



Race and Reconciliation

Workbook:

The Confessions of 1967 and Belhar

Writer: Clifton Kirkpatrick
Group Sessions Writer: Eva Stimson

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Writers:

Clifton Kirkpatrick is Professor of World Christianity and Ecumenical Studies and the William A. Benfield Jr. Professor of Evangelism and Global Mission at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He is also Stated Clerk of the General Assembly Emeritus for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), having served for twelve years as the chief ecclesiastical and ecumenical officer for the denomination. Before that, he directed the PC(USA)'s agency for World Mission for fifteen years. He has a long and deep history with the Confession of Belhar, having served from 2004 to 2010 as president of the World Communion of Reformed Churches and as moderator of the International Accompaniment Group for the Reconciliation of the Reformed Churches in South Africa around the Belhar Confession. He has most recently served as co-moderator of the PC(USA) General Assembly Special Committee on the Confession of Belhar.

Eva Stimson, a graduate of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education (now Union Presbyterian Seminary), is a freelance writer/editor, an oil painter, and the former editor of *Presbyterians Today*. She is a ruling elder, Sunday school teacher, and member of Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

Editor: Donald K. McKim is editor for *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*, an adult curriculum of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He also serves as editor of *The Present Word*. Dr. McKim is an Honorably Retired Presbyterian minister who has been an editor for Westminster John Knox Press, a seminary theology professor and academic dean as well as a pastor. He is the author and editor of a number of books on Reformed theology including *Introducing the Reformed Faith*; *Presbyterian Beliefs: A Brief Introduction*; *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers*; *More Presbyterian Questions, More Presbyterian Answers*; and the *Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*. He lives with his wife, LindaJo McKim, in Germantown, Tennessee. They have two married children and two grandchildren.



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Introduction

Reformed Christians confess what we believe. Throughout the world, Reformed churches have produced confessions of faith to witness to their Christian faith in different circumstances, cultures, and localities. We take seriously what the psalmist proclaimed: “Let the redeemed of the LORD say so” (Psalm 107:2).

This study focuses on two confessions of faith from the twentieth century. The Confession of 1967 was adopted by the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and is now part of the *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Confession of Belhar was composed in South Africa (1982) and adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1986. Both confessions are theologically grounded and address issues that continue to be crucial for the church in the twenty-first century.

Clifton Kirkpatrick is uniquely qualified to lead this consideration of the two confessions. His passion for the emphases of these confessional statements on reconciliation, unity, and justice brings these themes alive for us.

The resource you hold in your hands may be used in different ways: as a self-guided study, as a group study, and as a ready reference for reflection. For a self-guided study, you simply start at the beginning, reading the sections and completing the reflective activities at your pace, perhaps meeting regularly with a friend or two. For a group study, suggested lesson plans are offered (see p. 49).

This study enables us to hear the call of these confessions to the church and to us as Christian people. As the church celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the Confession of 1967 and the inclusion of the Confession of Belhar into the *Book of Confessions*, we say what we believe; and, by God’s grace, we try to live it.

Donald K. McKim
Editor

A Providential Coincidence

Introduction

When a string of good things is happening at roughly the same time, we see that as a good coincidence. In the same way, when negative things seem to happen one after another, we see that as a bad coincidence. One unique thing about Reformed Christians is that, while not denying that coincidences happen, we also believe there is a purpose to everything in life. Thus, we look for the hand of providence before jumping to the conclusion that human events are simply coincidental. We believe that what the world often sees as coincidences are, in fact, signs of God's providence meant to reveal God's purposes in human history.

This study of the Confession of Belhar and the Confession of 1967 (C67) puts forward the proposition that the growing attention in the church to both confessions at roughly the same time—and at a time when their common concern that overcoming racism is more urgent than ever—is not simply a coincidence. Indeed, it may well be the hand of providence giving us and our churches powerful theological tools to stand against the racism that is very much alive among us, in our nation, and in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Both these confessions share the sentiment so well expressed in the Belhar Confession that “God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation.” We hope this study will enable you to claim the ministry of reconciliation in a world and a church deeply divided by race, nation, gender, economic status, and religion. If that proves to be the case, the move to the forefront of the Confessions of Belhar and 1967 will indeed be a providential coincidence.

Read Micah 6:6–8 and Ephesians 4:1–6. Write your initial thoughts about each passage here:

What connections do you see between doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God and maintaining unity, a spirit of peace, and common hope in the triune God?

