

CONFESSION OF BELHAR

How should the church respond 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? 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 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.

The roots of apartheid go back in South African culture and church for several centuries. The Dutch Reformed Church embodied racial separation when it formed three “mission” churches in the late nineteenth century, each categorized by its racial identity. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church was formed for people designated as “coloured” (biracial). The church's complicity with racial separation kept Christians from worshipping and coming to the Lord's Table together. The white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) created an elaborate biblical interpretation and ideology that supported racial separation and then the formal apartheid policies.

The Dutch Reformed Church's active participation and theological defense of apartheid moved the global church to name apartheid a *status confessionis*—a conviction that the Gospel was at stake and thus the faith needed to be proclaimed. 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 Southern 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.

The Special Committee on the Confession of Belhar recommended that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) add Belhar as part of its Constitution because it believed the clarity of Belhar's witness to unity, reconciliation, and justice might help the PC(USA) speak and act with similar clarity at a time when it faces division, racism, and injustice.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved the Confession of Belhar as part of the *Book of Confessions* at the 222nd General Assembly (2016).

CONFESSION OF BELHAR

September 1986¹

10.1

Revelation 21:6–7

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.

10.2

Matthew 28:19–20

We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.

10.3

Ephesians 2:13–20

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;

Ephesians 4:11–16,
Psalm 133

- 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;

John 17:20–23

- 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;

John 13:34

- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways;

Colossians 3:12–16

- * in that we love one another;

Philippians 2:1–5

- * that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another;

1 Corinthians 1:10–13

- * that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another;

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.).

10.3-4

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| Ephesians 4:1-6 | * | that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; |
| 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 | * | 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; |
| Ephesians 3:18-20 | * | 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; |
| Galatians 6:2 | * | together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ; |
| 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 | * | that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; |
| 1 Corinthians 12:24b-28, Ephesians 3:14-20 | * | 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; |
| 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Romans 12:3-8 | • | 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; |
| Galatians 3:27-29 | • | that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church; |

10.4

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.

10.5

We believe

2 Corinthians
5:17–21

- that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ;

Matthew 5:9, 13–16;
2 Peter 3:13;
Revelation 21:1–5

- 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;

Romans 6:12–14,
Colossians 1:11–14

- that God’s life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God’s life-giving 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;

James 2:8–9

- 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.

10.6

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.

10.7**We believe**

- Isaiah 42:1–7
 - that God has revealed God’s self as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- Luke 6:20–26
 - 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
- Luke 4:16–19
 - that God calls the church to follow God in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
- Luke 7:22
 - that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;
- Psalms 146
 - that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;
- James 1:27
 - that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;
- Micah 6:8
 - that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right;
- Amos 5:14–15, 23–24
 - 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;
- Psalms 82:1–5
 - that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged;
- Leviticus 19:15
 - 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.

10.8**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.

10.9

Acts 5:29–32;
1 Peter 3:15–18

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.

Accompanying Letter to the Confession of Belhar²

This letter was a statement made upon the adoption of the Confession of Belhar by the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa

1. We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the Church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. We are aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is so threatened as to be at stake. In our judgment, the present church and political situation in our country and particularly within the Dutch Reformed church family calls for such a decision. Accordingly, we make this confession not as a contribution to a theological debate nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand. Along with many, we confess our guilt, in that we have not always witnessed clearly enough in our situation and so are jointly responsible for the way in which those things which were experienced as sin and confessed to be sin have grown in time to seem self-evidently right and to be ideologies foreign to the Scriptures. As a result many have been given the impression that the gospel was not really at stake. We make this confession because we are convinced that all sorts of theological arguments have contributed to so disproportionate an emphasis on some aspects of the truth that it has in effect become a lie.

2. We are aware that the only authority for such a confession and the only grounds on which it may be made are the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. Being fully aware of the risk involved in taking this step, we are nevertheless convinced that we have no alternative. Furthermore, we are aware that no other motives or convictions, however valid they may be, would give us the right to confess in this way. An act of confession may only be made by the Church for the sake of its purity and credibility and that of its message. As solemnly as we are able, we hereby declare before men that our only motive lies in our fear that the truth and power of the gospel itself is threatened in this situation. We do not wish to serve any group interests, advance the cause of any factions, promote any theologies, or achieve any ulterior purposes. Yet, having said this, we know that our deepest intentions may only be judged at their true value by him before whom all is revealed. We do not make this confession from his throne and from on high, but before his throne and before men. We plead, therefore, that this confession would not be misused by anyone with ulterior motives and also that it should not be resisted to serve such motives. Our earnest desire is to lay no false stumbling blocks in the way, but to point to the true stumbling block, Jesus Christ the rock.

² While not of constitutional character, the following letter accompanies the Confession of Belhar to explain the context of the confession.

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3. This confession is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches. We proclaim it against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion which threatens the gospel itself in our church and our country. Our heartfelt longing is that no one will identify himself with this objectionable doctrine and that all who have been wholly or partially blinded by it will turn themselves away from it. We are deeply aware of the deceiving nature of such a false doctrine and know that many who have been conditioned by it have to a greater or lesser extent learnt to take a half-truth for the whole. For this reason we do not doubt the Christian faith of many such people, their sincerity, honor, integrity, and good intentions and their in many ways estimable practice and conduct. However, it is precisely because we know the power of deception that we know we are not liberated by the seriousness, sincerity, or intensity of our certainties, but only by the truth in the Son. Our church and our land have an intense need of such liberation. Therefore it is that we speak pleadingly rather than accusingly. We plead for reconciliation, that true reconciliation which follows on conversion and change of attitudes and structures. And while we do so we are aware that an act of confession is a two-edged sword, that none of us can throw the first stone, and none is without a beam in his own eye. We know that the attitudes and conduct which work against the gospel are present in all of us and will continue to be so. Therefore this confession must be seen as a call to a continuous process of soul searching together, a joint wrestling with the issues, and a readiness to repent in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world. It is certainly not intended as an act of self-justification and intolerance, for that would disqualify us in the very act of preaching to others.
4. Our prayer is that this act of confession will not place false stumbling blocks in the way and thereby cause and foster false divisions, but rather that it will be reconciling and uniting. We know that such an act of confession and process of reconciliation will necessarily involve much pain and sadness. It demands the pain of repentance, remorse, and confession; the pain of individual and collective renewal and a changed way of life. It places us on a road whose end we can neither foresee nor manipulate to our own desire. On this road we shall unavoidably suffer intense growing pains while we struggle to conquer alienation, bitterness, irreconciliation, and fear. We shall have to come to know and encounter both ourselves and others in new ways. We are only too well aware that this confession calls for the dismantling of structures of thought, of church, and of society which have developed over many years. However, we confess that for the sake of the gospel, we have no other choice. We pray that our brothers and sisters throughout the Dutch Reformed church family, but also outside it, will want to make this new beginning with us, so that we can be free together and together may walk the road of reconciliation and justice. Accordingly, our prayer is that the pain and sadness we speak of will be pain and sadness that lead to salvation. We believe that this is possible in the power of our Lord and by his Spirit. We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope, liberation, salvation, and true peace to our country.