

From the Heart of God



**A Study of the
Belhar Confession**

What is the Belhar Confession, and why does it matter?

In this five-session study, learn how the Belhar was born, what it has to say about unity in the church, reconciliation between Christians, and justice in the world, and how it speaks to Christians everywhere.

Visit www.crcna.org/belhar for accompanying videos and a 28-day devotional guide.

Unity
Justice
Reconciliation

From the Heart of God



A Study of the Belhar Confession

by Susan Damon

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From the Heart of God: A Study of the Belhar Confession (Revised), © 2010, 2013, Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560. All rights reserved. This study is updated from the 2010 version prepared for study of the Belhar Confession prior to Synod 2012's deliberation whether to adopt the document as a confession of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. On June 12, 2012, synod adopted the Belhar Confession as an Ecumenical Faith Declaration.

Contents

Introduction	3
Important Dates in Belhar History	4
A Statement of Introduction by the CRC and RCA	5
Original 1986 Accompanying Letter	6
The Confession of Belhar	9
Using This Study Guide	13
Session 1: The Belhar: What Is It? Why Does It Matter?	17
Session 2: The Belhar Calls for Unity	25
Session 3: The Belhar Calls for Justice	33
Session 4: The Belhar Calls Us to Reconciliation	43
Session 5: What Shall We Do with This Gift?	51

Introduction

The Belhar Confession has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. This “outcry of faith” and “call for faithfulness and repentance” was first drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, which took the lead in declaring a *status confessionis* concerning apartheid, stating that the truth of the gospel was at stake.

The Dutch Reformed Mission Church formally adopted the Belhar Confession in 1986. It is now one of the “standards of unity” of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) and several other denominations. The Belhar’s framework for confronting the sin of racism has made possible reconciliation among Reformed churches in southern Africa and has aided the process of reconciliation within the nation of South Africa and elsewhere.

The Belhar addresses three key issues of concern to all churches:

(a) unity of the church and unity among all people, (b) reconciliation within church and society, and (c) God’s justice. As one member of the URCSA has said, “We carry this confession on behalf of all the Reformed churches. We do not think of it as ours alone.”

Though the Belhar emerged from the crucible of apartheid, it makes no explicit mention of apartheid. The implications of the Belhar Confession are far wider than its original context; thus, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa has offered the Belhar Confession as a gift to the entire family of Reformed churches worldwide. Synod 2012 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America adopted the Belhar as an Ecumenical Faith Declaration. Synod 2017 recategorized the Belhar as a contemporary testimony and eliminated the Ecumenical Faith Declaration category.

In this study we explore the major themes of the Belhar Confession and ask how the Belhar speaks to us as North American Reformed Christians. The URCSA views the Belhar as both a staff for the church to lean on and a measuring stick to gauge how well the church lives up to what it professes.

As you participate in this study, ask yourself, How might the Belhar Confession guide and challenge the Christian Reformed Church to more faithfully bring the light of Christ into the darkness of our world?

Important Dates in Belhar History

- 1652 The Dutch form a station at the cape of South Africa and introduce slavery.
- 1857 The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa decides to have separate services for “colored” members (though discrimination at the Lord’s Supper is already occurring).
- 1881 The Dutch Reformed Mission Church is established by the white Dutch Reformed Church for people of color.
- 1951 The Dutch Reformed Church in Africa is established for “blacks.”
- 1978 The Dutch Reformed Mission Church and Dutch Reformed Church in Africa decide to work for unity, a goal that took sixteen years to fulfill.
- 1982 The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) declares a *status confessionis* concerning apartheid. (*Status confessionis* is a Latin term meaning “that which is foundational for belief and behavior” and must be affirmed by professing members of the church.) WARC calls apartheid a heresy and suspends the white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. Later that same year, the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (meeting in Belhar) declares a *status confessionis* regarding apartheid and drafts what becomes known as the Belhar Confession.
- 1986 The Dutch Reformed Mission Church formally adopts the Belhar Confession as its fourth standard of unity, alongside the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort.
- 2009 The Christian Reformed Church’s synod proposes to Synod 2012 the adoption of the Belhar Confession as a fourth confession of the CRC.
- 2010 The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) officially adopts the Belhar Confession as its fourth confession.
- 2012 The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) adopts “the Belhar Confession and its accompanying documents (the Accompanying Letter from the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the joint statement of the RCA and CRC) as an Ecumenical Faith Declaration,” recommending it “to the churches for study and for incorporation of its themes into their discipling and liturgical ministries” (*Acts of Synod 2012*, p. 767).

