology of film. *Birth* featured blacks in derogatory and demeaning ways to heighten fear of inter-racial marriage and loss of political power. The film generated great sympathy for whites in the south and solidified support for nationwide white supremacy. The film also resulted in KKK membership increasing in record numbers in the North. Indiana became the largest state with headquarters in Indianapolis. By 1925, Chicago had the highest number of KKK members for a big city with 50,000 wearing hoods, most claiming to be Christians in good standing with the church and God. It is common to find tombstones in the Midwest with both cross and KKK symbols. Again, I have given examples of how virulent forms of white supremacist racism were born in the church. Thanks to *The Clansman* as the basis for *Birth*, Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Propaganda systematically worked tenaciously for Aryan supremacy, and the extermination of the Jew. From the beginning of his tenure, Goebbels organized attacks on German Jews, commencing with the one-day boycott of Jewish businessmen, doctors, and lawyer on April 1, 1933. His attacks on the Jewish population culminated in the *Kristallnacht* assault of 1938, an open and unrestrained pogrom unleashed by the Nazis all across Germany, in which scores of synagogues were burned and hundreds of Jews were assaulted and murdered. Further, he produced a series of anti-Semitic films. Goebbels used films like *Birth* and modern propaganda techniques to psychologically prepare the German people for aggressive warfare in his classic *Triumph of the Will*.

It should be noted that Hitler maintained a German embassy in South Africa during his reign of terror. It seems that the Nationalist Party was right in “goose step” with Hitler on their shared values of white supremacy, and the purity of the white race justifying apartheid segregation sanctioned by harsh de jure laws and brutal enforcement. Nazi beliefs were assimilated right into the apartheid world-and-life-view of the Dutch Afrikaner. Indeed, German is one of the languages still spoken in South Africa today.

Milton Rokeach in his excellent book *Beliefs, Attitudes, and Values* describes in the appendix how the most conservative religious groups manufacture racist ideology. So it should come as no surprise that hyper-conservative religious groups like the Dutch Reformed Church would hold firm to the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dordt, and simultaneously advocate segregation with the hermeneutic that God is sovereign and ordained the apartheid social order justifying the use of force even torture to maintain cultural hegemony. I discovered a Yale University website that shows every one of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings. The truth about the role of the church during apartheid cannot be ignored when you witness for yourself Afrikaner police telling how they used force even against innocent people; then go back to church and worship the Lord as though everything was normal and right. Look for the website and see the footage for yourself: [http://trc.law.yale.edu/video\\_episodes.htm](http://trc.law.yale.edu/video_episodes.htm)

## Confession in First John

The book of 1 John uses the word “confess” (*homologeō*) in two ways. In 1 John 1:9 it means to confess our sins; and 1 John 4:15 it means to confess our faith. The use of the word confess in the first epistle of John teaches us to admit our sin and guilt to God, as well as the profession of faith in Christ. To be sure, Reformed faith and liturgy teaches us to confess our sins to God and that God pardons us by His grace, as well as the significance of the three standards: Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dordt. I am thankful that Reformed liturgy stresses the vital need for confession of sin, and that we are pardoned by the grace of God. During worship there is time and space allotted for confessing my *personal* sin.

But what about the sins of collectives? How does a denomination like the CRCNA confess collective sins to God? Surely, Jesus died on the cross for the sins of collectives too. We don’t talk much about collective sin. This is one reason why it is difficult to make progress in racial reconciliation. When the concept of sin is mentioned people tend to translate to mean personal sin. For example, most people will acknowledge there was Slavery in the United States, and that there are some that benefit now from the free labor of slaves resulting in massive accumulations of wealth and prosperity for the descendants of whites that trafficked in the slave trade. According to personal sin doctrine, the descendants of the slave owners can claim immunity; they did not actively do anything and are not personally liable. But about those that inherited their fortunes from 19th century slave owners? This is where the passive sins of collectives come into play. There is a privilege enjoyed with wealth handed down from ancestors that profited from the slave trade. Though the inheritors are not personally responsible for what happened in the past, they enjoy the fruits of the ill-gotten gain in the present. A classic illustration in the history of the United States is the unjust confiscation of land with its rich minerals of gold and oil from Native Americans by the United States government with land; the dominant culture profited from the genocide and abuse of the Native Americans.

In the case of the Belhar, the “elephant in the room” is the painful reality of apartheid and the role of the church in cahoots with the political structure to perpetuate white supremacy and cultural hegemony. The Belhar is addressing the personal and collective sin of apartheid in South Africa. Again, the Belhar is about personal and collective actions of white supremacist church members; and it calls for sincere collective repentance with the promise of collective forgiveness so that unity, reconciliation, and justice can prevail. This then is the gift of the Belhar. It creates the context for collective forgiveness in the face of horrendous civil rights violations and abuses coming from Dutch Afrikaner believers that imposed sinful apartheid policies on one hand, while holding firm to the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dordt. If the three forms of unity did not deter the apartheid church and government in 1948 from establishing hegemonic rule with violent use of force and oppression, then perhaps a 4<sup>th</sup> confession is in order to ensure that future Reformed bodies never promote white supremacy like that again in South Africa anywhere. The gift of the Belhar

is that it incites us to reflect historically on the use and abuse of power in our Reformed denominations; and seek opportunities to confess collective sin with the view to collective forgiveness where unity, reconciliation, and justice rolls down like waters and righteous like a mighty stream (Amos 5:24).

