

AFFIRM THE BELHAR? YES, BUT NOT AS A DOCTRINAL STANDARD

A Contribution to the Discussion in CRCNA

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INTRODUCTION

My Position and Involvement in the Discussion

Synod 2009 recommended that Synod 2012 adopt the Belhar Confession [hereafter BC] as the CRCNA's fourth Form of Unity, that is, as a definitive doctrinal standard.¹ I oppose that recommendation because I believe that the confessional and theological identity and integrity of the CRCNA are at stake. In this paper I explain my reasons, some of which I have stated elsewhere.² This is not a formal academic publication but an informal contribution³ to the "balanced discussion" urged by Synod 2011.⁴

In brief, I think that BC's name has led to a confused recommendation. BC is like the Barmen Declaration, not the Belgic Confession. It does not have the necessary content to be a basic doctrinal standard: It does not state the Gospel or summarize the Christian faith. More problematic, if taken on its own terms, it is ambiguous and misleading about the Gospel, central Christian doctrines, and social ethics. In fact it is widely used in ecumenical circles to promote progressive ("liberal") theologies and social agendas. Thus adopting BC as a confession would diminish the doctrinal soundness, denominational unity, and ecumenical integrity of CRCNA. However, if it is subordinate to and interpreted according to the Three Forms, these problems do not arise. In that case, there are important reasons for affirming BC as an official declaration or testimony of CRCNA about the Gospel's implications for racial reconciliation and social justice.

¹ <http://www.crcna.org/pages/belhar.cfm>. The Synodical introduction and text of BC are available on this website.

² "Context and Confusion: What Does the Belhar Confess?," *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum*, Fall 2010, 10-12 (<https://www.calvinseminary.edu/pubs/forum/10fall.pdf>); "Reformed Matters: Why the Belhar Should Not Be a Confession," *Banner*, June 2011 (<http://www.thebanner.org/departments/article/?id=3362>)

³ Because the paper is informal, I do not document all references or assertions. I can do so if necessary.

⁴ *Acts of Synod 2011*, Art. 31, IV, p. 826.

Before proceeding, I reject two problematic reasons for opposing BC as a confession. One is any traditionalism, confessionalism, or doctrinalism that refuses on principle to consider new confessional standards. (I think that the *Contemporary Testimony* is much more worthy of being a confession than BC.) The other reason is tolerance of racism and injustice, which are sins. My opposition to making BC a confession is not evidence of traditionalism or racism.

A Momentous Decision: Our Doctrinal Identity and Integrity

Synod 2009 recommended that Synod 2012 adopt the BC as the CRCNA's fourth Form of Unity, equal in doctrinal authority to the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dordt. The significance of this decision is monumental and will set our theological direction for the future. The Forms of Unity are not merely venerable documents expressing the faith of our ancestors on the issues of their time. They are doctrinal standards—definitive summaries and explanations of the essential and enduring truths that God teaches in Scripture—foundational to our denominational identity and unity. Adding to the Three Forms after four hundred years is a momentous decision. BC must meet a very high standard to merit that status.

Are we sure that it does? Have we studied the issue adequately? These questions reflect my concern that current spiritual and cultural dynamics in the CRCNA have diluted our discussions of BC. We have not clearly identified and evaluated what is at stake theologically. Fifty years ago we might have been in danger of intellectualism and doctrinalism. Our grandparents' generation would have scrutinized BC line by line. But in general, our level of confessional interest, doctrinal knowledge, and theological skills are significantly less than theirs. We are much more likely to make decisions for practical, emotional, and relational reasons than from knowledge of Scripture or Reformed doctrine. In some ways this development is healthy, but in others it is a regrettable loss.

For better or worse, our discussions of BC have focused more on what it symbolizes (racial reconciliation and social justice), how people feel about it (who can be against justice and reconciliation?), and how it will affect ethnic and ecumenical relations (how can we say no?) than what it says and whether it merits confessional status. Many of us have read it and found it “right on.” But we have not thought deeply about doctrinal standards, what BC actually says, what it does not say, and how it is perceived in the world beyond the CRCNA. If we are fully biblical and Reformed, we should weigh all these factors in proper proportion.

Adopting BC as a Form of Unity would officially sanction the trend away from robust confessional integrity in the CRCNA as we encounter the pragmatic pluralism of the twenty-first century. At this point, we ought to nurture doctrinal soundness, not exacerbate its erosion.

The Burden of Proof

Stewardship of our Reformed heritage for future generations places a heavy burden of proof on those who favor adopting BC as a confession. But the decision of Synod 2009 shifted the burden to those who have reservations. We usually appoint synodical study committees of experts to consider important issues in depth. We often take years or decades to decide, as was the case with women in office, children at communion, and the new form of subscription. It is astonishing that we have not taken such care with BC, which is a matter of fundamental confessional identity. The main impetus for BC did not arise from within the CRCNA but from ecumenical relations. A series of denominational listening sessions elicited a variety of responses, not an enthusiastic consensus in favor of making BC a confessional standard. The decision of Synod 2009 did not reflect that tentative diversity of views in CRCNA or adequately explore the reasons for them. Instead, after limited discussion, it recommended the most radical

option--that Synod 2012 adopt BC as a Form of Unity. This decision and subsequent denominational promotion of it have placed the burden of proof on those who have reservations.

That shift is misplaced, given our responsibility for God's providence of our confessional tradition to future generations and our ecumenical partners. Synod 2011, reflecting the need and desire for more thorough reflection, urged a more "balanced" discussion before Synod 2012.

This paper is my contribution to that discussion. It is not balanced in the sense of looking at the pros and cons of all options. It contributes to overall balance by raising and articulating serious objections to the recommendation of Synod 2009 and making a case for an alternative.