2017 Following a recommendation from Synod 2016, Synod recategorizes the Belhar Confession as a contemporary testimony. Thus, the Belhar, as a contemporary testimony, is understood as “a dynamic statement of faith that serves the CRCNA—its congregations and members—as an important statement that speaks to essential matters in a given time period. It is useful for study, faith formation, teaching, and worship” (*Acts of Synod 2017*, p. 699).

A Statement of Introduction by the CRC and the RCA

From the very beginnings of the church, often in times of crisis or threat, Christians have sought ways to say to the world, “Because of our faith in Jesus Christ, this is who we are, what we believe, and what we intend to do.” These statements of faith, including the ecumenical creeds and the historic Reformed confessions, though centuries old and far removed from their place of origin, still guide our understanding of Scripture and of faith today, and of the life they call us to live.

In the late twentieth century the leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa, like Christian leaders centuries before them, stepped forward to confront yet another critical issue that threatened the very core of the gospel message. The church and the society in which it ministered were torn by internal conflict, injustice, racism, poverty, and subjugation of the disenfranchised. From this crucible of suffering emerged the Belhar Confession, a biblically based doctrinal standard of justice, reconciliation, and unity. This confession is intended to guide not only the personal lives of God’s children but also the whole body of Christ as it speaks and lives out God’s will—“to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly” with God (Mic. 6:8).

Like the confessions that preceded it, the Belhar Confession becomes a gift from a particular expression of the church to Christians in other parts of the world—a testimony for all of God’s people in our time. South Africa is not alone in its journey with conflict, injustice, racism, poverty, and the subjugation of the disenfranchised. The history of oppression in our own countries and the reality of racism and injustice in our own time call for the voice of the Christian church to be heard with unmistakable clarity—to confess that the Lord of life, who entrusted to us the “message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19), is the Lord of our hopes and aspirations for a just and reconciled people.

Our South African brothers and sisters have asked us to join them in confession, forgiveness, and healing by formal adoption of the Belhar Confession, that we might together say it aloud and live by it. May our prayer as we respond mirror the words in the “Accompanying Letter” to be read as a preface to the confession: “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. . . .”

—Adopted by the synods of the CRC and the RCA in 2009

Original 1986 Accompanying Letter to the Belhar Confession Issued by the Moderamen of 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.

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.

Note: *The following 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 (USA).*

Confession of Belhar

September 1986

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

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 (Eph. 2:11-22);
- 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 (Eph. 4:1-16);
- 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 17:20-23);
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; 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; 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; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting

one another; 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 (Phil. 2:1-5; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; John 13:1-17; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; Eph. 4:1-6; Eph. 3:14-20; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 1 Cor. 11:17-34; Gal. 6:2; 2 Cor. 1:3-4);

- 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 (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-11; Eph. 4:7-13; Gal. 3:27-28; James 2:1-13);
- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church.

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.

3. We believe

- that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; 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 (2 Cor. 5:17-21; Matt. 5:13-16; Matt. 5:9; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21-22);

- that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God's lifegiving 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 (Eph. 4:17-6:23, Rom. 6; Col. 1:9-14; Col. 2:13-19; Col. 3:1-4:6);
- 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.

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.