### Colonization and Commerce

Big problems occur when the covenant promise is interpreted as national right and privilege. For instance, the name Immanuel means “God with us.” The intended interpretation puts the emphasis on the preposition *with*; but the nationalistic read emphasizes the pronoun interpreting as “God is with **US!**” The Afrikaner identity pivoted on the three forms of unity and the nationalistic belief that God is with *us* evidenced by the victory over the Zulu tribes on December 16, 1838. Indeed, other Dutch colonizers had a similar sense of national identity that they took with them to colonize and establish commercial trade routes all over the world.

This is one key way that we can learn from the Belhar. Unlike the Belgic Confession written to apologetically confess our faith in Christ over against the dominant Catholic Church, the Belhar is written to the Dutch Reformed Church as the harbingers of strident white supremacy and apartheid. The Belhar is written to advance the confession of collective sin against the oppressed that like God will forgive and pardon. The Belhar is written with the assumption that both 1 John 1:9 (admission of sin and guilt) and 1 John 4:15 (testimony of faith) are both needed. Again, the Belhar is not posing as an equivalent to the three confessional standards. It is a polemic between that seeks unity, reconciliation, and justice between saints within the same denomination where the collective sin of apartheid has hierarchically ordered the society with whites on top for theological reasons. It is my hope and prayer that we will adopt the Belhar a fourth confession because it takes confessing collective sin seriously. Again, 1 John 1:9 is not just about personal sins. We must be mindful of sins like apartheid in our own bailiwick and how unrepentant collective sin can quench the Spirit of God in our denomination.

The study committee report of Synod 1996 entitled *God’s Diverse and Unified Family* underscores the fact that “The fundamental effect of sin is the breakdown of the community.” As the diverse family of God, we must work together to transform the “racialized” society that vitally needs the unity, reconciliation, and justice addressed in the Belhar.

### Cultural and Historical Context

As I read the Belhar Confession, I remember the importance of first seeking to understand the cultural and historical context of the text so that my interpretations have rich description much like those of the framers. As an African-American male from the south side of Chicago, I read with spectacles (Calvin image) that color (pun intended) my observations, interpretations, and applications of the text. Therefore, it is important that I confess my social location as a Black and Reformed Belhar reader who views the world through social-consciousness spectacles with a “stigmatism” that seeks to expose and correct the hegemony of hierarchical dominator cultures (term coined by Riane Eisler). For example, dominator

cultures manufacture consent perpetuating cultural hegemony by manipulating the self-image of oppressed to view themselves through “stereotyped spectacles.” Inferiority complexes derived from Western patriarchal cultures distort the image of God for the oppressed, and conditions them to view themselves with carnivalesque funhouse mirror images as normative. The Afrikaner spectacles of apartheid with heretical Reformed theology in one lens, and political power in the other, seemed right and good to white supremacists with funhouse images that segregate whites on top from coloreds and blacks as *summum bonum*. In order to understand the context of the Belhar Confession, we will need an “ophthalmoscope” to look inside the interior structure of the eye of the apartheid church, especially the theological retina, that reflects images upside down and pathologically orders social reality so that whites, especially white males, are the “boss man” with coloreds next, and blacks on the bottom.

Indeed, there is a need for an “ophthalmoscope” to interpret some of the actions of the Reformed church and political structures when human rights are violated. It may seem upside down to some, but makes perfect sense to those with theocratic power and control of the city-state. Again, there is a dark side of every theological system. It may have seemed right side up at the time, but upside down in retrospect. This is one of the reasons why it is important to avoid discussing the three doctrinal standards in the abstract, and comparing the quality of doctrinal statements using the historical document as model, without considering the contextual realities and cultural contradictions. My point in bringing up contradictions of Calvinism is to underscore the fact that they do exist, and that the Belhar reader is savvy enough to know how to critically read between the lines. It is one thing to look back at doctrinal statements; it is a different matter to look back at the actions taken by Reformed leaders and synods to critique their use of power and control over against the doctrinal positions they upheld. Discussing such contradictions of Calvinism may shed light into the grievances against the apartheid church and government and its abuse of power under the theology of the sovereignty of God.

