

REFLECTIONS ON CONFESSING

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I wish to modify slightly the title assigned to this paper. Rather than address the question, 'why confessions?' I will offer my reflections on the prior question, 'why confess?' The original query, 'why confessions,' is of course an important one and can be answered appropriately in a number of ways. Confessions, such as those of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), have both primary and secondary historical significance. At the time of their writing and adoption they functioned catalytically in a given historical situation; thereafter in various ways at various times they again played a role in shaping the church and charting its course. Confessions serve the *magisterium* of the church in the absence of a magisterial bishop and thus unify the church in evangelical teaching and provide a standard for discipline as well as the theological orientation of worship and order. Confessions provide the basis for ecumenical conversation and convergence. Confessions originally established the religion of a city or region and subsequently its political, economic, and social climate; they continue in the modern period, at least in some degree, to fashion the mentality and culture of congregations and denominations.

These are among the important reasons that churches have written and adopted confessions, and they obviously deserve further consideration. But such explorations will not carry us far in our efforts to determine whether the Belhar Confession should be adopted as a standard of the RCA. A search of history may identify useful confessional principles and establish confessional precedents, but these, in my judgment, will apply only in the broadest sense. What is being considered now is *sui generis* in the history of the RCA for three reasons.

First, while it is built on a solid theological basis, unlike the historic confessions of the RCA, the Belhar makes social justice rather than doctrinal purity a matter on which the gospel stands or falls. If the Belgic Confession is apologetic, the Heidelberg Catechism pedagogic, the Canons of Dort polemic, the Belhar Confession is prophetic. I do not mean to say by this that the historic confessions were apolitical. Guido de Brés offered the Belgic to the Spanish emperor; King Frederick the Wise commissioned the Heidelberg Catechism; the Synod of Dort was sponsored by the national government, opening with speeches alluding to the fourth-century precedent of Constantine and the Council of Nicea. But the hope of toleration and a religiously unified citizenry in a world moving toward modernity differs sharply from the impassioned call for justice on the behalf of those that modernity in its full force has oppressed. Our historic confessions

witness to evangelical truth, while the Belhar Confession calls for evangelical action of a kind unknown to our forbears. The confessions of the RCA and the processes that produced them simply provide no precedent for determining the adoption of the Belhar Confession.

The second reason I believe we are confronted by a confessional *novum* will no doubt be disputed by some: the RCA, unlike other Reformed churches, does not write or adopt new confessions. Jack Stotts describes the Reformed tradition as an open confessional tradition in contrast to the closed system of the Lutherans. This generalization does not take into account the RCA; our history demonstrates that we subscribe if not in principle then in actuality to the closed-confessional Lutheran tradition. Why this is so poses an interesting question but one not germane to our discussion today. Those protesting this conclusion will no doubt argue that while the RCA has never added a confession to its historic trio, it may do so at any time it pleases. But consider the facts: At least one of the reasons for the establishment of the Commission on Theology (COT) in 1959 was to assemble a panel of theologians to prepare a new confession for the church. By 1964, a draft was brought to the synod with the request that it be sent to congregations for response; in 1966 the synod authorized the distribution of copies to every elder, deacon, and pastor in the denomination. By 1968 it appeared that the Commission's efforts would fail and no further attempts were made to achieve its adoption. The task of confession writing was eventually withdrawn from the Commission on Theology and given to a single author, the Reverend Dr. Eugene Heideman, who produced *Our Song of Hope* (1974), which, while highly praised, also failed to achieve confessional status. The proposal coming before the 1997 synod requesting that the Commission on Theology prepare a new confession was soundly defeated. The RCA has in its more than two hundred-year history never written even a single confessional sentence, all three of its standards being imported from Europe. It also could be argued that technically the church has never adopted a confession; by the Plan of Union and Explanatory Articles, the liturgies, order, and confessions of Dort were embraced in the formation of the American church—these constituted the church, calling the new denomination into existence.