4. We believe

- that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- 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;
- that God calls the church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
- that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;

- that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;
- that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;
- that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right (Deut. 32:4; Luke 2:14; John 14:27; Eph. 2:14; Isa. 1:16-17; James 1:27; James 5:1-6; Luke 1:46-55; Luke 6:20-26; Luke 7:22; Luke 16:19-31; Ps. 146; Luke 4:16-19; Rom. 6:13-18; Amos 5);
- 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;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; 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.

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.

5. **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 (Eph. 4:15-16; Acts 5:29-33; 1 Peter 2:18-25; 1 Peter 3:15-18).

Jesus is Lord.

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

Using This Study Guide: Advice for Group Leaders

Unity, reconciliation, justice: these are the central themes of the Belhar Confession. It's our prayer that as your group begins this study, each member will embrace these themes as guiding principles for your work together. We pray you will experience

- **unity**, so that disagreement is not cause for division but an opportunity to reexamine one's own position, to understand and appreciate differing viewpoints, and to practice love, respect—and unity!—despite those differences.
- **reconciliation**, so that all participants may embrace one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, turn away from past divisions, and commit, with God's help, to seeking understanding and common ground.
- **justice**, so that you allocate your time together fairly, allow everyone equal opportunity to speak, and listen to every viewpoint with respect.

Living out the Belhar Confession's principles of unity, justice, and reconciliation within your group offers possibilities for healing, personal transformation, and powerful witness in your congregation and in the world to the grace and power of God.

Course Materials

For this study, you will need the following materials:

- one copy of this study guide for each participant
- videos for sessions 1-4, available as free downloads at www.crcna.org/belhar
- for each participant or household, a free download of the devotional that accompanies this course.

You will also need a dry-erase board, chalkboard, or newsprint to use in brainstorming activities.

When additional supplies are required, they are listed in the session plans.

Tips for Getting the Most Out of This Study

- **Distribute materials early.** If at all possible, distribute the study guide and devotional to participants before the first session. Encourage everyone to complete the pre-session activities for Session 1 (reading the Belhar and its history and reflecting on the questions).
- **Prepare.** Sessions will be much more fruitful if participants come prepared. Encourage everyone to use the devotions and to spend at least half an hour on the pre-session activities. Leaders should read through the session materials in advance, select activities, and make sure they have needed materials on hand.
- **Extend a warm welcome.** Make sure everyone in your group feels welcome and included. If participants don't know each other, make time for introductions or consider wearing nametags.
- **Be flexible.** Feel free to adapt this study to the backgrounds, needs, and interests of your group and to your available time frame. Don't feel obliged to discuss every question; choose what will best engage and challenge your group.
- **Lead by example.** During group activities, leaders should be ready to "break the ice" if others are hesitant to share responses.
- **Stay on course.** Remember that the goal of the study is to engage with the themes of the Belhar Confession without getting bogged down by specific issues on which there is disagreement.
- **Be sensitive.** Take the pulse of your group as you go. If people are feeling uneasy about a particular issue, step back from the material and explore those feelings. Participants approach issues from differing backgrounds and perspectives, and your group members may have different understandings of the issues and biblical texts. Take that as positive evidence of Reformed Christians seeking to make the Belhar their own!

- **Pray!** Pray daily for the members of your group, for your group as a whole, and for other groups throughout the denomination engaged in this study. Make it a priority to pray at the beginning and end of every study group session.

Guidelines for Constructive Communication

Review these guidelines at the beginning of your first session, and perhaps at each subsequent session, to set the stage for positive dialogue:

Speak for yourself, not for others. Use “I” statements.

Do not interrupt when others are speaking.

Listen carefully to others’ viewpoints; listen to learn and to understand, not to refute.

Paraphrase what you heard another say before responding to it.

Don’t label people. Don’t single out any individual as representing a group or point of view.

Address differences and challenge behaviors and ideas. Do not question another’s motives, intentions, character, or worth.

Don’t lay blame on yourself or others.

Don’t personalize issues.

Assume that others in the group are of equally good faith and conviction.

