

The Confession of Belhar

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	3
To the Leader	4
Session 1. Belhar History and Being a Confessional Church	5
Session 2. Article 1: A Trinitarian and Ecclesiological Confession	9
Session 3. Article 2: Unity	14
Session 4. Article 3: Reconciliation	18
Session 5. Article 4: Justice	22
Session 6. Article 5: Benediction and the Role of Confessions	26
A Few Films about Racism	31

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Published by CMP, a ministry of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Kentucky.

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

Belhar History and Being a Confessional Church

Scripture

Psalms 137; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 4:1–6; 2:11–22

Main Idea

God works for the liberation of oppressed peoples and calls the church to work for the same. When the gospel is distorted to favor the rich and powerful, the church must speak and stand with God. Confessions are one way the church proclaims what it believes and what it proposes to do to live in accord with God's will. This session focuses on confessions and their role in the life of the church, and gives historical background to the Confession of Belhar.

Teaching Points

This session invites learners to consider:

1. The biblical witness concerning injustice and God's justice.
2. Personal experiences and memories of racial injustice.
3. The role of confessions in speaking against injustice in the name of Christ.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

Hymnals with the hymn "When Israel Was in Egypt's Land"

Leader Prep

The Confession of Belhar was originally a product of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church as it protested the sin of apartheid. Just a few years later it became the confession of the Uniting Reformed Church, the reunion of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. It is a product of a conversation between the Theological Declaration of Barmen and the unjust realities of South Africa. Clearly, the Confession of

Belhar is a specific act of confession that emerged out of a specific context—a context that is non-European and non-North American.

Whether in America, expressed in slavery, or in South Africa, expressed in the racial partitioning known as apartheid, racism causes agonizing cries from the heart, heard in poetry and in spirituals that echo the well-known lament of the psalmist, “How long, O LORD, how long?” It is one thing to suffer wrong in society, but it is egregiously painful when injustice invades the church or is perpetuated by the church. This is especially so in countries with a strong Christian identity. South Africa is such a country, as is the United States. Acknowledging a Christian identity also means acknowledging a great responsibility to live into its ethical and moral dimensions.

The Confession of Belhar’s great strength is its christological foundation for the unity of the church. Racism in or by the church cannot stand when unity is understood in this way, but racism is not the only force that fragments the unity of the church. We are only too well aware of the centrifugal forces at work among us, threatening to cause us to fly apart. In this session we give heed to the scriptural basis of the church’s unity in hopes that it is salutary for our life together.

If possible, invite an accompanist to lead the hymn during Gather. As you prepare to lead this six-session study, consider incorporating scenes from films that address the topic of racism into each session. See page 31 for a list of suggested movies.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Sing “When Israel Was in Egypt’s Land” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, no. 334).
- Read Psalm 137. Invite the group members to share their feelings and observations of the psalm. Help the group recall the history of God’s people as a liberated people and God as a liberator. Ask: *Does Israel’s story of being freed by God bring you comfort? For whom is Israel’s story of a redeeming God good news? For whom is it bad news?*
- Pray:
Redeeming God, you do not desire for any of your children to suffer. As we gather to remember your saving purposes for all who are oppressed, give us minds, hearts, and wills to hear your Word and live your Word. We pray this in the name of Christ the Savior. Amen.

Head

- Read Galatians 3:28. Ask: *If this Scripture verse is the answer to a point of tension in the early church, what is the point of tension?*
- Read Ephesians 4:1–6 in the following manner:
 1. Have one person read Ephesians 4:1–6 aloud, slowly and meditatively.
 2. Spend one minute in silence as participants allow a word or image to come to them.
 3. Have another person read the text in the same manner.
 4. Spend one minute in silence as the participants reflect on the word or image that has come to them.
- Ask: *What word or image came to you during the readings? What significance might this word or image have in your understanding of the text?*
- Ask: *In what ways does Ephesians 4:1–6 speak to issues of racism and injustice? What does the unity of the church have to do with the promotion of social righteousness?*
- Read Ephesians 2:11–22. Explain to the group that this is a confession of the early church. Ask: *How does thinking of these verses as a confession influence your reading of the passage? Is this confession something to which you can say, “Amen”? Why or why not? Would you be willing to modify your life according to this confession?*

Heart

- Ask: *What do you remember or know of the civil rights movement?*
- Invite group members to describe a time when they experienced or witnessed racial injustice. Ask: *Where do you see racism in your community?*
- Lead the group in a time of prayerful reflection that names and confesses before God the sins that lead to racial injustice or division in your community.

Hands

- Dr. Holder Rich defines *status confessionis* as “a situation when the preaching and teaching of the gospel is distorted, inaccurate, or not true to the aim of Christ’s good news.” Ask: *Given this definition, what circumstance or situation do you think would necessitate a status confessionis in the church today? Where is the preaching and teaching of the gospel distorted, inaccurate, or not true to the aim of Christ’s good news today?*

- Ask: *What might you be able to do to understand more fully the issues of racial justice in our community?*
- Read the following statement of Dirk Smit, a South African theologian who was one of the principal authors of the Confession of Belhar, and invite the group to discuss its implications for the church in America:

Confession is a commentary on scripture, representing insight given to the church and presupposing risk and danger. It is born out of compulsion. It is geographically, temporally and materially limited. It always arises in a definite antithesis and conflict. It says a definite Yes only because a definite No is implied; otherwise it is no confession. It is public speech, on the basis of solid theological preparation and is intended to be heard, tested, and evaluated by others. Since there is a ‘notorious connection, even a unity, between the heresies of every age and place,’ it can be confidently expected that confessions written for another time and place, if they really express the Word of God, can again reveal and address conflicts at other times and in other places.¹

- The Reformed confessional tradition believes in the ability of one generation to bear witness to another. Christians of other times and places have something to say to us. Ask: *Given what you know about the Confession of Belhar and its history, why is it important to study it? How might this document bear witness to the church in the United States?*

Depart

- Lead the group in reading article 4 of the Confession of Belhar (found in the participant’s book) responsively.
- Pray together the prayer in the participant’s book.

1. Smit, Dirk J., “‘No other motives would give us the right’—Reflections on contextuality from a Reformed experience,” in *Christian Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Studies in Reformed Theology 8, ed. M. E. Brinkman & D. van Keulen (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), pp. 130–59.

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.”¹

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.”² Confessions help us avoid having our shared faith fade to what theologian William Placher termed “generalized warm fuzziness and social conventions.”³

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.

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.

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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.⁴ Dort states, “No church will dominate other churches, no minister other ministers, no elder or deacon other elders or deacons.”⁵

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."⁶

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.⁷

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.'"⁸

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

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

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?