The final reason the decision now before the RCA is unprecedented concerns what prompted the process we are now engaging. The Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa has officially offered the Belhar Confession as a gift to the RCA. We are being invited by a sister church, an autonomous ecclesial body, to adopt one of its confessions as our own. Consider what this implies. Our tripartite constitution is confessionally grounded. Our denomination is *constituted* by its confessions as noted above. They provide the theological basis for liturgy and order, thus influencing the faith and practice of the church in

myriad ways directly and indirectly. For the church to write and adopt its own new confession for the first time in its history would elicit manifold changes in its life and work – this would in itself be a radical step. But the adoption of a confession written by another body in a different historic situation would in principle elicit even broader and deeper denominational transformations. Our church would now be *constituted* by a set of confessions one of which was written in South Africa in response to issues arising in the region. Thus the request to adopt the Belhar carries the church beyond the provisions of the Formula of Agreement whereby the RCA merely recognized the confessions of partner churches as faithful to the gospel. Here, I believe, we are confronted by a question of enormous ecumenical magnitude: how does one church respond to such an offer from another church? And at the same time we have before us what could become one of the most consequential decisions in the history of the RCA: shall we allow ourselves to be reconstituted?

Since historic precedence and principle cannot determine the Belhar question, we must recognize that our denominational deliberations will launch us into uncharted waters and that adopting this confession will demand courage, hard work, sacrifice, and risk if the confessional process is to amount to anything more than an acquisition of one more largely disregarded document. Since the RCA has never before adopted a confession, the question is in actuality not one of ‘shall we add a confession’ as is usually advertised, but ‘*shall we confess?*’ And more specifically, ‘*shall we confess the Belhar?*’ And this is why I believe ‘why confess’ is the question that must be addressed in determining the RCA’s response to the Belhar.

Why confess? The short answer is that to confess is to create identity – to call into being who and what we are and at the same time determine our purpose and commitment. Here my thinking has been guided by a little known Strasbourg philosopher, the phenomenologist, Georges Gusdorf. Gusdorf, in an extraordinarily rich little book titled *Speaking*, examined what he calls “lived existence,” seeking to identify that which is uniquely human. His investigations lead him to the conclusion that the *conditio sine qua non* for humanity is to be located in human speaking – not speech or language, but in speaking. He does not mean that we are human beings who possess the capacity to speak, but rather that it is by our speaking that our humanity is actualized. Thus our humanity is dynamic – not something we possess but something we “do.” Gusdorf carefully distinguishes speaking from language; language is not speaking but the instrument of speaking, even as the notes on a score are not music but symbols used in the production of music.

Gusdorf does not address the meaning of confessing in his short monograph, but its relevance for the question before us may be readily seen. If universal speaking calls humanity into being, then particular kinds of speaking may reasonably be thought to determine the existence of specific cultural entities. Confessing, then, may be thought of as a form of speaking that calls into existence corporate bodies of various types, including churches. This is, after all, the implication of the RCA's understanding that the historic confessions constitute the church—but to apply Gusdorf's thinking accurately, it would not be the confessions, but confessing the confessions which becomes constitutive. The confessions themselves provide the language the church employs, they are the notes on the page; they are inert and useless until they are confessed.

Notice that confessing, while corporate, is also personal. The phrase frequently used in the Belgic Confession, "We believe with our hearts and confess with our mouths," captures this nicely. The term "confess" itself derives from a Latin word formed by the melding of "together" and "admit" or "declare." Similarly, *homologia*, both in secular and biblical Greek, combines the notion of "the same" and "saying" — saying the same thing or the same ones saying something. Even when one confesses individually, that confessing is in solidarity with others who express the same commitment. In other words, in confessing the Reformed Church in America realizes who and what it is as a denomination but also as a classis, a congregation, and an individual believer.