Avoid unsubstantiated comments such as “People are saying.” Instead, offer specific facts or names to support your views.

When you disagree with someone else’s point of view, go on to say what you believe and why.

Look for points of agreement.

The purpose of dialogue is to be open to the possibility of developing a new position together and hold on to the hope inherent in continuing the conversation.

After you leave, do not identify persons when discussing what is said in the group.

—Sources: *Managing Church Conflict*, by Hugh F. Halverstadt, and “Guidelines for Dialogue with Civility” from the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism

Session 1

The Belhar: What Is It? Why Does It Matter?

Session Goals

In this session we'll think about the role of doctrinal statements in our Reformed tradition and listen as people engaged in various ministries within the CRC share their personal journeys with the Belhar.

Pre-Session Activities

- Read the introductory material and the Belhar Confession (pp. 3-12).
- Reflect: What are your expectations as you begin this study of the Belhar Confession? What would you like to know when you have finished the study? What do you hope will change, in yourself or in your church, as a result of this study?
- Respond: Which of the Belhar's three main themes (Christian unity, reconciliation, and justice) most interests you personally? Why?

Session Opening

Prayer and Song

Open your session with prayer, followed by singing or reading together a hymn focused on unity, such as "The Church's One Foundation," "We Are One in the Spirit," or "In Christ There Is No East or West" (all available in the hymnal *Lift Up Your Hearts* or by Internet search on www.YouTube.com).

Share Pre-Session Experiences

If your group received this study guide in advance, share reflections on the daily devotions and the pre-session activities. What did you learn? What most challenged you? What raised questions for further exploration?

Video

Watch the Session 1 video (available as a free download from the webpage www.crcna.org/belhar). Share what spoke to you most powerfully, and why.

In-Session Activity

Step 1

The CRC subscribes to three ecumenical creeds (creeds common to many Christians): The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. It also subscribes to three confessions (collectively called the three Forms of Unity) that are distinctively Reformed and shared by a number of Reformed denominations. Using a dry-erase board, chalkboard, or newsprint, jot down what you know about each.

Step 2

Study the charts below outlining the main features of the CRC's creeds and confessions. What are some of the things you notice?

Creed	Birthplace/Date	Context	Purpose
Apostles' Creed	Uncertain: probably in Franko-Germanic regions (c. 3rd-4th cent.) before moving southward to the Roman church	Developed as a declaratory creed summarizing the apostles' teaching	A summary of the essential teachings of the Christian faith

Nicene Creed	Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), with additions by the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381); accepted in present form at Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451); filioque (“and the son”) phrase added in A.D. 589	Developed in opposition to heresies concerning the doctrine of the Trinity and the person of Christ	A statement of the orthodox faith of the early Christian church
Athanasian Creed	In the Western (Roman) church (4th cent.); commonly ascribed to Athanasius (A.D. 293-373) but not written by him	Developed in a time of attacks on the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity and humanity of Christ	To state the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation and two-natures doctrine of Christ

Confession	Birthplace/Date	Context	Purpose
Heidelberg Catechism	Heidelberg, Germany, c. 1563	Requested by Elector Frederick III, ruler of the Palatinate province, to provide a basis for Reformed theological instruction in the church	To teach
Belgic Confession	The Netherlands (including Belgium at that time), 1561	Severe persecution of Reformed churches in the Netherlands by its then Roman Catholic government	Sent to King Philip II to protest the cruel oppression and to prove to the persecutors that Reformed Christians were not rebels but law-abiding citizens who professed true Christian doctrine according to Scripture
Canons of Dort	The Synod of Dort (1618-19) at Dordrecht, the Netherlands	Severe disagreement in the church over key issues of theology	To affirm the principal beliefs of Calvinism: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and the Perseverance of the saints (TULIP)

In 1986 the CRC adopted Our World Belongs to God as a contemporary testimony. This “testimony of faith for our times,” unique to the CRC, addresses current issues but does not have the status in the CRC of the creeds or confessions. As an indication of the ongoing nature of this testimony, it was revised in 2008 to continue addressing contemporary issues that emerge in the church.