WHY THE BELHAR CONFESSION CANNOT BE A DOCTRINAL STANDARD

Confusion about "Confession"

A lot of confusion could have been avoided if the Belhar statement had been differently named. It was called a Confession, like the Belgic Confession. But it is not a Confession in the historic sense of Confessions that are doctrinal standards, such as the Belgic, Westminster, Helvetic, or Augsburg Confession.⁵ Rather, it fits another genre of ecclesiastical statement developed in the twentieth century. In length, content, and purpose, it is apparently modeled on the 1934 *Barmen Declaration* about the Nazi government by the German Evangelical churches, which they did not consider as a doctrinal standard. Other more recent statements of this sort recognized by the World Council of Churches or World Association of Reformed Churches are the Korean Declaration (1973), the Korean Unification Declaration (1988), the Kairos Document (South Africa 1985), and the Kairos Palestine Document (2009). All of these are brief statements that apply selected Christian doctrines to specific social, economic, or political situations. They are a recognizable genre. Thus the name Belhar Confession is confusing. If it

⁵I'll use the capitalized form, Confession, to mean Form of Unity, i.e. doctrinal standard.

was intended as an historic Confession like the Belgic Confession, it is a category mistake—a title exaggerated to emphasize the importance and binding nature of its content. Another recent example is the Accra Confession, which seeks to canonize a particular perspective about justice in the global economy. If BC had been named a Declaration or Affirmation or Testimony, it would be less confusing and controversial.

Of course BC does have some functions similar to the historic confessions. Properly interpreted, it does confess important biblical teachings about justice and reconciliation that are binding on the faith and practice of churches and their members. In addition, it does call us to confess and repent from racism and injustice. So BC is confessional in these senses.

But these functions are not sufficient to make it a Confession in the sense of a doctrinal standard or Form of Unity; conversely, a church declaration need not be a Confession to have these functions. We are obligated by everything that Scripture teaches, not merely by what is in the Three Forms, so we are mandated to seek justice and reconciliation, whatever we decide about BC. If it is necessary to give confessional status to biblical teachings about justice and unity in order to believe and obey them, as some argue for BC, then we should also make evangelism, life-style, stewardship of creation, and many other responsibilities into confessional issues, for they too are crucial. But this sort of confessionalism is unnecessary and unsustainable. In addition to Scripture and the Forms of Unity, we are also bound by synodical decisions that specify what Scripture and the confessions teach, for example, about the ethics of life and sexuality. Thus Synod could affirm BC as biblically binding without making it a Confession.

Similarly, confession of sin is not the purpose of confessional standards, although they can be used that way, as is the Catechism's explanation of the Law. Conversely, the BC and the Contemporary Testimony can be used for confession of sin even they are not Confessions.

For these reasons, the confessional functions of BC neither necessitate nor are sufficient to make it a Form of Unity. In sum, all the reasons for adopting BC as a Confession based on the term confession are equivocations, category mistakes, or non-sequiturs. (The centrally important *status confessionis* question--whether the Gospel itself is at stake—is addressed below, p. 17.)

The Belhar Confession Lacks the Content of a Doctrinal Standard

What then is a Confession? What should an ecclesiastical statement contain in order to qualify as a doctrinal standard? Advocates of BC realize that it is much shorter (only two pages) and more narrowly-focused than the Three Forms of Unity. But they claim that there is no standard definition by which to reject BC and, furthermore, that because all confessions are incomplete and imperfect, BC's deficiencies are not a problem.

But these arguments do not stand up to scrutiny when BC is compared to the Three Forms. Although there is diversity in the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions about the number, names, and content of confessional documents, the real point of comparison for CRCNA is our Three Forms of Unity as basic doctrinal standards. The Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dordt have a common content (as do the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, Helvetic Confession, and Augsburg Confession, which are doctrinal standards for other denominations). They state the essential content of the Gospel and summarize the Reformed Christian faith, whereas BC does neither. Furthermore, they take clear positions on the issues that they address, whereas BC is fundamentally ambiguous, as shown

below. For both reasons, BC cannot serve as a doctrinal standard, whatever other “confessional” functions it has.

In different ways, all three Forms summarize the essential core of the Gospel. They clearly state the basic doctrine of sin and the alienation of all unregenerate humans from God. They explain the Gospel of God’s sovereign grace, that he saves and reconciles his chosen people through the incarnation, obedient life, atoning death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and that he brings each of his chosen ones to repentance, faith, love, obedience, community, and life everlasting by his Word and Spirit. The Three Forms also make clear the difference between God’s people and the world as they summarize the Christian life and the mission of the church.

The Catechism and Belgic Confession (and Contemporary Testimony) elaborate the core Gospel within broader summaries of biblical teaching for faith and life. The Canons of Dordt are sometimes portrayed as narrow in focus in order to find common ground with BC. But the similarity is superficial. Although the Canons focus on the debate about election between Calvinists and Arminians, they clearly state and elaborate the whole Gospel—a broadly biblical account of God’s eternal and sovereign plan of grace in Jesus Christ to save his elect people in this life for the life to come. The Canons are in no way narrow in content.

None of the Three Forms contains every doctrine that Scripture teaches, and none is without minor flaws (the usual list: HC 80, detesting Anabaptists, Paul writing Hebrews). But each can stand on its own as a summary of the way of salvation, and none depends on the others to be understood correctly or to avoid misrepresenting the Gospel or the Christian faith.

In contrast, BC neither states the basic Gospel nor summarizes biblical doctrine. It does not make clear the way of salvation or outline mere Christianity. It might presuppose the “sin, salvation, service” framework of the Heidelberg Catechism, or God’s plan to give his elect

people eternal life through Jesus Christ, as stated in the Belgic Confession and Canons, but it does not mention them. To claim that it builds on them is an argument from silence. It would have been easy for BC to affirm the Three Forms or to include a brief summary of the doctrines of sin, salvation, and eternal life for God's people, but it does not do so. Instead, it begins with a brief statement about the triune God gathering his people in this world, and it quickly moves to focus exclusively on two parts of God's mission that it mixes: justice, reconciliation, and unity in church and in society.

It is true that all confessions are incomplete and imperfect. But what is missing from BC makes it qualitatively deficient. It lacks major content that is common and essential to the historical doctrinal standards, and thus it simply does not qualify to become one of them.

In addition, if BC does presuppose and depend on the Three Forms for its meaning and proper interpretation (even though it does not say so), then logically it is not their equal in standing or authority. In other words, claiming that BC assumes the Confessions actually concedes its subordination to them. For all these reasons, BC does not qualify as a Form of Unity even if it has no other problems.

