

# The Confession of Belhar

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i> .....	3
Introduction to <i>The Confession of Belhar</i> .....	4
The Confession of Belhar .....	5
Accompanying Letter to the Confession of Belhar (1986) .....	10
Session 1. Belhar History and Being a Confessional Church .....	13
Session 2. Article 1: A Trinitarian and Ecclesiological Confession ....	19
Session 3. Article 2: Unity .....	26
Session 4. Article 3: Reconciliation .....	33
Session 5. Article 4: Justice .....	39
Session 6. Article 5: Benediction and the Role of Confessions .....	46
Suggestions for Further Study .....	52

# Belhar History and Being a Confessional Church

## Scripture

**Philippians 2:5–11** Also known as the Christ Hymn, this Scripture passage is a creed or hymn of the early church.

**Ephesians 2:11–22** An early New Testament creedal statement.

## Prayer

O God, you are almighty and created heaven and earth:

Establish your kingdom among us.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Son of the living God:

Give us your mercy, forgive our sins.

Holy Spirit, breath of God who brings life:

Renew your church, renew your people, renew your world.

Amen.

## Introduction

In South Africa, the Confession of Belhar emerged out of a context formed by more than a century of one church's domination of another based on racial differences. This inequity eventually found expression in church support for legalized racial oppression. The confession emerged at a time when violence in South Africa had raised such concern among international Christian bodies that they found it necessary to declare that the gospel of Jesus Christ was at stake and that the only response was to demand a thorough dismantling of South Africa's systemic program of persecution and separation. This confession, arising out of that conflict and context, has a historical relationship for all Christians in the Reformed theological family. Arising from the crucible of South African apartheid policies and suffering, the Confession of Belhar's themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice call us to a deeper understanding of what it means to follow Christ.

## Confessional Christianity

Reformed Christians are guided by the creeds and confessions of the church. The Reformed tradition “believes in the ability of one generation to bear witness to another.”<sup>1</sup>

Reformed Christianity is confessional. We share this peculiarity with Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans. Creeds and confessions tell the church “who and what it is, what it believes, [and] what it resolves to do”; they “identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as its actions.”<sup>2</sup> Confessions help us avoid having our shared faith fade to what theologian William Placher termed “generalized warm fuzziness and social conventions.”<sup>3</sup>

The Confession of Belhar is often compared to the Theological Declaration of Barmen, a document that grew out of another twentieth-century crisis. The emergence of the German Christian Church under Hitler forced Christians to examine the relationship of church and state and the ways that the church speaks to and against the state. Reformed theologian Karl Barth and Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, taught, and spoke about the nature of the church before and during the war. Barth was the primary author of the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934). Reflecting on the challenges of that era, Bonhoeffer’s friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge noted that there are moments in history that become an “acute present,” when all at once, several long-discussed controversies suddenly and unpreparedly demand decision and resolution.

Barth believed a confession is a proclamation of the church in a specific situation that requires the interpretation of a specific location at a specific moment about a specific issue.

This specificity places the confession in the midst of a society’s political, cultural, and economic realities. These crisis moments call the church to clarity of thought and speech.

All creeds and confessions arise in a particular time and place in response to a particular issue. All of them seek to listen and look for the signs of the times. It is not surprising that those

---

*All creeds and confessions arise in a particular time and place in response to a particular issue.*

---

1. Eunice T. McGarrah, “A Study of The Confession of Belhar and Its Accompanying Letter.” Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Office of Theology and Worship, p. 5. Available at [pcusa.org/resource/belhar-confession-study-guide](http://pcusa.org/resource/belhar-confession-study-guide).

2. *Book of Order*, G-2.0100.

3. William C. Placher, “Why Creeds Matter,” *Christian Century* (September 20, 2003): p. 23.

who came to write the Confession of Belhar looked to the Canons of Dort, a document from the Netherlands written during the Reformation era, as they sought to understand their own time. The Confession of Belhar travels on a path familiar to us who look to creeds and confessions to discern truth and renew faith.

## **Apartheid and the Church in South Africa**

*Apartheid* is the Afrikaans word meaning “apartness.” It describes policies enacted in South Africa in 1948, but the events that led to these policies started centuries before. The introduction of Dutch Reformed Christianity to South Africa in 1652 contributed to this history. Dutch merchant Jan Van Riebeeck brought a group of settlers to an area that is now part of the city of Cape Town, and this group eventually came to be known as the Cape Colony.

Over time, the Dutch immigrants began to see themselves as indigenous to southern Africa—they began to see the land where they lived as theirs, given to them by God. The term *Afrikaner* came into use as the name of their ethnic group. Afrikaans, an outgrowth of the Dutch language, is their language (which has now become a native tongue for other Africans).

Afrikaners believed they were to share the gospel with others while also keeping themselves separate. This led to the Dutch Reformed Church’s (DRC) mission strategy, starting in the nineteenth century. The DRC formed three mission churches, one for each of the three racial groups that were identified under apartheid: black, coloured (biracial), and Indian. The coloured mission church, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), was founded in 1881.