Contemporary Testimony	Birthplace/Date	Context	Purpose
Our World Belongs to God	CRC in North America, 1986, 2008	The increasing secularization of modern life and culture	To set forth a biblical and Reformed statement of faith that also addresses contemporary issues such as racism, abortion, pollution, sexism, and human sexuality

Step 3

Compare the overviews of the creeds and confessions and Our World Belongs to God (above) with that of the Belhar Confession (below). How is the Belhar like the CRC’s confessions? How is it like Our World Belongs to God? How is it different from both?

Contemporary Testimony	Birthplace/Date	Context	Purpose
Belhar Confession	Cape Town, South Africa, in the suburb of Belhar, 1982, 1986	Unjust, racist system of government in South Africa called apartheid	In opposition to apartheid, to affirm the unity of the church, reconciliation between peoples, and God’s justice for the poor and destitute

Share

What are your expectations as you begin this study of the Belhar Confession? (If your group is large, you may want to break into smaller groups to discuss this, and then rejoin to share your responses.)

Options for Further Discussion

- What does it mean to be a “confessional church”? Name other denominations that are “confessional” and denominations that are not. How do you feel about the fact that Reformed churches, including the CRC, are confessional churches?
- The historical rallying cry of Reformed Christians is “*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*” (the church reformed and always being reformed). Some add the words “*secundum verbum Dei*” (according to the Word of God). In your view, what do these ancient words mean with respect to our confessions?
- Did you learn “the catechism” as a young person? In your opinion, does the CRC today generally place more or less emphasis on teaching/learning the confessions than in the past? How do you feel about this? What role could/should confessions play in our church today? What opportunities might the Belhar offer for greater understanding of and appreciation for our confessions in general?

Personal Reflection

What have you learned from this session? What difference might it make in your life?

Closing

Spend a few minutes in prayer (led either by the leader or by participants), asking God’s Spirit to guide your group as you seek to explore difficult issues with love and respect.

Digging Deeper

- During the coming week, read *Our World Belongs to God* in its entirety (available online at www.crcna.org/pages/our_world_main.cfm). Compare it to the Belhar Confession. How are the two statements of faith similar? How are they different?
- Learn more about the CRC’s current creeds and confessions by visiting www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs.
- Research the confessions of other denominations, both Reformed (for example, the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church[U.S.A.], and the Presbyterian Church in Canada) and non-Reformed (for example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). What commonalities do you find? What differences?
- Visit the website of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa at www.vgksa.org.za to learn more about this denomination and its life with the Belhar Confession.
- Conduct a survey at your church or among your friends, family, and acquaintances. Ask, What do you know about your denomination’s confessions? How important do you think confessions are for the church today?
- Ilan Ossendryver is an Israeli photojournalist. Here’s a brief excerpt from his writings about growing up white in South Africa:

Distinctly, I remembered the days when around my house, in the White suburbs where the quietness of the day would be broken by loud whistles and shrieks of “Run!” Then came the ugly Bedford trucks carrying police. They would brake with a screech and out would pour police with batons and whips in hands, running after terrified Blacks, mostly old women. They would be caught and violently shoved in the back of the waiting Bedfords. Then it would be quiet again until the police came around again to search for Blacks without permit-passes to be in White areas.

I remember the day I wanted to play jazz in my garage with the gardener, who was a jazz musician. When I got around to asking him to come play, he said he couldn’t because he was Black

and that according to the laws of Apartheid, it was forbidden to socialize with Blacks in White areas. The laws of racial segregation. I remember being extremely angry and confused. As a White living in South Africa, it became difficult to look into the eyes of the Blacks, the African majority ruled by the White minority.

—Ilan Ossendryver
(from a web posting at www.ic-creations.com)

As you reflect on this piece, try to visualize the setting from which the Belhar emerged. How does this narrative make you feel?