The Belhar Confession is Doctrinally Ambiguous

But its brevity and narrow focus lead to another serious deficiency: lack of doctrinal clarity. Historically, creeds and confessions are supposed to define what the church teaches on important matters and to clarify what is ambiguous or disputed. But because BC does not present the Gospel or a summary of the faith, it is ambiguous. It elicits but does not address questions about a number of important doctrines which it assumes or mentions. These doctrines are understood in diverse and conflicting ways in current ecumenical Christianity. In fact when

BC is taken on its own as a self-standing document (i.e. as a doctrinal standard should be able to do), it reads more like progressive post-Enlightenment than historic Reformed Christianity.⁶

The list of doctrinal issues includes the nature of sin and alienation from God (individual and spiritual or basically social?), the person and work of Jesus Christ as the mediator of salvation (not addressed), the basic content of the Gospel (substitutionary atonement, regeneration, justification, forgiveness, and eternal life are not addressed), the goal of salvation (more than community in this world?), the nature of true faith (more than trust and commitment for justice and reconciliation?), and the distinction and relation between the following: God's elect people and human society, saving grace and common grace, reconciliation to God and reconciliation among humans, justification and justice, life in this world and eternal life, and the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of Christ. These doctrines are not peripheral matters.

The text of BC is intrinsically ambiguous on these issues, allowing readings from the perspectives of Reformed orthodoxy, Barthian neo-orthodoxy, the progressive social gospel, and various kinds of liberation theology (explained below). Thus at a time when doctrinal pluralism is wide-spread among Reformed churches, BC fails at what creeds and confessions are supposed to do—clarify what Scripture teaches on important and/or disputed issues that it faces.⁷

⁶ Much Protestant theology, including “Reformed” theology, since Schleiermacher (c.1820) has understood God's relation to the world to be totally immanent in nature and history and progressively redemptive of the whole creation, including all people of good will irrespective of faith in Jesus Christ. It superficially sounds like Kuyper but rejects supernaturalism (in miracles and revelation), penal substitutionary atonement, eternal punishment, and other doctrines of historic orthodox Christianity. It is what our grandparents meant by “liberal” or “modernist” theology.

⁷ I elaborate this claim in “Context and Confusion: What Does the Belhar Confess?” *CTS Forum*, Fall 2010, 10-12. Synod 2009 already began to address three of these deficiencies in its introduction of BC. It felt the need to assert that sin is more than social alienation, that salvation comes only through true faith in Jesus Christ (asserted but not defined by BC, Art.2), and that BC does not support homosexual activity. The corrective introduction to BC would have to be as long as BC itself if it were going to deal with all of the ambiguities and misinterpretations.

My concern about doctrinal ambiguity is not hypothetical or preemptive. It is disturbingly evident in the conflicting interpretations of BC publicly defended by some of its original sponsors and by many advocates in churches in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (now the World Communion of Reformed Churches, of which CRCNA is a member).

Some supporters of BC are confessionally orthodox. Advocates in South African Reformed churches, in the former Reformed Ecumenical Council, Reformed Church in America, CRCNA, and WCRC find nothing in BC that is inconsistent with historic Reformed doctrine. They are right: BC can be read that way and was no doubt so intended by some original sponsors. Nothing in it explicitly contradicts the Confessions. But mere consistency with the Three Forms is not nearly sufficient.

The problem is that BC does not require or even favor an orthodox reading. Other interpretations are equally possible and more consistent with its actual text, and they are widely held. I mention only the views of Dr. Alan Boesak, an original formulator of BC and two-term president of WARC,⁸ and the progressive voices in recent Presbyterian Church USA discussions.⁹ If intelligent advocates can read BC so differently, then it obviously lacks clear, unambiguous, biblical-Reformed statements of central doctrines, not only those doctrines basic to social justice and racial reconciliation.

The Social Gospel?

⁸ See Boesak, "To Stand Where God Stands: Reflections on the Confession of Belhar after 25 Years," <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/4539/Boesak-SHEXXXIV%281%29-July2008.pdf?sequence=1>

⁹ Here are examples: <http://www.ecclesio.com/2011/03/church-dividing-idols-and-the-belhar-confession-%E2%80%93-by-christian-iosso/> <http://newchurchrising.com/lessons-from-south-africa/the-belhar-confession/>

Historic Christianity bases social welfare and justice on the Gospel of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ—not either/or but both/and. The Gospel is basic and its benefits follow. Critics of BC are concerned that it affirms the social gospel instead of the Gospel.

In brief, the Social Gospel largely replaces proclamation of the Gospel of forgiveness of sins and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ with the “gospel” that God promotes social justice and welfare for humans in this world. It was a movement that flourished a century ago (cf. Walter Rauschenbusch). Based in German liberal theology, it presumed that God grants eternal life to all humans, or to all people of good will, whether or not they have faith in Jesus Christ during this life. It was typically universalistic and open to religious pluralism. It felt that the most pressing mission of the church is not to call sinners to repent and believe but to tend to their earthly needs. The Gospel mission is diaconal work and social reform, not evangelism.

The Social Gospel as a movement is history. But its perspective lives on in progressive Christianity, which is embraced by influential figures in leading denominations in WCC, WARC, and WCRC. These leaders and organizations strongly emphasize community and justice, but they largely ignore evangelism, personal conversion, and church planting. Most of them believe that BC supports their vision of Christianity.

Does BC express the social gospel? The question arises because BC alludes to God, salvation, true faith, and the church only briefly; it does not state the basic Gospel or define sin, salvation, or true faith; and it does focus exclusively on racial reconciliation and justice. As a result, the text of BC on its own seems to define sin as social alienation and injustice, to identify reconciliation to God with human reconciliation, to equate true faith and the true church with those who are truly committed to social reconciliation, to correlate God’s kingdom with the

progress of reconciliation in society as well as in the church, and to equate the Christian mission with promoting justice, reconciliation, and unity in church and society.

Someone unfamiliar with Christianity who read BC as an accurate summary of the faith (i.e. as a doctrinal standard) would naturally come to these conclusions. Those familiar with theology would readily notice the similarity to the social gospel or liberation theology. I claim only that BC can easily be read as the social gospel. Because it is ambiguous, I do not allege that it is the social gospel.¹⁰

Liberation Theology?

The concern about liberation theology is similar. This movement flourished from the late 1960's to the '90s. It was begun by Roman Catholic priests among the poor in Latin America but spread internationally to many groups. The poor, women, ethnic and cultural minorities, colonized peoples, gays and lesbians, environmentalists, disability advocates, and marginalized religious groups developed distinctive theologies of liberation with progressive social visions.

In general, liberation theology synthesizes Christian doctrine with progressive, transformational, or revolutionary, (socialist or Marxist) ideology and social philosophy.¹¹ It views society as a dynamic, comprehensive system of demographic groups which are alienated because the rich, powerful, and "normal" advantage themselves and oppress "the others."