John Calvin served two terms as mayor of Geneva. He was never ordained, but maintained position as doctor of the church while administering city government at the same time. His second term was well received as good business for the city of Geneva. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was a best seller. His commentaries sold well too. There were multiple printing presses in Geneva printing copies of his books to keep pace with the brisk sales and demand. His business relationships with the powers that be in Geneva may shed light on Calvin’s role in the execution of Michael Servetus just outside the city of Geneva where he was burned at the stake, along with a copy of one of his books, on October 27, 1553. As a Belhar reader, I reflect on Calvin’s use (and abuse) of his power as mayor to preside over the execution of Michael Servetus, a Spaniard with Jewish descent (some contend Calvin suspected his Jewish background) in order to try to understand the “upside down” worldview of Calvinist when the church has both ecclesiastical and political power and control.

The charges against Michael Servetus were basically twofold: he did not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, and he did not believe in infant baptism. But when you read the different accounts of church historians, an alarm goes off in the brain that Calvin went too far

and abused his power as mayor of Geneva, and pressed for execution over against a life sentence, or turning him over to the Pope in Rome for punishment, since he was wanted by the Catholics as a “heretic” as well. Certainly, The Vatican had courts and jails, and could have done the deed of execution. Calvin could have finessed the situation. But Calvin had (or took) powers of mayor and executed Servetus while he was under his jurisdiction. In retrospect, Calvin won the battle, but Calvinism may have “lost the war” when it comes to the issue of freedom of conscience. Servetus is considered a martyr by those that advocate freedom of speech and conscience. Indeed, Americans would defend Servetus, especially Thomas Jefferson as a framer of the Declaration of Independence. With hindsight, the Servetus execution is hard to explain, especially to those that come to the CRC from oppressed communities where power and control has been abused by the *bossman*.

The scandal of the execution of Michael Servetus is an example of what can go wrong when Calvinist leaders have both church and government powers with obligation to maintain objective and impartial jurisprudence when *in reality* subjectivity and bias (remember Calvin was aware of “On Jews and Their Lies” by Luther) factored in to his abuse of power, and the decision to execute rather than seek alternative solutions. The Pope had a warrant for the arrest and conviction of Servetus, but Calvin locked him up and chose to execute. In fact, Calvin anticipated the opportunity to execute the accused heretic in a letter to Farel on 13 February 1546: “Servetus has just sent me a long volume of his ravings. If I consent he will come here, but I will not give my word; for if he comes here, if my authority is worth anything, I will never permit him to depart alive.”

To be clear, I raise the issue of burning Servetus at the stake as an illustration of the incongruence of Reformed orthodoxy and Reformed orthopraxy. It is one thing to compare the three forms of confession with the Belhar for orthodoxy. But when the question of practice arises, it sheds light on the fact that Reformed doctrine alone is not enough. Right doctrine gets diminished by contradictory practice, e.g., Calvin may likely have had impure motives for eliminating Servetus. As mayor of Geneva, there were other higher powers in Switzerland in Zurich and Basel that needed to authorize this mayoral execution. One would think that Servetus would have found sanctuary in Switzerland given the fact that this is where dissidents fled for freedom of speech and conscience. And Servetus surely felt that he could even attend church in Geneva where Calvin was teaching without consequences. But given his preferred status as mayor of Geneva, and businessman with lucrative books sales, the Swiss hierarchy “signed off” and did not overrule Calvin and the execution. Again, orthodoxy must be congruence with orthopraxy; there needs to be harmony of word and deed.

Another matter worth noting is the Acts of the Synod of Dordt. The Belhar conversations focus of the Canons of Dordt, while the Synod of Dordt deserves scrutiny as well. The Acts of the Synod of Dordt report the beheading of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt only four days after Synod ended on the grounds of treason, and using his political position to protect the Remonstrants. Also, Hugo Grotius was given a life sentence, but he escaped prison with the help of his wife. On that note, let’s turn the kaleidoscope again.

## Role of Women in the Struggle

How can females in the CRC join in the struggle for unity, reconciliation, and justice? We seriously need for women to “put their dogs in the fight” and speak out for or against the Belhar as a fourth confession. This should not be a white male thing with little or no participation of people of color and females on the sidelines.

I attended Synod 2009 at Trinity Christian College when women delegates were first seated and allowed to vote. I remember the vote taken to extend time for the Belhar to be discussed and reviewed before the up or down vote in 2012. I believe the vote of the women mattered greatly for the 2012 extension. And as we move into the final months before the 2012 Synod, I am convinced that the female opinion and vote will make a huge difference. I believe that we must not allow the white male paternal culture in the CRC smother the voice of females on this critical issue.

## Conclusion

It is my hope and prayer that the Belhar conversations and debates will move beyond the arid, historical comparison of documents for doctrinal content and the like. Let’s talk honestly about some of the contradictions that undermine Reformed faith like apartheid and other sins of collectives that perpetuate white supremacy and divide us. It is not enough to try to build community upon right doctrine. We must have right practice that confesses the sins of collectives so that the Holy Spirit can heal us and cleanse our denomination. I urge all to join in the conversation and express from your head and heart advocating for the Belhar as a fourth doctrinal standard of the Christian Reformed Church.