Notes

The Belhar Calls for Unity

Session Goals

In this session we'll begin to explore the central themes of the Belhar and reflect on how it speaks to us as Reformed Christians in North America.

The Belhar Confession is first and foremost a call for Christian unity. We'll examine the biblical call for unity among Christians, how the Belhar expresses that call, and how we hear that call in our own context.

Pre-Session Activities

Complete one or more of the following and be prepared to share what you have learned at your next session.

- Read Article 2 of the Belhar Confession (about Christian unity—see pp. 9-10). Rewrite this section in your own words, making reference to your own experiences of disunity and exclusion among Christians.
- List as many examples of exclusion and disunity among Christians as you can think of. Divide a piece of paper into two columns. Label the first column “same,” and list things that the examples of exclusion and disunity have in common. Label the second column “different.” What are some of the ways the examples differ from one another?
- Talk to someone from a group excluded or discriminated against because of “descent or any other human or social factor” (such as race or ethnicity) in your community. What have their experiences been? How have those experiences made them feel? What things do they wish were different? Have their experiences been different inside and outside the church?
- Draw a picture, design a graphic, or write a poem that illustrates the connection between a “gathering, protecting, and caring” God and the Christian’s pursuit of unity, reconciliation, and justice.

- One of the blessings of Christian unity is the rich gifts we receive from other Christians. Look for something from a group different from your own (racially, ethnically, or culturally) that has blessed you. It might be a song, a work of art, clothing, food, a household item, a dance, a tool, or a story. Bring it to the next session to share with your group.
- Reflect on and respond to this quote:

Human beings have an extraordinary ability and, seemingly, even a desire to break down the world into *them* and *us*. We do not know who *we* are, it seems, until we know who *they* are. And once we have identified *them*, it is open to us to disclaim responsibility for their welfare, their rights or, in extreme cases, their very existence.

Each of us inhabits a personal commonwealth, often more than one. Membership in each commonwealth defines for us those with whom we share a common dignity, common rights, and common obligations. At the root of exclusion in all its forms lies the drawing of boundaries around that commonwealth for reasons of personal comfort, economic advantage, or political power.

—from “Exclusion, Inclusion and Participation”
by David Lawrence, included in the study texts
for the 24th General Council of the World Alliance
of Reformed Churches, Accra 2004

- Think of a time when you felt excluded from others. How did it make you feel? How did you respond? How do you think a lifetime of exclusion might affect a person?

Session Opening

Reading and Prayer

Read together Articles 1 and 2 of the Belhar Confession. Then pray together this prayer for guidance:

O God, direct us in the way we should go. Sometimes we think we know the way, but we are following only our own selfish desires or our foolish impulses. Give us the certainty of Jesus and the will to follow in his footsteps. When we turn aside, warn and correct us. When we are in the right path, encourage us and keep us from stumbling. Give guidance to those who guide us, and may we never disappoint any who look to us for direction, but move steadily forward in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

—Purd E. Deitz, 1897-1987, from *Prayers from the Reformed Tradition*, compiled and edited by Diane Karay Tripp, Witherspoon Press, Louisville, Ky., © 2001

Share Pre-Session Experiences

Ask the group to share their reflections on the accompanying devotions and the results of the pre-session activities of the past week. What did you learn? What most challenged you? What raised questions for further exploration?

Video

Watch the Session 2 video (download from www.crcna.org/belhar). Share what spoke to you most powerfully, and why.

In-Session Activities

Choose from among these activities as your timeframe allows.

Activity 1

Read, reflect on, and discuss the following words from Article 2 of the Belhar Confession:

“ . . . that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is a 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 17:20, 23).”