Although oppression and alienation are pervasive, liberation can result if the oppressed assert

¹⁰ The possible influence of Barth on BC is not much discussed. Specifically, the claim in Article 4 that God is in a special way the God of the poor and oppressed may be quoted from Barth rather than a liberation theologian. He was a vocal socialist. With respect to theology, while he emphasized the proclamation of the Word and personal response, he also seemed to imply universalism by asserting that all humans are elect and reprobate in Christ. In both these ways, Barth can be used to support a progressive reading of BC.

¹¹ Liberation social philosophy should not be confused with the perspective of Abraham Kuyper, and those who stand in the tradition of Kuyper should not identify themselves with liberation theology. The important differences are as significant as the similarities. Liberation thought has roots in Enlightenment revolutionary and Romantic sociology.

their humanity, resist oppression, overcome alienation, and construct a social system that prevents oppression and preserves freedom and justice for all.

Liberation ideology becomes liberation theology when the process of liberation is identified with God's redemptive activity in the world. Mainline liberation theology proclaims that God identifies with the marginalized and oppressed against the rich and powerful. He uses the transforming process of liberation to bring salvation incrementally, progressively, and inclusively in history. Men and women, rich and poor, gay and straight, different cultures, ethnicities, the natural environment, and (for many liberation theologians) different religions—all are included and reconciled in God's coming Kingdom. Social liberation culminates in reconciliation and communion with God. Liberation and salvation are inseparable aspects of the same process. God's people are those who strive for social liberation and reconciliation.

Before making judgments about BC, it is important to consider two qualifying points about liberation theology. The first is about doctrine. There are different brands of liberation theology: orthodox and progressive Roman Catholic, as well as evangelical and progressive Protestant. A few liberation theologians are evangelical Protestants who affirm the Gospel and historic doctrine.¹² Not all liberation theology is liberal or progressive in doctrine.

The second point is about politics. Many liberation theologians embrace populist democratic socialism, not Marxism or top-down socialism. CRCNA members--especially those who identify conservative American politics as the Christian position--should realize that many Reformed Christians in Europe regard the democratic socialism of the Netherlands and Switzerland, for example, as the legacy of John Calvin's Geneva. Many are orthodox but also

¹² For example, Jose Miguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists: The Mutual Challenge to Revolution* (Eerdmans 1976).

sympathetic toward the social-political perspective of some liberation theologians. For both these reasons it is not accurate to reject all liberation theology as theologically liberal.

Nevertheless, much liberation theology is doctrinally progressive and problematic, including versions promoted by advocates of BC. Like the social gospel, mainline liberation theology reinterprets the core biblical doctrines of sin and salvation in terms of social oppression and liberation. The poor are the poor in spirit who inherit the kingdom of God. The primary mission of the church, on this view, is promoting social justice and reconciliation, not calling individual sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. In outcome and practice, progressive liberation theology and the social gospel agree that the mission of the Gospel is primarily about improving life in this world. At stake here is not just Reformed theology but the Gospel and mission of the church as defined by Jesus in Matthew 28.

The strongest suggestion of liberation theology in BC is Article 4, which focuses entirely on justice, harmony, and well-being among humans. It asserts that God “is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged.” In the absence of a nuanced definition of “special way,” BC does seem to invoke a basic theme of liberation theology, God’s “preferential option for the poor.”¹³

Scripture teaches the equality of humans before God as created, fallen, and redeemed. In what way, then, are the poor and oppressed more “special” than others? Are they more likely to receive eternal life? Absolutely not. Galatians 3:28 teaches that no demographic status is preferred by God or merits his favor. Certainly the Bible speaks with a strong voice about God’s concern for the poor, widows, orphans, strangers, and all victims of injustice, oppression, and

¹³ South African theologian and anti-apartheid activist John de Gruchy explicitly links BC with liberation theology. See “Belhar: Connecting Reformed and Liberation Theology” in his book, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Eerdmans 1991), 214-219. However, the phrase about God’s special relation to the poor may be quoted from an essay by Karl Barth.

neglect. In this sense God's concern for them is "special"--he helps those who have no other help. But Scripture also teaches that God does not favor the poor if they oppress others, or are dishonest, or do not work if they are able. Thus it is false or misleading to assert without qualification that God relates to the poor and oppressed in a special way, and it does sound very much like liberation theology.

In sum, the single-minded focus of BC on reconciliation and justice among humans without a clear biblical summary of "sin, salvation, and service" leaves the strong impression that the Christian Gospel and mission are primarily about communal life in this world. BC can be interpreted as a Reformed Christian commitment to justice and reconciliation if it is read through the lenses of the Three Forms. But taken on its own as a summary of the Gospel or the Christian faith, it is false or misleading, and thus it cannot function as a doctrinal standard equal in truth and authority to the other Forms.

Is the Gospel at Stake: Status Confessionis?

Status confessionis has been the key argument for making BC a Confession. Advocates claim that the Gospel itself is at stake if the church does not promote social justice and racial reconciliation in an unjust and ethnically divided world. "A Gospel without justice is no Gospel at all," they say. They also stipulate that a state of confession exists when the Gospel is at stake in an historic situation—the church must confess the Gospel. Because BC affirms justice and reconciliation in a crucial situation, they claim confessional status for it.

Even if we grant its debatable notion of *status confessionis*, this argument fails. It is self-defeating precisely because BC omits the basic Gospel and appears instead to promote the social gospel or liberation theology. If proclamation of the Gospel is essential for confessional status, then BC fails to qualify.

But is the Gospel really at stake without justice and reconciliation? I completely agree that if the church preaches only individual salvation, personal sanctification, and a future in heaven without justice and reconciliation, then it is spiritualizing and reducing the fullness of the Gospel. Worse, if it condones or practices injustice and racism, then it disobeys God and undermines the credibility of Gospel. But it still preaches the basic Gospel—God graciously saves each of his elect children through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Individuals who believe have eternal life even if, lamentably, they remain victims of injustice and oppression all their earthly lives. The core Gospel without its social benefits is certainly reduced and impeded.

But the basic Gospel is missing from the mainline social gospel and progressive liberation theology. What ultimate good are social justice and racial reconciliation without reconciliation to God? Jesus asks, “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (Matt. 16:26). Thank God that we don’t have to choose between earthly welfare and life eternal. But if we did, who would want the social gospel without the Gospel?

