

Lenten Reflections on The Confession of Belhar

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Introduction by Allan A. Boesak

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A Note on This Book

After the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted the Confession of Belhar to become part of the *Book of Confessions* in June 2016, consideration was given to what type of resource could introduce the Belhar Confession more fully to the denomination.

It seemed that a book of devotions based on the Belhar Confession for Lent 2017 would be a blessing to the church as congregations and individual Presbyterians contemplated Scripture, the Belhar Confession, and the meanings that emerge as the Confession is studied phrase by phrase during the season of Lent.

The devotions were written by a variety of Presbyterians, reflecting on a portion of the Confession in relation to Scripture texts that are associated with the Confession. The forty-seven devotions cover the days of Lent, plus Sundays. Five devotions (Reflections 1, 2, 23, 31, and 43) introduce the five sections of the Confession. Reflection 47 offers a summary devotion on the Confession itself.

Preface

The 222nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted the Belhar Confession to be part of the church's *Book of Confessions* at the assembly meeting in Portland, Oregon, in June 2016.

The 2014 Assembly had voted to send the Confession to the presbyteries of the church for a vote. The required two-thirds of the presbyteries voted in favor of adding Belhar to the *Book of Confessions*, and the 2016 General Assembly voted on June 22, 2016 to approve the addition of Belhar to the church's confessional standards.

Belhar was written in 1982 in South Africa and adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1986. In the context of apartheid in South Africa, the Confession spoke strongly of the theological roots of Christians being one in Christ and the church's call to be a living demonstration of God's intention for all humanity. Put succinctly, Belhar says: "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." This message is for the church universal at all times.

The Belhar Confession has made a significant impact in the South African context and across the globe. It has helped churches in their struggles against oppression and quest for justice to see their efforts as theological, as well as political, since the integrity of the Christian gospel is at issue.

The Belhar Confession is an important witness to Jesus Christ. As Clifton Kirkpatrick has said: "We need a fresh reclaiming of the gospel's vision of unity, justice, and reconciliation for faithful Christian witness in the twenty-first century. One of the great resources for that vision comes not from the established churches of Europe and North America but from the new majority churches in the global south through the Confession of Belhar."¹

We are grateful to the contributors to this devotional book for sharing their insights and voices as they reflect the church as the whole people of God. We are especially grateful to Dr. Allan Aubrey Boesak, one of the authors of the Belhar Confession, whose introduction to this book clearly and passionately identifies Belhar's significance for the church and the world as we seek to walk with God.

We commend these devotions to the church. We hope they will deepen understanding, ignite our visions, and challenge and comfort us during the days of Lent and in all seasons.

Jesus is Lord.

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

Kerri N. Allen and Donald K. McKim
Editors

Introduction

Walking with God

The Belhar Confession was first conceived and written between the years 1982 and 1986 when it was formally adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. The apartheid regime—in response to the growing, determined, internal resistance and the prophetic witness of the church—declared the first two states of emergency and gave blanket impunity to all sections of the police and the army. This was on top of the array of draconian legislation that was already in place.

The results were devastating: 40,000 persons in detention without trial; 40 percent of those detained were children under 18; countless banning orders and house arrests; the routine hunting down and torture of activists; political assassinations; and almost daily killings of protesters during confrontations in the streets. Our people were slaughtered. There was not a single community in our church that was not touched by this disastrous state of affairs in one way or another.

In this context, the church confessed her belief in Jesus Christ as Lord, and accepted the costly grace of discipleship in a new commitment to unity, reconciliation, and justice. It was also a call to a new obedience—not just to unity, but to the very foundation of it in that we were obligated to “give ourselves willingly and joyfully to one another”; and not just to reconciliation, but to the inescapable truth that for Christians, reconciliation is not an option among other options, where we weigh the risks, consider the probabilities for success or failure, and then, with cautious optimism feel free to choose the path more feasible and manageable. Rather, it is an obligation, a calling, and a ministry entrusted to us by God in Jesus Christ.

The Belhar Confession is a call to justice as the heart of discipleship: (1) that God—the God of Jesus of Nazareth, not the false god that blesses slavery, apartheid, genocide, exclusion, and oppression—is a God of justice; (2) that God calls the church—that is, those of us who call upon the name of Jesus and seek to follow him as his disciples—to follow God in this; (3) that the church must, therefore, stand by all people in *any* form of suffering and need—no excuses, exceptions, or compromises—which means that the church must witness against any form of injustice, so that justice may “roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream”; and (4) that the church as the possession of God—not the possession of the privileged and powerful, the high and the loud-mouthed, the racially exclusive, the arrogant and the self-satisfied—should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged.

In our synod that day, the elder who prayed after our acceptance of Belhar, prayed that we might become a church committed to walking with God. We might not have known exactly what that walk meant or where it would take us, but today we know a little better.

Walking with God is learning to read the heart of God, to hear the voice of God in the cries of the victims of our ferocious and destructive sinfulness, and in so doing to understand what Yahweh requires. And *that* cannot be done but in utter humility before God and before the ones we have hurt and damaged through our arrogance, greed, injustice, and love of violence.

It is walking with God through Egypt—*seeing and knowing* both the oppressive, heartless might of the Pharaoh *and* the pain and suffering of God’s people (Exodus 3:7). It is standing in the midst of the slaves, counting the blows, bending under the weight, and feeling the pain. It is recognizing Pharaoh’s power and the mercilessness of his slave drivers, and it is “to come down” to rescue, to liberate, and to end the violence and the suffering. Walking humbly with God is walking from the brick-making yards through the palace gates to the throne, telling the Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” It is breaking down the wall of resistance between the will of the Pharaoh and the longing of the people, between the power of the Pharaoh and the cry for justice. It is acknowledging the difference between making bricks for the Pharaoh and breaking down the walls of hatred, enmity, and exclusion.