- What phrases particularly stand out for you?
- How would your congregation look different if it perfectly maintained “visible and active unity”? How would the CRC look different? How would the church of Christ universal look different?
- It has been said that 11:00 a.m. Sunday morning is the most racially segregated hour of the week in the United States. Do you agree? If so, what might be the cause? How does the Belhar speak to this North American reality?
- What do you think about the fact that there are so many Christian denominations? Are denominations always an expression of disunity? How might there be both diversity and unity in the church?
- In North America, particularly in the United States, there is increasing political polarization between left and right. How has this affected the Christian church? How could Christians combat this cultural threat to Christian unity?
- Do North American individualism and the emphasis on personal and religious freedom contribute to Christian disunity? If so, how?

Activity 2

Read and discuss the following words from Article 2 of the Belhar Confession:

“Therefore, we reject any doctrine . . . which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.”

- What factors, stated or implied, determine membership in your congregation? Are there groups that would not be accepted or feel comfortable in your church because of their “descent or any other human or social factor”? How could your congregation more earnestly pursue visible Christian unity? What first steps could you take?

Activity 3

The following quotation is from the Belhar Report from the CRC Black and Reformed Conference of April 23-25, 2009:

In many instances, blacks and people of color have experienced discrimination, racism, and injustice in our denomination. Often the agencies of the CRCNA have practiced institutional racism. Blacks and people of color have been hurt and embittered by these experiences, but have elected to stay as members of the CRCNA in obedience to God’s calling to our denomination.

Now more than ever before, the CRCNA needs to have serious conversation about unity. . . .

—from the “Belhar Report from the Black and Reformed Conference,” 2009; submitted by Dr. Robert J. Price Jr. and the Black Planning Committee

- What would it take for the stories of people of color to be shared freely—and heard—within the CRC?

- How might the Belhar Confession help us find greater racial openness and unity?

Options for Further Discussion

- The Belhar Confession asserts that unity is both a gift and an obligation. List words that come to mind when you think of “gift.” In what ways might unity be a gift? List words that come to mind when you think of “obligation”? In what ways is unity an obligation?
- *Ubuntu* is an African word meaning “I am who I am because of who we all are.” It describes a sense of community that shapes all who are part of the community or society; the concept of *ubuntu* includes helpfulness, care, respect, sharing, trust, accountability, unselfishness, and more to enable and build up the community around you. List the relationships and associations that define who your congregation is. Do the same for your denomination. How does the concept of *ubuntu* differ from North American individualism? What are the implications of this for unity in the church?
- The Belhar states that unity is a reality “which the people of God must be continually built up to attain.” Read Ephesians 4:11-13 together. Then, on newsprint or a dry-erase board, list the various leadership roles and groups in your congregation (pastor, Sunday school teacher, choir director, evangelism committee, council, etc.). Ask group members to think of how each of these leaders or groups could help your congregation grow toward greater unity with other Christians in your community, especially with congregations that have a different ethnic composition than yours. Be as specific as possible. Suggestion: Have someone record your group’s ideas to share with your church leaders.

- Why have Christians perennially had so much trouble honoring the request of Jesus as stated in John 17:20-23? Jesus prays here for the unity of all who believe in him. List examples of how Christian squabbling and disunity have damaged the cause of Christ in the world and in your own denomination, congregation, and community. List as many causes of disunity as you can.

Personal Reflection

What have you learned during this session? What difference will it make?

Closing

Ask participants to read the following prayer in unison:

Lord, as you have taught us, we bow down before you in all humility, gentleness, and patience, supporting each other with love and trying to keep the unity of the spirit by the bonds of peace, that we may become “one body and one spirit,” according to our common calling and vocation. With one voice, repenting of our divisions, we commit ourselves to working together for reconciliation, peace, and justice, and we stand together in imploring you: help us to live as your disciples, overcoming selfishness and arrogance, hatred and violence: give us the strength to forgive. Inspire our witness in the world, that we might foster a culture of dialogue and be bearers of the hope which your gospel has implanted in us. Make us instruments of your peace, so that our homes and communities, our parishes, churches, and nations might resonate more fully with the peace you have long desired to bestow upon us. Amen.