BC does not deny the basic Gospel, but neither does it proclaim it. At best it presupposes it. If *status confessionis* requires the essential Gospel, then BC should not be a confession.

Biblical Justice or Liberation Ideology?

BC is as ambiguous on social ethics and politics as it is on doctrine. Its supporters read and apply it in very different ways. Many take it as an expression of the Reformed tradition’s strong (if inconsistent) stand for justice, liberty, and solidarity in church, state, and society in the spirit of Calvin, the Puritans, Kuyper, and others. They believe that BC calls Reformed Christians to apply their own traditional principles consistently to race relations and social issues.

Other promoters believe that BC expresses a progressive political perspective and social ethics.¹⁴ It has been invoked to affirm, for example, the Accra Confession (global economics), Latin American socialism, gay rights, the ordination of women, open immigration, pro-Palestinian Middle East policy, and global warming.¹⁵ The positions urged are typically on the left or progressive wing of the spectrum (which makes them like all positions--debatable but not necessarily wrong). Advocates believe that BC is committed to this perspective and that these implications follow from it. By implication, they make their progressive social-economic-political perspective a matter of faithfulness to the Gospel, Scripture, and doctrinal orthodoxy.

What is a fair interpretation of BC? Its text explicitly denounces the evils of racism, injustice, and racist ideology, and it urges solidarity with victims, racial reconciliation, and justice in church and society. On these points it is clear and specific.

BC does not endorse any other specific issues or agendas. Topics such as gay marriage, immigration, women's roles, Middle East policy, and global economics are not even mentioned. A lot of debatable assumptions must be added to derive positions on them from BC. Those who make such pronouncements cannot justify them. Those who believe that adopting BC will commit the church to promoting specific social agendas will be disappointed.

Furthermore, BC does not endorse a socio-economic-political perspective. Admittedly, it does sound like liberation rhetoric in places, and some prominent supporters read it that way. But the text itself does not validate this interpretation against others. Because it explicitly

¹⁴My *Forum* article (note 2 above) explains the religious worldview behind progressive social-political-economic readings of BC.

¹⁵ Some examples: <http://www.soliustitiae.co.za/insights/2010/10/11/reformed-churches-economy-and-ecology-in-the-context-of-globalisation/> <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/message-colloquium-accra-and-belhar-confessions/> <http://naminghisgrace.blogspot.com/2009/12/goddess-belhar-accra-at-stony-point.html> <http://www.ecclesio.com/2011/03/church-dividing-idols-and-the-belhar-confession-%E2%80%93-by-christian-iosso/> <http://newchurchrising.com/lessons-from-south-africa/the-belhar-confession/>

appeals to biblical principles of justice and reconciliation and not a particular political philosophy, BC is consistent with several political and social perspectives—individualist, socialist, Kuyperian, even Roman Catholic—in so far as they are used to implement the biblical mandate for social justice and racial reconciliation.

Because BC is widely invoked to support progressive agendas, it ought not to be given confessional status.¹⁶ But properly grounded and interpreted, its appeal for biblical justice and reconciliation, I argue below, recommend it as an important testimony or declaration.

CONSEQUENCES OF ADOPTING THE BELHAR AS A DOCTRINAL STANDARD

Adopting the Belhar Confession Would Compromise Our Confessional Integrity

If BC cannot be a doctrinal standard because its content is insufficient and misleading, as I have argued, then adopting it as a Form of Unity would lack integrity and compromise the clarity and strength of our doctrinal commitment in several ways. By *confessional integrity* I mean intellectual honesty, clear theological thinking, and sound doctrinal content.

First, making BC a doctrinal standard because of the affective, symbolic, relational, and practical reasons invoked--without significant reflection on the doctrinal and theological issues involved--would officially endorse a superficial understanding of doctrine and theological discourse in CRCNA.

Second, adopting BC as a Form of Unity would make it equal in authority and truth-value to the other Three Forms. But this status is demonstrably false. Granting it would be

¹⁶ I agree with Fuller Seminary President Richard Mouw's statement: "That it [BC] can now be seen by some of its drafters as capable of being extended to the full inclusion of active gays and lesbians in ministry says something about the weaknesses of Belhar—not as an important prophetic declaration in its original context, but as a statement that can stand on its own as a normative confession." *Mouw's Musings*, Apr. 21, 2009 <http://www.netbloghost.com/mouw/?p=108>

disingenuous and dishonest. It would award BC a position that it does not deserve and cannot perform—the wrong kind of affirmative action. It would also introduce a double standard of doctrinal truth and reliability into our Forms of Unity.

Third, treating BC as equal in truth and authority would modify the overall confessional position of CRCNA. Our doctrine flows from Scripture through the Three Forms taken together, just as we read Scripture as an organic unity. If we adopt BC, our doctrine will flow from Four Forms taken as an organic unity, not from the Three Forms with BC as an appendix. Just as our view of Jesus Christ would be different if we had only Matthew, Mark, and Luke without John; just as our doctrine of faith and works would be different if we had Romans without James; so our theology will be different if the Three Forms are integrated with BC as an equal input on the doctrines it mentions, assumes, or implies. Most of those doctrines have been identified above.

Fourth, there is a real danger that BC would actually function more authoritatively than the Three Forms. The threat is from historicism—the principle that all beliefs and texts are time-bound.¹⁷ Historicism implies that the Three Forms were true, important, and normative in their time, but that they are less so four centuries later when perspectives and issues have changed. What is more true and important is what the church confesses now. Historicism would make BC the operative interpretive key to historic Reformed doctrine--reading the Three Forms in terms of BC rather than the other way around. Historicism is obvious in how modernist theologians appropriate the ancient Creeds, and how progressive Christians in mainline denominations subscribe to historic doctrinal standards, such as how the Westminster Confession is affirmed by progressives in PCUSA. What sounds like historicism is also heard in CRCNA, for example,

¹⁷ Of course everything human is historically located and contextualized. But we should also note that the truths about things in their contexts endure (“in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue” remains true), and that some truths and norms endure for all times and places, especially the abiding teachings of God in Scripture. Historicism undermines enduring truth.

when we say that the Three Forms spoke to their times without immediately adding that they are still valid for ours. The danger is historicism, not BC as such. But postmodern culture is pervasively historicist, and we in CRCNA are not immune to it.