Gusdorf recognizes that constitutive speaking always involves speaking to "the other." This insight is especially apropos in regard to the Belhar question, since it is "the other," the Uniting Church of Southern Africa, who offers us the gift of the Belhar and in so doing, calls us to respond. The offer of a gift with the hope of acceptance seems an innocuous gesture; the thoughts of another philosopher, the French Jew Emmanuel Levinas, however, demonstrates how radical such a request may be. "The other," Levinas teaches, confronts us and we must respond; to refuse to do so is in itself a response. Our inclination is to respond in ways that serve our own interests, which means we see ourselves in "the other" and are thus able to offer safe and prudent responses. In other words, we wish to make the other predictable. But there is always something in "the other" that we cannot know — a separateness or transcendence Levinas calls *alterity*. Since "the other" always possesses an unfathomable dimension, the results of our sincere response cannot be known. But this much is certain, in responding we will be changed and changed in unpredictable ways. A new mentality, a new identity, a new set of purposes will come into being; looking into the mirror we will no longer see a familiar face. It is precisely because such change cannot be orchestrated or charted that an honest and total response to "the other" is unsettling and even frightening.

In the recent e-mail chatter concerning the adoption of the Belhar, I have come across the objection that since no *status confessionis* has been declared in the RCA, there is no grounds to confess anew. I am arguing here, informed by Levinas's profound understanding of "the other," that this is not the case. The RCA is in fact in a "situation of confessing," a *status confessionis*, albeit without formal synodical action, because this is precisely where the gift and invitation of the Uniting Church of Southern Africa places us. We must and will confess either by adopting the Belhar or by refusing to do so. And by responding to "the other," however we choose, we will be changed. By embracing a fourth confession, by truly *confessing* the Belhar, changes within the RCA will be obvious and even dramatic – our denomination, classes, and congregations will be *re-constituted* – there will be death and rebirth. If we refuse the invitation we may think that we will return to the *status quo ante*. But this will not be the case. While we have been placed in a *status confessionis*, we are also in a *processus confessionis*. Through this process of thought, prayer, study, discussion, and debate, even if we ultimately say no to the Belhar our common life will be altered, and among the coordinates through which our denominational future is charted will be that which has been considered and rejected.

We will confess by our yea or nay, but there is a third option that I must address before concluding this paper. We may say "yes" to the Belhar as a confession but "no" to confessing it; we may adopt it and quickly make it a confessional orphan. I have highlighted the uniqueness of what is before us: the RCA has never written or adopted a confession, let alone one that is as concerned with social ethics as with doctrine and one that is under consideration at the behest of another church. I have also shown that confessing anew is necessarily costly, involving nothing less than reconstituting ourselves, acquiring a new identity and set of purposes, and embracing an unpredictable future. I have also shown that declining to confess is a form of confessing that will have less obvious but nevertheless real consequences for the church. The least costly action that the denomination could take would be formally to adopt the Belhar Confession, celebrate our resolve, and then archive it with our historic confessions, which we now seem unwilling or unable to confess. Such a response would be cynical, unfaithful, and, unfortunately, I fear, likely.

I hope this will not be the outcome. I hope that it will seem good to the Holy Spirit and to the councils of RCA not only to adopt the Belhar Confession as our own, but more importantly to make it what "we believe with our hearts and confess with our mouths" – that is, to confess it.

Works used in this paper:

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Appendix: Theses on Confessing

Concerning Confessing

1. Confessing is identity
2. Confessing is witness
3. Confessing is critical

Concerning Ecclesial Confessing

4. Confessing is outer side of faith
5. Confessing is pluriform
6. Confessing is polysemous

Concerning Reformational Confessing

7. Confessing is apostolic
8. Confessing is textual
9. Confessing is ecumenical

Concerning RCA Confessing

10. Confessing is historical/textual
11. Confessing is homiletical, sacramental, liturgical, and governmental
12. Confessing is *koinonia* and *diakonia*