An Important Anniversary and a New Beginning

The Confession of 1967 was adopted by an overwhelming number of presbyteries and by the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in Portland, Oregon, in (you guessed it!) 1967. It was a time of tumult in society and massive social change. The 1960s were the high-water mark of the civil rights movement. New legislation was being adopted (the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965). Non-violent efforts at social change were taking place (Selma and the March on Washington). Churches (especially the black churches) were providing leadership on racial and social justice issues. Clearly, the Presbyterian Church was called to act, and it did in a variety of ways, including giving clear expression to our mandate to work for racial justice in the Confession of 1967. (See section 9.44a of the Confession of 1967.)

What significant events do you recall from 1967—in the world and in your own life?

One of the reasons for holding our 2016 PC(USA) General Assembly in Portland, Oregon, is the importance of celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Confession of 1967 in the city where it was first adopted by the church. It is interesting that this confession continues to capture the imagination of the church. Theologically rich commemorations of this important confession were held at the fifteen-year mark (at Princeton Theological Seminary) and again at the thirty-five-year mark (at Stony Point Center) to remind the church of its continuing relevance. That will again be a major focus as the Assembly gathers in Portland in 2016.

Coming to this same Assembly will be the Confession of Belhar for formal adoption after its previous approval by the 2014 General Assembly and now the approval of well over the required two-thirds of our presbyteries. Growing out of the witness of the church in South Africa against apartheid, this powerful confession is a call to the church to live a life firmly centered on unity, reconciliation, and justice. In an interesting way, the Confession of 1967 calls on the church to be an advocate for “the elimination of all racial discrimination” in our nation and world, while Belhar is primarily a call to the church to be a living demonstration of the unity, reconciliation, and justice (where there is no place for racism) that God intends for all people. One confession is primarily focused on the world; the other is focused on the church. Both seek a world and a church free of racism and injustice and shaped by a spirit of unity and reconciliation. We need both!

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Locate the texts of the confessions (p. 73). Highlight words and passages that speak to you about the problems of race and injustice.

“For Just Such a Time as This”

In the book of Esther, when the king has threatened to annihilate the Jewish people, we read the riveting account of the admonition from Mordecai to his cousin, Esther. Esther has just been made queen. He tells her,

“If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” (Esther 4:14)

As I have read, studied, and taught the Confession of 1967 this past year and as I have been actively engaged with Belhar as the Co-Moderator of the General Assembly Special Committee on the Confession of Belhar, I have had a growing conviction that the coming of these two confessions to prominence in our church is not just coincidental. It is providential. These confessions are meant “for just such a time as this.”

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While we have never escaped distrust and division in the church and violence, injustice, and racism in society, we have felt the sting of these evil forces with special power over the last few years. The Special Committee on the Belhar Confession has expressed the need for these confessions in a powerful way:

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is again facing a critical time in its history. We are rent apart by division and schism, we have yet to confront directly and confess the racism that has been a significant force in our own history, and we have shown a failure of resolve to make courageous stands for justice. We believe that the Confession of Belhar, a profound statement on unity, reconciliation, and justice in the church, comes to us as a word from God for this particular time and place for the PC(USA).¹

Over the last few years, we have lost hundreds of thousands of members and hundreds of churches that are so deeply alienated from the broader witness of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that they have felt they must split from other sisters and brothers in our denomination. At the same time, we have failed to make our church a truly inclusive church with a growing diversity of age, race, language, and nationality in our membership. The historic words of Martin Luther King Jr., who said that Sunday morning at eleven A.M. is the most segregated hour of the week, are as true today as they were fifty years ago.

List current examples of racism and injustice in your community; in the country.

What do you find most distressing about these examples? Where are there signs of hope?

Racism and injustice are rampant in society. They call out for the prophetic ministry of the church. First Nation peoples still live in dire poverty on reservations. Young African-American men are incarcerated disproportionately to their percentage of the population. The legal status of Latinos, both native born and immigrant, is subject to question in virtually every quarter of the nation. “Stop and frisk” and “stand your ground” laws put poor, black, and brown young men at risk.

1. Frequently Asked Questions about the Confession of Belhar. pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/belharbrochure.pdf.

If we didn't already know how serious racism and injustice are in our society, we have received a wake-up call from Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Trayvon Martin—who all died needlessly by violence from police or security personnel. Adding to this litany is the tragedy in Charleston, South Carolina, which has just happened as I write. The Rev. Clementa Pinckney and eight other leaders of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church were shot to death by a young white man who had been welcomed into the church for Bible study and a prayer meeting. The young man posted photographs of himself online holding a Confederate flag and a gun.

The concerns that gave rise to the Confession of 1967 in its time and to the Confession of Belhar in the 1980s are very much alive today. The concerns to end racism, to be a people of God reconciled in Christ for the reconciliation of the world, and to live in unity, reconciliation, and justice are as relevant today as ever. It is truly a providential coincidence that these confessions are again prominent in the life of our church. They are surely needed “for just such a time as this.”