The Belhar Confession and Ecumenical Relations

The main impetus for the CRCNA to adopt BC has been the urging of the United Reformed Church of South Africa, its original sponsor. The REC declared that BC is consistent with Reformed doctrine, but did not endorse or adopt it. The ecumenical momentum for BC developed greatly in WARC during the eight-year presidency of Alan Boesak, one of BC's original formulators. WARC did not officially adopt BC. But at the insistence of URCSA, Boesak's denomination, adoption of BC as a confession was required of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa as proof that it truly repudiated *apartheid* and deserved full membership in WARC. Thus promoting BC as a Confession became an important project in WARC. WARC merged with REC in 2010 to become the vast majority of WCRC, so BC retains momentum in the Reformed ecumenical community.

Its future is unclear, however. BC has been adopted by few denominations outside of South Africa: only the United Protestant Church of Belgium and RCA, to the best of my knowledge. The hoped-for bandwagon effect was dealt a blow in June 2011 when PCUSA failed to ratify it as a Confession (even though it approved marriage for gay clergy).¹⁸ Apparently there is no groundswell in WCRC for BC at this point. It is said that many churches in WCRC are watching what CRCNA will do because they respect our judgment. If so, we should provide them with a compelling rationale for affirming BC as a testimony, not as a Confession.

¹⁸ Dr. Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Seminary and long-time member of CRCNA, is a member of PCUSA who has publicly opposed adoption of BC as a Confession. Here is his statement and criticism of Boesak's appeal to BC for gay marriage. <http://www.netbloghost.com/mouw/?p=108>

The RCA adopted BC in 2010. Because of increasing cordiality and cooperation between our two denominations, there are hopes that CRCNA will follow suit. But we have no spiritual or ecclesiastical obligation to do so, especially if it is against our best judgment. If we decide not to follow, it would indicate that the historical difference in doctrinal ethos between the two denominations remains. If we do not adopt BC as a Confession, it will have no negative effect on our fellowship and cooperation but would be an obstacle to eventual reunion.

We have ecumenical relations and obligations beyond WCRC. We remain close in doctrine to other conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches and enjoy local fellowship even though they do not want formal denominational relations. We also participate in the National Association of Evangelicals, and we have been in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. These doctrinally conservative denominations almost universally regard BC as theologically and politically progressive. So does the general public, which learns about church news and religion from the *New York Times* and CNN. If we value our reputation as an evangelical, orthodox, Reformed denomination, we should think twice before adopting BC as a doctrinal standard. (We must also be aware of the appearance of racism if we simply reject it.)

A Gift, or an Offer We Can't Refuse?

We are sometimes urged to accept BC because it is “a gift” of URCSA, which obligates us to receive it as offered—as a Confession. But the analogy breaks down. A gift that comes with strings attached is not really a gift. A genuine gift is freely given and its recipient respected. My Grandfather once gave me \$20 designated for college. But when I suggested another worthy purpose, he gladly consented. Similarly, if BC is a gift, URCSA will not be offended or doubt our solidarity if we use it differently than intended. If making it a Confession is a condition for fellowship or a test of solidarity, then it is not really a gift.

Do Racial Justice and Reconciliation Require Adoption of BC as a Confession?

I ask the reader's understanding as I raise an issue that is sensitive and potentially controversial—"an elephant in the room." The issue is whether adoption of BC is a matter of justice and reconciliation in CRCNA. In plain language, would it be racist not to adopt BC?

The case for the affirmative goes something like this: Persons of ethnic minority background want BC to be a Confession because they believe that this status is necessary to acknowledge racism, promote reconciliation and unity, and demonstrate the sincerity of CRCNA's commitment. The traditional majority has often marginalized or excluded minorities from decision-making. Justice and reconciliation require that the majority respect and validate the voice of minorities. Therefore the majority ought to support BC as a Confession.

This argument seems persuasive. Many feel that it is compelling--that to oppose BC is somehow racist and unjust, that it would be another case of marginalizing ethnic minorities, and that biblical reconciliation requires adoption of BC. I disagree, and I want to explain why.

First, for all the reasons presented above, the decision about BC is primarily a matter of confessional integrity, not justice and reconciliation. The problem is with the text of BC, not with the truth that God wills all his children to love and respect one another.

Second, sound Reformed thinking is not personally or culturally relative. Confessional Reformed churches and faithful theologians are at home in many parts of the world. Of course different groups are shaped by diverse cultures, traditions, and experiences, just as individuals have different personalities, learning styles, and kinds of education. Thus we all should be empathetic and communicate in clear and respectful ways. All of us should also consider all the reasons—biblical, doctrinal, historical, ecclesiastical, practical, and relational--for and against BC, evaluate and rank them, and come to well-informed conclusions. Maybe we won't all agree.

But all our positions should result from wise reflection based on a common commitment to CRCNA and the Forms of Unity, not on ethnicity, power, or status in the denomination. We should be persuaded by the truth of what people say, not by whether they are Seminary professors with Frisian ancestors or elder delegates of color who have suffered from racism. Consequently, we should not frame the decision as the traditional majority's concession to ethnic minorities in order to achieve reconciliation and justice. That approach would only validate the liberation ideology that is alleged against BC—that disagreements about beliefs and values are at bottom functions of ethnic, class, or gender conflict.

Finally, it is racial stereotyping to assume that ethnicity predicts one's position on BC. Some CRCNA members of European background favor it, and some members of African, Latin American, Native, Korean, Indonesian, Chinese, and other ethnic backgrounds do not. In addition, ethnic groups might differ among themselves in range of opinion. Perhaps more Frisian-Canadians than Dutch-Americans or Korean-Americans favor it. No one has done the research, so no one knows the demographic range of views in CRCNA. But whatever the case, we should avoid ethnic stereotypes in our discussions of BC.

Synod 2012 must decide for the right reasons. I am convinced that making BC a Confession because justice and reconciliation require it is not the right reason. Implicitly it is a kind of racism because it makes ethnicity the deciding issue. It pits confessional integrity against racial reconciliation, which means that one must choose between them. It implies that those who favor confessional integrity are soft on racism, and that those committed to racial reconciliation value it more than confessional integrity. All of these choices are false dilemmas. We should have both, not one or the other.

I hesitate to make these observations. But this issue lies just beneath the surface of many discussions of BC, and it should be aired. If I am out of line, I welcome correction.

