

THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR

A WORKSHOP DESIGN



Produced by the Special Committee on the Belhar Confession

Come Join Us in Community

Based on the Confession of Belhar, Article 2.

Suggested tune: McKee, CM

By James Hart Brumm

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Come join us in community;
the Church of God's own Son
grows into a reality
when we all live as one.

Come join us as we show our friends
and shout out in the streets
how every hate and discord ends
for people Jesus meets.

Come join us as we manifest
God's love in give and take,
in duties that bring out our best,
and in the bread we break.

Come join us to confess God's Name,
God's baptism, God's cup.

We do not need to be the same
to bond and be built up.

With every tool the Spirit gives
we set all people free
to share the life that Jesus lives
joined in community.

THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR— A WORKSHOP DESIGN

There are a variety of ways to use this workshop design. One suggestion: when learning with large groups, gather in the large group for singing hymns, prayers, and presentation of material and separate into small groups of 6-8 persons for reading and discussion.

The workshop can be completed in one, 50–60 minute session or in three sessions of 15–20 minutes each. To use the workshop design for three sessions, the first session ends after the first set of Small Group Questions, Discussion, and Large Group Sharing; the second session ends after the second set of Small Group Questions, Discussion, and Large Group Sharing.

Some key terms are in bold type in the text. All of these are defined immediately after they appear.



Resources (enough for each workshop participant)

Bibles

Handouts (or brochures, order from _____ or download from _____)—Belhar Confession

Pencils or pens

Opening Hymn

“Come Join Us in Community”

vv 1–2 (sung to McKee CM, the tune for #440, *The Presbyterian Hymnal*)

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I Introduction

In times of crisis, what is God’s call to the church? When sin disrupts the church’s unity, creates division among the children of God, and constructs unjust systems that steal life from God’s creation, how should those who follow Jesus respond?

Members and leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa faced these questions under **apartheid**, a system of laws that separated people by race

Apartheid, a word in Afrikaans meaning “apartness,” denotes a system of laws enforcing racial segregation in South Africa beginning in 1948 when the National Party came to power. Under apartheid, the rights of the black majority of South Africa were severely restricted, and white minority rule was enforced.

from 1948–1994. Apartheid formed a racially stratified society. Those with the lightest skin tones were offered the greatest protection and opportunity. Non-“white” persons were separated into three categories; each skin tone step away from the “white” category represented a decrease in governmental protections and opportunities. Racial separation was established by law and enforced through violence. Non-white citizens lived with constant and intrusive police presence and interference in the daily functions of life. Those who protested risked punishment, imprisonment, and even death.

Racial separation was also practiced in the life of the Reformed churches. The white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) created an elaborate biblical interpretation and ideology which supported apartheid policies. The DRC formed three “mission” churches, each categorized by its racial identity. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church was formed for people designated as “**coloured**” (biracial). The church’s complicity with the separation mandated by law, which kept Christians from worshipping and coming to the Lord’s Table together, moved the global church to name apartheid a **status confessionis** – a practice where the Gospel was at stake.

Leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church wrestled with this situation theologically and practically. One outcome of their struggles was the emergence of the Confession of Belhar in the early 1980s. The Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa (URCSA), the church that succeeded the Dutch Reformed Mission Church after apartheid, has offered the Confession of Belhar to the global Reformed family as a gift, believing that the themes of unity, reconciliation and justice issue a call from God to the whole church toward holy action, transformation, and life.

A **status confessionis**, literally “a state of confessing,” has been called at different times in the history of the church when those who call for it see a dire situation in which the church must stand up for the integrity of the gospel and the authority of the God it confesses. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was among those who called the church under Nazi Germany a status confessionis. The Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches named apartheid a status confessionis as well. When a situation is named a status confessionis, the whole church is called to reflect deeply on the profound nature of the situation and to discern together the need for repentance and transformation in the church and the society.



In small groups, read Articles 1 and 2 of the Confession of Belhar aloud.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. The Confession of Belhar has been described as both **Trinitarian**—who God is in three persons and what God is doing—and **ecclesiological** – who we are as God’s church. What evidence do you see in Articles 1 and 2 of these?
2. Think about these statements from Article 2:
 - a. The church is “the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another”

- b. Unity is something “...the people of God must continually be built up to attain”
- c. Unity among the people of God must be something we “experience, practice, and pursue”

How do these sound like or differ from your experience of the church?

3. Article 2 is on the theme of unity. In a context of South African apartheid (“apartness” or “separation”), people were separated from one another by law and in worship. Leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church maintained that that separation, that apartheid, also separated people and the church from God.

Apartheid is a word in Afrikaans, and so particular to one place; but separation from one another and from God is all too common. In the letter to the Christians in Ephesus, the author begs the believers to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1–3). From Article 2, identify one or two statements that you believe would help the Church maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace if the church had the courage to confess this to one another and the whole world. As you are comfortable, share these with your small group.

Sharing of small group insights in the Large Group

(Note: The workshop can be paused after sharing in the large group.)