Walking with God is walking with Jesus: restoring life to the bodies of the abused, making the wounded whole, healing the sick, touching the untouchables, and empowering women to their rightful place. It is weeping with those who mourn, releasing the life-giving power of God's love, challenging and confronting the powerful on the doing of justice and mercy in their temples and their palaces, and giving notice that the reign of God has come.

Walking with God is to stand where God stands, to fight for whom God fights: the poor, the weak, and the defenseless. It is to have the courage to know that trepidation before the might of the powerful is overturned by the fear of the Lord and the love of Christ. It is to understand—unequivocally and with a clarity that is both humbling and liberating—that justice is what Yahweh requires.

Walking humbly with God means being humbled by what we see, by what we are doing to others, and by our capacity for harm and destruction in what we are wreaking upon God's creation. Walking with God is learning to let the Holy Spirit have her way, to let us be astounded by what we can do in God's name, for Jesus is Lord.

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Chapter 1



A Call to Confess



Reflection 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.

The Confession of Belhar

Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

Revelation 21:6–7

The biblical passage provides a hopeful vision of a time when the church will know victory over the oppressions of this world; the dawning of a paradisiacal new creation; the necessary sustenance of communal, spiritual, and physical existence—the “water of life”; and the righteous and glorious presence of Almighty God. The vision is Eden revisited (Genesis 3). Realization of this vision is the inheritance of “those who conquer.” Faith—transforming, determined, ever-renewing faith in God—is the characteristic that beneficiaries of the vision must embody in order to receive the promised inheritance. Faith—transformative faith—is what it takes to “conquer” existing oppressions and to live and participate in a new relationship with God.

It is hoped, of course, that the reality envisioned by John in Revelation can be further transformed into one where the language and structures of empire (“conquer” and “throne”) are relinquished by all who partake in the new creation. After all, the “water of life” issues from an ever-flowing spring that continually quenches the thirst for freedom and community.



The first part of Belhar calls the church to confess its faith “in the triune God” who “gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit.” Faith in this instance is more than mere intellectual acknowledgment of the existence of God. It is more than congregational membership and active participation in the life of the church. The faith called for by Belhar is the same as that inferred by the biblical text. It is transforming, determined, ever-renewing faith. It is the sort of deeply felt, strongly held conviction that elevates Almighty God to the status of Lord of the conscience. It is faith that transforms both the believer and the community to move from racist, sexist, ageist, classist, and homophobic attitudes and behaviors, to the new life of a new created order in a redeemed community where honoring, serving, and loving the other in God’s name is the primary concern.

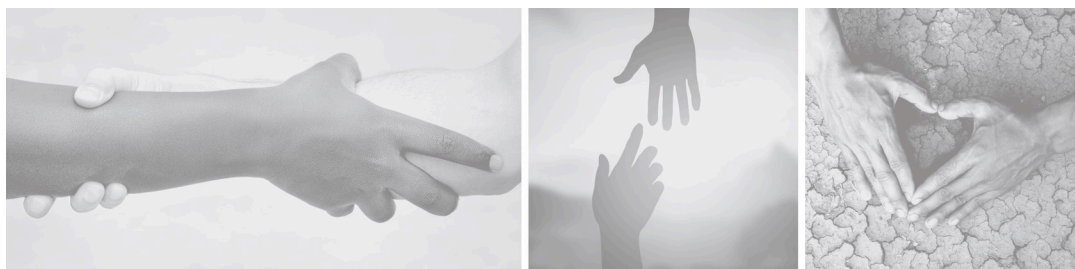
Mark Lomax, Lithonia, Georgia

*Most holy and triune God,
transform us through the abiding power and presence
of your Holy Spirit that we might embody
and live the gospel of Jesus Christ now and forever.
Amen.*

Chapter 2



A Call to Unity



Reflection 2

Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
Ephesians 4:3

Unity.

The second section of Belhar wrests us from our comfort zones. It calls for every member of the body of Christ to be actively engaged in establishing and maintaining unity. If the reconciling work of Christ means anything at all, the unity it portends must be evident in the life of the church.

It is tempting to be poetic here: to use flowery language to soften the cold, hard realities of our common life in the church of God. Belhar pushes us to reconsider what it means to be Christian in a church and society suffering from and contorted by sins such as racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism. It compels us actively to oppose the spiritual, economic, and political forces that inflict faithful sisters and brothers with such diseases as income disparity, corporatism, and corrupt public policies designed to alienate the weakest, poorest, and least capable among us. Belhar constrains us to say out loud to God and the faithful how we have been complicit through our unwillingness to speak and act, even as we witness injustice in the public square.

Conversely Belhar insists we actively work for unity in the body of Christ, remembering our baptisms that bring us together in such deep and profound ways that the struggles and sufferings of our sisters and brothers are really our own. We are unified not by confessions and rituals alone, but more importantly by our shared relationship with God through Christ and in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.



Just as a mother loves her children so deeply that she will sacrifice her own well-being for the sake of theirs, so must Christians love one another. Just as a friend will unwittingly dive into storm-tossed waters to deliver a brother from certain demise, so must Christians act in the interest of Christians who are incapable of reaching the dry ground of a good quality of life alone. As children are ever grateful for the selfless love of mothers, and friends never forget the compassion of another offered in the time of storm, so should loving acts of service and reciprocal responses of gratitude bind the members of the body together in loving and appreciative unity.

To attain the unity confessed in Belhar, every member of the body of Christ must in turn serve the other in recognition of the fact that we are indeed one.

Mark Lomax, Lithonia, Georgia

Make us one in Christ Jesus, we pray. Amen.