The Belhar, CRCNA Polity, and Denominational Unity

It is ironic that BC, which has been promoted for the sake of unity and reconciliation, has become polarizing. Obviously there is a range of views and levels of engagement in CRCNA. What Synod 2012 decides and how it does so are crucial to the unity of our denomination. Important practical questions arise. Should a simple majority determine the outcome? If Synod adopts BC as a confession, where does that leave those who disagree? The potential for mishandling these issues is real, and the consequences of getting them wrong are serious. CRCNA and Synod 2012 should think them through carefully.

Simple Majority? According to its rules, Synod can decide to make BC a Form of Unity by a simple majority—by a single vote, say 88-87. Other Reformed and Presbyterian churches require larger majorities on crucial issues, or ratification by two-thirds of the classes or churches. But even though a simple majority is possible for Synod, that does not make it necessary or wise, any more than calling a minister after a 51-49 vote of a congregation is necessary or wise. It only increases the probability of disunity. Adopting BC as a Confession would deeply affect our unity and identity. There is no consensus or clear majority view in CRCNA, and confessional integrity is a matter of conscience for some members. For all these reasons, Synod should not insist on a simple majority but choose a wiser process that reflects the gravity of the issue and the diversity of opinion. A decision about the Forms of Unity should aim at consensus, if possible.

Conscientious Objection? Adopting BC as a Confession would obligate all office-bearers to subscribe or covenant that BC has the same level of truth and authority as the Three Forms. Confessing members likewise agree with the Forms when they publicly profess their

faith. To refuse would be to remove oneself from office, if not from membership. Some office bearers and members who oppose BC may be able to live with it. But others take confessional identity and integrity as a matter of conscience and could not live with it.

If Synod makes BC a Confession, what will happen to office-bearers who dissent? Will they no longer be office-bearers? Will they be deposed if they refuse to resign? Will BC take effect immediately at Synod 2012? Or will agreement only be required of those elected after Synod 2012--a grandfather clause for conscientious objectors? Perhaps subscription will begin in the future, say 2014, so that dissenters have time to decide what to do. Lots of options must be considered.

Denominational unity is at stake. We can live together in CRCNA with different positions on women in office because that is not a confessional matter. (We lost thousands of good members on both sides because they regarded it as a biblical matter.) Assuming BC becomes a Confession, agreement is required. Dissent is impermissible. But dissent is a matter of conscience for some ministers, elders, deacons, and members. Some will leave CRCNA. (Others may leave if we do not adopt it.)

What Synod 2012 decides is profoundly important and will have major consequences. We should think more thoroughly than we have thus far about the right process and possible outcomes. It would be tragic if adopting BC, which is all about unity and reconciliation, resulted in alienation and fracture in CRCNA.

WHY WE SHOULD AFFIRM THE BELHAR AS A DECLARATION OR TESTIMONY

Many reasons for adopting BC have been given by advocates in South African churches, Reformed ecumenical circles, and in CRCNA. I have argued that those reasons are not sufficient

to make it a Form of Unity. But if it is subject to and interpreted according to Scripture and the Three Forms, then there are more than sufficient reasons for CRCNA to affirm it as a declaration, testimony, or some other appropriate designation. The problems with its being a Confession do not prevent it from being affirmed in a proper way.

The Basic Objection Neutralized

The main objection to BC as a doctrinal standard is that its ambiguity and misinterpretation undermine the Gospel and confessional integrity. A sufficient response is that although BC is open to progressive theology and social policy, it does not explicitly assert or support them. Its ambiguity is also consistent with confessional orthodoxy and historic Reformed social ethics. If it is subject to the Three Forms, then it will be interpreted according to the biblical Gospel and Reformed doctrine as the foundation for social justice and racial reconciliation. It could not be read as the social gospel or liberation theology.

In the same way, BC is consistent with proper biblical and Reformed perspectives on social-political issues. The text of BC does not assert a progressive vision that requires socialist economics and politics, and it does not even mention gay marriage or any other social agenda, progressive or otherwise. It does not suggest whether liberals, moderates, or conservatives are more just in their approach to the global financial crisis. It will not even help us decide specific issues or strategies for ethnic diversity or race relations in CRCNA, such as ethnic representation in decision-making, minority hiring goals, or the Crossroads anti-racism program. BC commits Christians to biblical justice and racial reconciliation. But it does not give specific guidance about what they require and how they can be achieved. Thus BC does not favor “liberal” (or “conservative”) approaches to racial reconciliation and ethnic diversity in CRCNA.

Nevertheless, some might still reject BC because it has been co-opted by progressives on social issues. They want no ambiguity or openness at all. Everything must be precisely right and nailed down. But complete rejection of BC would “throw the baby out with the bath water” or “stop the use because of the abuse,” like banning hammers because they hurt fingers. The general, open character of BC is natural and appropriate for the kind of document it is. First, it affirms universal biblical principles of justice and reconciliation, not particular political-ideological elaborations of those principles. Second, it primarily states biblical principles and does not develop specific applications of those principles beyond the recent racist situation in South Africa. Because BC asserts biblical principles, which are universal and general, it cannot be expected to eliminate all ambiguities and unacceptable positions. As a statement of biblical principles, BC implies no evil and entails much good. It should not be rejected simply because it does not rule out all unacceptable perspectives and social agendas.

Principled Decision or Political Compromise?

Is adopting BC as a testimony a decision of principle, or is it merely a pragmatic compromise between those who want it as a Confession and those who want to reject it completely? In the current political climate, a cynical view is easy—none of us gets everything we want, but each of us gets something. Let’s make a deal.

Even if it were a compromise, it would not necessarily be wrong. “Give and take” is not only for business and politics. It is practiced in marriages, families, friendships, and communities for noble and Christian reasons. Love and justice in the body of Christ and in civil society often require negotiations and trade-offs as we seek consensus and attempt to maximize the best for all. If adopting BC as a testimony is agreeable to 80% of the denomination, whereas

“all or nothing” will divide us close to the middle, then perhaps we should choose the testimony option for the sake of unity in Christ. Unity is a biblical principle, not pragmatism.

In addition to Christian love and unity, here follow several other important reasons for CRCNA to adopt BC.