Hymn: “Come Join Us in Community”

v 3 or vv 1–3

(Note: The decision of leaders to facilitate the workshop in its entirety or in parts will have some impact on decisions on how much of the hymn to use at different points)



II The Church Confesses Faith

Presbyterians are confessional Christians. We are **creedal**, which means we accept and use the ancient and universal creeds of the church, the Apostles’ and the Nicene Creeds. **Confessions** are “a public declaration before God and the world” of what the church believes.¹ Creeds and confessions “identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as its actions.”² Presbyterians are like Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Orthodox Christians in that we stand in and are formed by a confessional heritage.

¹ “The Confessional Nature of the Church,” xi–xxx, in The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I, *Book of Confessions*.

² The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church(U.S.A), Part II, *Book of Order*, G-2.0100.

Article 3 of the Confession of Belhar concerns reconciliation, particularly the work of reconciling people one to another. The *Book of Confessions* does not currently include the word “reconciliation,” and in the sixteen instances where the word “reconcile” is used, almost all concern our reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. A question that must be considered, then, is whether reconciliation as both a theological and ecclesiological concept or reality deserves a place in our confessional understanding of ourselves. If so, what is the role of reconciliation, particularly reconciliation between persons and groups of people, in our theological understanding of what it means to be the church?

In small groups, read Article 3 of the Confession of Belhar aloud.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. Read Matthew 5:9 and 5:13–16. Are these statements of Jesus guides for individual Christians in their faith walk, or, rather, for the church as a whole and its life in the world, as Article 3 assumes? How does the meaning change if these are for the whole church?
2. Do you have experiences of “God’s lifegiving Word and Spirit” having “conquered the powers of sin and death,” enabling “the church to live in a new obedience” and opening up “new possibilities of life for the society and the world”? Think through what these phrases mean and imply; as you are comfortable, share your experiences with your small group.
3. Read Revelation 21:1–5. In the church in North America, we no longer experience “forced separation of peoples on the grounds of race and color.” We do, however, experience informal, substantially fixed separation of peoples on these grounds. That is, much of our society and most of our congregations are monocultural and monoracial, separated by race, color, culture, and language. How does this impact our ability to witness to the new creation and the new heaven and new earth that God is bringing into being in the world?

Sharing of small group insights in the Large Group

(Note: The workshop can be paused after sharing in the large group.)

Hymn: “Come Join Us in Community”

vv 3–5



III Justice and the Ends of the Church

In the early years of the 20th Century, a list of the church’s ends—its goals and purposes—began to appear in constitutional drafts for a predecessor denomination of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Over the decades, this list gained acceptance throughout Presbyterianism, and it now appears as part of the PC(USA) constitution,

entitled “**The Great Ends of the Church**”.³ Among these six ends are two that name the goal, the intent, of the church to work toward justice and righteousness:

- The promotion of social righteousness
- The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world

These ends are founded in Biblical teaching. God commands Israel to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the alien. Jesus preaches, proclaiming his self-understanding as the one whom the Spirit had anointed to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed. Founded in a rich variety of biblical, confessional and constitutional teachings, Presbyterians have a profound and dynamic relationship to justice and righteousness.

In small groups, read Articles 4 and 5 aloud.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. Read Psalm 82:1-5 and Luke 4:16-21. Compare the **Christology** (the image or understanding of Jesus) and/or the **theology** (the image or understanding of God) you see in these passages and in Article 4. How are the two Christologies, or theologies, similar? How do they differ?
2. Think about the last four points in the **We believe** section of Article 4. What is the image of the church here? Now think on your experience of life in a congregation – your own or one you know in which you know well. How is the congregation in your mind similar to, or different from, the church that is pictured in these points? How is the congregation similar to or different from the one described in the Great Ends of the Church? If there are differences, what do you see as the reasons for the differences?
3. Having read the Confession, what do you see as the meaning and potential of this gift to your own congregation? To the life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

Large Group Sharing



³ *Book of Order*, F-1.0304

The great ends of the Church are:

the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
the maintenance of divine worship;
the preservation of the truth;
the promotion of social righteousness; and
the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. (F-1.0304, *Book of Order*)

Closing Prayer

L: We share one faith,

P: have one calling,

L: are of one soul and one mind;

P: have one God and Creator,

L: are filled with one Spirit,

P: are baptized with one baptism,

L: eat of one bread and drink of one cup,

P: confess one Name,

L: are obedient to one Lord,

P: work for one cause, and share one hope.

L: Together we come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ;

P: are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity;

L: know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ

P: that we need one another and up build one another,

L: admonishing and comforting one another;

P: that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness.

L: Together we pray;

P: together we serve God in this world.

All: In the name of Jesus, who calls us to unity, reconciliation, and justice. Amen.



Confession of Belhar

September 1986¹

For Spanish and Korean version, see

1. **We believe** in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.
2. **We believe** in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

We believe

- that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;
- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity;
- that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;
- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church;

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;
- which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;
- which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;
- which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.

3. We believe

- that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.
- that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;
- that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;
- that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which, in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

4. We believe

- that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged

- that God calls the church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
- that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;
- that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;
- that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;
- that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right;
- that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology

- which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

5. We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory for ever and ever.

Endnote

1. This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the confession as it was adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986. In 1994 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa_(URCSA). This inclusive language text was prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).