Study Personal Postscript

Most of the rest of this study will deal with biblical, theological, historical, and sociological issues related to these two confessions. However, what is ultimately important are the personal and spiritual issues as we seek to find how these confessions might shape our faith and our faithful witness. Therefore, I want to use this postscript to share how these confessions have shaped and continue to shape my life and faith. I hope you will engage in such a personal and spiritual exploration for yourself. Issues of race and building community in diversity in the church are not issues we American Presbyterians deal with well, but they are so important to our future.

I grew up as a Presbyterian in Memphis, Tennessee, largely in the 1950s. These confessions did not exist at that time, but when I encountered them later in life, they cast my experience growing up in Memphis in a whole new light. I went to a segregated school, worshiped in a segregated church, and lived in a segregated society. In so many ways, I was (and continue to be) an unfair beneficiary of white privilege. I did not see much connection between the social realities of Memphis during those days and my Christian faith. The Christian faith in which I was raised (by parents who had a deep compassion for people of all races) was that of “the spirituality of the church” in which Christian faith was concerned about spiritual life without much connection to issues of social justice.

Under the leadership of a student YMCA at Davidson College, whose leaders had been deeply shaped by the ecumenical movement, I began to take a second look at what I believed and came to see the gospel, concerned with all realms of life and justice, as a core calling for Christians. In my context that meant a deep passion and an active engagement for civil rights and for peace (in the midst of the Vietnam War).

When I arrived at Yale Divinity School, there was great enthusiasm in the Presbyterian student group on campus for the Confession of 1967. Its vision of reconciliation in Christ for the reconciliation of the world became a core

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conviction that is still central to me today. Its four-fold areas for reconciliation in society—race, peace, poverty, and gender justice—have been missional priorities for me from those days to today.

My connection with Belhar came later. In 1981, I had just been elected director of international mission for the Presbyterian Church, U.S. (the southern branch of American Presbyterianism at that time), and one of my first overseas trips in that capacity was to South Africa. In many ways, South Africa was a different world. I was astounded by the poverty, the desperation of the townships, and the incredible hospitality and spiritual vitality of the churches. However, in other ways (not very positive ways), it was all too familiar. The public parks had admission on different days for different races (with the whites getting six out of every seven days), water fountains and schools were segregated, and a deep difference in wealth and opportunity divided blacks, colored, and white—a reality that was much the same as in Memphis, Tennessee, where I had grown up in the 1950s and early 1960s.

However, seeing the power of the gospel, the courage to work for justice, and the passion for reconciliation among those in the churches of the dispossessed was a transformational experience for me. It became clear there was no way to be in mission in South Africa without joining Christians there in working to end apartheid. I came to know some of the courageous leaders who wrote and upheld the Belhar Confession. I came to see that their struggle was indeed our struggle, and while there are many differences, the theological task of dismantling racism and reconciling the church is a shared task for African and American Christians. As the Belhar Confession emerged in the 1980s, it also became my confession, and I am now thrilled to see it become our confession in the PC(USA).

What experiences have shaped your faith, especially in relation to the issues of social justice addressed in the confessions?

Questions for Reflection

The need to overcome racism is as urgent as ever. What are the strongest evidences of racism in our society? Where are there signs of hope?

What is similar and what is different in relation to the church and race in the United States and South Africa? What do we have to learn from each other?

What has been your experience with the Confession of 1967 and/or the Confession of Belhar? Do you believe they speak in helpful ways for us as we seek to be faithful Christians in our time?

Spiritual Practice

One of the best-known prayers in the world is the beautiful Prayer of St. Francis (p. 12). Pray this prayer each day for the week ahead. After praying it all week, take a few minutes to meditate on the prayer and try to discern how God is seeking to make you an instrument of God's peace. If you are comfortable doing so, share your new insights with others who may be engaging in this study with you.

The Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love;

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.

Amen.



Sessions for Group Study

A Providential Coincidence

Scripture

Micah 6:6–8; Ephesians 4:1–6

Main Idea

At a time when the need to overcome racism is more urgent than ever, it is providential that the church is focusing on both the Confession of 1967 and the Confession of Belhar, which give us powerful theological tools to work for unity, justice, and reconciliation in our church and society.

Teaching Points

The session invites participants to consider:

1. That while the Confession of 1967 is primarily focused on the world and the Confession of Belhar is focused on the church, both seek a world and a church free of racism and injustice and shaped by a spirit of unity and reconciliation;
2. Circumstances such as divisions and growing diversity in the PC(USA) and rampant injustice and racism in society, which suggest these confessions are meant “for just such a time as this”;
3. How these confessions might work on a personal and spiritual level to shape our faith and witness.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Christ candle and lighter

Newsprint and markers

Bare wall or bulletin board and tape or pushpins to create a “We Believe” graffiti wall

Paper, scissors, old magazines and newspapers, pens, pencils, and/or markers

Leader Prep

Read Section 1 and highlight important points.