Faithful Witness to Biblical Justice and Reconciliation

Disharmony and injustice are sins that pervade the human race. They seem to matter more in recent times than ever before. The Gospel produces communion among God’s people and promotes justice in society. But the church has not always preached or practiced community and justice, and sometimes has actively violated them. Regrettably, this is also true in the Reformed tradition, including the Dutch Reformed tradition in Europe, North America, South Africa, Indonesia, and elsewhere. In the public mind, there are valid historical associations of Reformed Christianity with slavery, colonialism, and *apartheid*. Even when Reformed churches did stand for justice and reconciliation, they did not often do so with sustained enthusiasm or make official declarations about it. There is need and plenty of room among orthodox Reformed churches for an official statement like BC, as well as public action.

CRCNA synods have taken several decisions against racism and *apartheid* during the last several decades. Racial diversity and unity are addressed in several articles of the Contemporary Testimony. Synod adopted *God’s Diverse and Unified Family* as a biblical framework for ethnic diversity, but it does not have status as a Contemporary Testimony. The issue of racism is not new to us, and we have taken some steps in the right direction. But we have no official declaration with the historical significance of BC.

By God’s providence, the Belhar Confession is a unique and significant proclamation by an ethnically diverse church in the Dutch Reformed tradition. Although contextualized to

apartheid in South Africa, it affirms biblical principles of compassion, justice, reconciliation, and community that are universal—addressing official and unofficial racism, ethnic tension, and social injustice wherever they occur. BC has gained an international reputation among Reformed churches and in the world.

In this context the CRCNA should officially affirm BC as a declaration or testimony. Thereby we would publicly declare our commitment to biblical justice and stand against racism, some of which has stained the Reformed tradition and our own denomination. We would squander a significant historical opportunity provided by God’s providence if we rejected BC as a Confession but did not affirm it as an official commitment and witness to the world.

Benefits for Ecumenical Relations and Racial Reconciliation

CRCNA ought to decide about BC for the right reasons and not merely because of its results. But doing the right thing usually has positive effects.

Ecumenically, endorsing BC will affirm our fellowship and solidarity with URCSA and others for whom BC is important: RCA and other denominations in WCRC. We can agree with most of their reasons for adopting BC without making it a doctrinal standard, and we can use the golden opportunity to explain our rationale. In this way we can provide theological leadership in WCRC on how to distinguish and relate orthodoxy and orthopraxis in the historic Reformed way. For our more conservative Reformed and evangelical friends, we can model how to remain faithful to the Gospel and sound doctrine while reforming the church and engaging the world, guided by the principles of justice and reconciliation that are taught in Scripture. We can adopt BC in the spirit of reform without becoming “liberal.” This strategy has been a strength of Kuyperian Neo-Calvinism. Rejecting BC totally because conservatives regard it as a liberal document would fall prey to the false dilemma between doctrine and practice rejected above.

Adopting BC will also promote racial reconciliation in CRCNA. Members from all ethnic backgrounds support BC because we care deeply about ethnic diversity, racial reconciliation, and unity in Christ. Adopting BC as a testimony or declaration would confirm denominational commitment to these biblical mandates. It would state more substantively than other synodical decisions and statements that CRCNA is committed to ethnic unity in Christ and social justice in the world. The effect of BC as a testimony would be no less powerful and binding than if it were a Confession. It would validate the intuitions, experiences, and reasons people have for believing that we should adopt BC. Making BC official would confirm and promote the cause of ethnic diversity in CRCNA. Rejecting it completely would discount the important reasons for adopting it, marginalize those who support it, and harm the cause of racial reconciliation in CRCNA.

Can We Make a Confession a Testimony?

I do not suggest changing BC's name but only its status: the Belhar Confession would become a Contemporary Testimony or a Declaration of CRCNA. But can we make a Confession a testimony or declaration? The mix of titles might seem confusing, like calling a tree a bush or a ship a boat. More problematic, adopting BC as a testimony might seem like awarding it a title to compensate for a demotion or downgrade. Do we have the right to make this designation? Is it a downgrade to less important status? These are practical questions that come to mind.

To consider them, let's recall the genre distinction made above between the historic Confessions that are doctrinal standards and recent declarations about social-political issues. BC clearly fits the latter, not the former, whatever it was named. To adopt it as a testimony or declaration would challenge its name. It would disappoint URCSA and RCA, who want us to adopt it. Some might find it demeaning. But it would be more true to what BC actually is.

Admittedly, it might sound a little odd to call the Belhar Confession a Testimony. But it would be no more confusing than making the Contemporary Testimony or Barmen Declaration into Confessions, as some advocate. Clear designation and regular use will make the status and role of BC well understood in CRCNA and in our ecumenical neighborhood.

Do we have the right to this decision when URCSA has made BC a Confession and asked us to do the same? If they have a legal or moral copyright and refuse the change, then we do not have the right to make it a testimony. But this would be the coercive “take it or leave it” option, not the genuine gift discussed above. If it is a gift, URCSA should respect and accept our rationale for the change. Suppose another group wanted to adopt our Contemporary Testimony as its Confession. Would we object?¹⁹

Finally, is it demeaning or downgrading for BC to be adopted as a testimony subject to the Three Forms? Not if we distinguish doctrinal standards from specific declarations, as suggested above. Mixing categories--apples and oranges—sets up false expectation and disappointment. Excellent examples of one category fare poorly in the other. Novels don’t win Oscars and movies don’t earn Pulitzers. BC would not make a good Confession, and the historic Confessions are not good contemporary testimonies. Furthermore, Confessions and testimonies have different roles. Each can be excellent in its way even though one has more authority than the other. Being subject to the Three Forms would not mean that BC is inferior in quality any more than the heart is inferior because it is regulated by the brain or the Civil Rights Act is inferior to the US Constitution. BC is an excellent declaration of biblical principles directed at a specific instance of a basic problem in human relations. Designating it as a contemporary testimony or public declaration would in no way indicate that it is inferior in quality or

¹⁹ For example, the Grand Rapids Christian School Association, with copyright permission from CRCNA, has adopted the Contemporary Testimony as its operative faith statement, subject to the Three Forms.

normativity. Just the opposite—subjecting BC to the Forms of Unity is precisely what enables it to be understood as proclaiming binding principles of biblical justice and reconciliation rather than debatable progressive theology and social activism.

For all of these reasons, Synod 2012 should adopt BC as an official declaration or contemporary testimony of CRCNA. Doing so would preserve our doctrinal integrity as well as reaffirm our commitment to social justice and racial reconciliation, whereas insisting on BC as the fourth Form of Unity would force us to choose between them. The right decision is clear.