Racial segregation became the law of the land with the election of the National Party in 1948, which made separate racial designations official. Laws passed over the next decade denied South African blacks citizenship and land ownership. New laws prohibited entry into most schools for blacks and coloured students, outlawed mixed marriages, and made travel from one region to another more difficult for blacks. While some pastors and leaders of the DRC spoke out against these policies, much of the church, including many leaders, accepted, approved, or supported apartheid.

---

*Racial segregation became the law of the land with the election of the National Party in 1948, which made separate racial designations official.*

---

Relationships between Reformed Christians in South Africa grew more problematic. Apartheid undoubtedly played a catalytic role in the development of what finally became the Confession of Belhar in 1986. However, it was not the only impetus. DRC control over the life, ministry, and governance of the DRMC also led to a confessional moment. C. J. Botha, in a volume written by many who helped write the confession, names violations of the Canons of Dort in the relationship between the DRC and DRMC.<sup>4</sup> Dort states, “No church will dominate other churches, no minister other ministers, no elder or deacon other elders or deacons.”<sup>5</sup>

Vetoes of DRMC actions by the DRC were common. One church was dominating another. While this example had many parallels in the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century mission relationships between churches, the transgression of a historic confessional standard was unacceptable to Christians for whom the confessions were primary documents of the faith.

## **Introduction to the Confession of Belhar**

Organized protests to apartheid policies began with groups like the African National Congress, whose history dates to 1912. Rallies and marches were held; numerous strikes and boycotts took place; protest documents were written, including many by Christian groups; and the military enforced the policies, violently putting down protest actions. Many, including Nelson Mandela, were imprisoned; many, including Steve Biko, were killed. Through it all, the DRC continued to support apartheid on biblical, theological, and moral grounds.

As the crisis of apartheid continued, the deaths of sixty-nine people in a violent exchange between protesters and police caught the attention of the international community. The World Council of Churches (WCC) sent a team to South Africa in 1960 and, after review, issued *The Cottesloe Consultation*. The WCC encouraged all sides to work toward peace and decry violence.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in 1979 and 1982, respectively, named apartheid a *status confessionis*. This term, originally used during the Protestant Reformation, refers to a situation when the preaching and teaching of the gospel is distorted, inaccurate, or not true to the

4. C. J. Botha, “Belhar—A Century-Old Protest,” in *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church*, ed. G. D. Cloete and D. J. Smit (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), pp. 66–80.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

aim of Christ's good news. WARC noted that a situation of *status confessionis* occurs when "the integrity of the proclamation of the gospel is at stake."<sup>6</sup>

WARC made denunciation of apartheid a condition of membership and suspended member churches that continued to support apartheid. WARC had a stake in the issue because the theology developed within Reformed communions provided the foundation for the practices of apartheid. WARC's action continues to reverberate through the global Reformed community.<sup>7</sup>

The Dutch Reformed Mission Church concurred with WARC later in 1982 and offered the Confession of Belhar as its response. It was adopted in 1986 and became one of the standards of unity (along with the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Heidelberg Catechism) for the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (1994).

As of this writing, the Reformed Church in America has recently adopted the Confession of Belhar as one of its confessional documents, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is considering including Belhar in its confessional standards. For many, the confession's biblical response to the church's lack of unity, the need for Christian reconciliation, and the justice God desires in the world speak to the global church community that struggles with these same issues. Because of the enduring problem of racism in American culture, the General Assembly asked the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to consider how the Confession of Belhar can address us. Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America writes, "The Confession of Belhar has the potential to serve North American Reformed denominations as it does the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, 'as an instrument for profound self-examination, to help determine whether the church really lives by the faith it proclaims.'"<sup>8</sup>

---

*The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) acted in 1979 and 1982, respectively, to name apartheid a status confessionis.*

---

6. [warc.ch/where/22gc/study/13.html](http://warc.ch/where/22gc/study/13.html)

7. In June 2010, as WARC and the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) merged to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), REC member churches from South Africa that had not denounced apartheid were not granted membership in the WCRC.

8. [images.rca.org/docs/aboutus/BelharGuideIntro.pdf](http://images.rca.org/docs/aboutus/BelharGuideIntro.pdf)

The questions remain, Why Belhar? and Why now? In the 1980s, the DRMC believed that the gospel was at stake and that the church was at risk. Is the gospel at stake today in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and in the Reformed Church in America? Is the church at risk?

### **Spiritual Practice**

Clip photos that depict people of different races from magazines, and post them on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror. Use these photos as reminders to pray for peace and justice among members of the human family.

### **Questions for Reflection**

What events in your community's history came to mind as you read about the history of the Confession of Belhar?

Can you remember a time when church leaders spoke out against injustice in your community or nation? What was the issue?

How does the confessional nature of the Reformed church inform your faith?