For Gather, set the Christ candle (a white pillar candle) on a table in the center of your meeting space. Enlist participants to take turns lighting the candle and reading the opening Scripture.

For Head, familiarize yourself with the introduction to Section 1 and “An Important Anniversary and a New Beginning” (pp. 6–7). Read the Confession of 1967 and the Confession of Belhar (appendices, pp. 73–98), highlighting words and passages that indicate C-67’s focus on the world and Belhar’s focus on the church.

For Heart, familiarize yourself with “For Just Such a Time as This” (pp. 7–9). Post a sheet of newsprint where it is visible to all. Have Bibles available for all participants, and newsprint and markers for the small groups. Think about the first Question for Reflection (p. 11) so you can help others engage with the question if needed.

For Hands, familiarize yourself with “A Personal Postscript” (pp. 9–10). Be prepared to share experiences that have shaped your own faith and to help participants engage with the second Question for Reflection (p. 11) as needed. Write “We Believe” in large letters on a sheet of paper and post it on the bare wall or bulletin board to begin a graffiti wall. Also, post the words “Unity,” “Justice,” and “Reconciliation.” Have available paper, pens, markers, old magazines, and other supplies for participants to use throughout the study to confess their faith in words and images.

For Depart, enlist a participant to read the closing Scripture. Choose a selection from section 11.2 of the Confession of Belhar to read together as an affirmation of the unity expressed in Ephesians 4:1–6.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Invite participants to introduce themselves and to share briefly anything they know or have heard about these two confessions and what they hope to gain from this study.
- Light the Christ candle.
- Read Micah 6:6–8.
- Pray together the Prayer of St. Francis (p. 12). Suggest that participants pray this prayer daily in the coming week, as suggested in the Spiritual Practice (p. 11).

Head

- Note the dates of both confessions. Ask participants who were alive in 1967 and/or 1986: *What significant events do you recall from those years—in the world and in your own life?* Allow a few minutes for sharing some of these memories.
- Review together the context of the two confessions, as described in the Introduction and “An Important Anniversary and a New Beginning” (pp. 6–7). Note the role each confession will play at the 2016 General Assembly of the PC(USA).
- Call attention to the author’s statement: “One confession is primarily focused on the world (C-67). The other is focused on the church (Belhar).” Have participants find the texts of the confessions (pp. 73–98) and spend a few minutes highlighting words and passages that indicate the focus of each. Suggest they pay particular attention to Parts II and III of C-67 and the Accompanying Letter to Belhar. Invite any who wish to share findings with the group.

Heart

- Have participants find Esther 4:14 in their Bibles. Ask a volunteer to read aloud the first paragraph of “For Just Such a Time as This” (p. 7), in which this verse is quoted. Ask: *Knowing what you know about the two confessions, do you agree with the author that they are meant “for just such a time as this”?* Invite participants to list current examples of racism and injustice from their own experience and those mentioned by the author. Write these on a sheet of newsprint.
- Form several small groups. Give them Bibles, newsprint, and markers. Ask each group to choose one of the examples of racism or injustice listed earlier that resonates personally with them or seems particularly urgent. Ask: *What do you find most distressing about this situation? Where are there signs of hope? How does our Christian faith call us to respond?* Have them search the two confessions and their Bibles for passages that could speak to the situation, listing these on newsprint.
- Invite a person from each group to report highlights of their discussion.

Hands

- Ask: *What is similar and what is different in relation to the church and race in the United States and South Africa? What can we learn from each other that will help us put our faith into action?*
- Look at the experiences the author shares in “A Personal Postscript.” Ask: *What experiences in your own lives have shaped your faith, especially in relation to the issues of social justice addressed in these confessions?* Have participants form groups of two or three to share their experiences.
- Call attention to the “We Believe” graffiti wall you have begun, explaining that this will be a way to use words and images to confess their faith. Invite them to add quotes from the confessions, the Bible, and their own discussions that have been meaningful during this session. Suggest that throughout the next five sessions they add expressions of faith related to the themes of unity, justice, and reconciliation.

Depart

- Read Ephesians 4:1–6.
- Say together all or part of the “We believe” affirmations in section 11.2 of the Confession of Belhar.
- Pray a closing prayer, asking God to use the Confession of 1967 and the Confession of Belhar to shape the life and faith of each person in the group.
- Extinguish the Christ candle.