

On my way from vacation earlier this week I started to think about the Belhar Confession. (Yes, it is a long drive. No, I have not gone over the edge – at least not yet.) The impetus for my thoughts came from watching TV while eating breakfast at the hotel that morning. They had on some news channel that was recapping last week's Republican National Convention and previewing this week's Democratic National Convention. The anchors and the reporters were bad enough. The people they chose to interview were worse. They were all angry about something, practically shouting at the camera, predicting dire results if their party did not win the election. It was not good for my digestion or my mood.

Once I got in the car and had some time to reflect on that sordid piece of reporting, that's when the Belhar Confession came to mind. Written by people who were oppressed by the apartheid government of their country, a policy that was supported by other Reformed churches in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church nevertheless held out a vision of church unity and offered forgiveness to those who tried to marginalize, if not demonize, them. They had every right to be angry. They could have responded with bitterness. They did not. They chose to follow the way of Jesus. They have a lot to teach us and we have a lot to learn.

How do we deal with people who disagree with us? In the church it's easy to say that our common faith in Jesus Christ overrides anything that might separate us. The reality is that people often walk out the door if they don't agree with decisions that are made by the session, the presbytery, or the General Assembly. Or they withhold their money or designate their giving to support only those causes they support or over which they have some control. Church unity is either forgotten or left behind.

Belhar reminds us of the importance of church unity. It reminds us that God has called us together and brought us together. The church is God's idea more than it is our choice. We can't – or we shouldn't – walk away from the church as easily as we change TV channels. Belhar appropriately challenges our understanding of ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church.)

Belhar also reminds us of the importance of forgiveness. Each time we say the Lord's Prayer we affirm the importance of forgiveness. Too often we hold on to the idea that we are the righteous ones or we see ourselves as the victim. If we believe that we will be forgiven as we forgive, we can't keep blaming the other person or the other side and wait for them to take the first step in restoring the relationship. If we believe that we will be forgiven as we forgive, if we believe that the relationship is important, then we need to take the first step. We need to be the ones that offer forgiveness.

Belhar also reminds us that we have work to do when it comes to race. The killing of black men by white police officers and the killing of white police officers by black men is a disturbing trend and a pattern repeated far too often. While we have come a long way, we still have a long way yet to go when it comes to race. Belhar offers us hope that there can be racial reconciliation. While the Confession of 1967 also lifts up the importance of reconciliation in a number of different areas, the Belhar Confession goes far beyond that and comes from a people, as the Brief Statement of Faith puts it, whose voices have long been silenced.

While the news reports I saw that morning were more dramatized and the polarizing voices they presented were probably intended to bring better ratings, I prefer the vision that comes from the Belmar Confession. It gives me hope for the future of the church. It shows us what we can do and what we need to do to be better followers of Jesus.

(* One of my favorite resources on the Belhar Confession is a video on the PCUSA website:

<http://oga.pcusa.org/section/ga/ga221/ga221-belhar/> It's the third one down on that page and is a little over 10 minutes long. It provides an overview of the confession as well as showing different people reading through the confession itself.)