—from Syriac liturgy used by Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches in Aleppo, Syria. Liturgies for Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2004, www.oikoumene.org

Digging Deeper

- To learn about some of the organizations working for greater unity among Christians, explore the websites of ecumenical bodies such as the World Communion of Reformed Churches (formed from the merger of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council), the World Council of Churches, the National Association of Evangelicals, the Canadian Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and Christian Churches Together in the USA.
- Learn more about Reformed/Roman Catholic dialogue by searching www.crcna.org. See also “Was the Reformation Necessary?” by Ronald J. Feenstra in the October 2009 issue of *The Banner* at www.thebanner.org.
- Complete this statement: “I find it hardest to love Christians who . . .” Reflect on this and use your reflections as an opportunity for repentance and change.

Notes

The Belhar Calls for Justice

Session Goals

The Belhar Confession speaks of God as a God of justice—a God who is especially present to those who suffer as a result of poverty and injustice. In this session we explore the biblical grounds for the Belhar’s assertions and what God’s concern for justice might mean for us as North American Christians.

“The Confession of Belhar closes a loop in Reformed confessions by coming to terms with the revelation of God in relation to the realities of social justice. In this context it confesses that God is revealed as one who brings justice and true peace among human beings. Further, that in a world of injustice and enmity, God, in a special way, is revealed as the God of those who suffer in general and also of those who suffer as a result of poverty and injustices. In this addition to the standards of faith, the Confession of Belhar has made a significant contribution to the content of faith in the Reformed community at large.”

—Rev. Dr. Russel Botman, vice-chancellor of the University of Stellenbosch and executive chair of the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa, in an address to RCA Synod 2007

Pre-Session Activities

Complete one or more of the following.

- Reread the Belhar Confession, focusing especially on Article 4. Compare the language of Article 4 with the words of Isaiah 1:10-20; 3:13-15; 10:1-4; 11:1-5; 26:1-6; 29:13-21; 42:1-9; 58:1-12; 61:1-3. Write down phrases that are similar. Read the biblical references listed in Article 4. How well do they support the assertions of the Belhar?
- Consider: How would you define justice, based on your reading of Scripture (for example, the Isaiah passages above) and the Belhar Confession?

- Do a print media search. Clip magazine and newspaper articles and photos reporting unjust situations in your community and your world, and bring them to your next session. Try to include as many types of injustice as you can (racial, economic, social, interpersonal, educational, employment, gender, political, medical, housing, ecclesiastical, etc.). Note the effects of these injustices in the lives of those directly affected and in the wider community. How do those who are unjustly treated respond? What connections do you see between injustice and disunity?
- Identify a justice issue in your community that concerns you. Research local groups that are trying to address the issue, and talk with people involved in the groups if possible. How are the groups addressing the issue? In what ways could you help? Obtain pamphlets or other informational materials about the groups to share at your next Belhar study session. If you are already involved in a justice group, prepare to share that group’s work. How has your involvement changed you? What results have you seen? What have been your joys and frustrations? How could others become involved?
- If you like statistics, research statistics related to some form of injustice, locally or globally. If possible, present the results to your study group in a visual format (chart, graph, or diagram).
- Look for a true story—preferably from your community—about a person or persons whose lives have been affected by some form of injustice. Or look for a story about people whose lives have been changed for the better through the efforts of Christians working for justice. Share the story with your group.
- Reflect on opportunity and privilege in your life. List opportunities you have had that people who are less privileged do not receive. What difference have those opportunities made in your life? What are some of the consequences of lack of opportunity for the poor?
- In Luke 4:16-21 we see that Jesus embraced the Jewish prophetic tradition that saw God strongly as a God of justice who was particularly concerned with the plight of the lowly. The Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) gives us clear insight into what Jesus learned at his mother’s knee. Jesus grew up as a Jew suffering under Roman oppression. Compare/contrast this with the family and culture into which you

were born. How has your upbringing influenced your concern for justice and your involvement in justice work (or your lack thereof)?

Session Opening

Reading and Prayer

Read Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55, followed by a prayer asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that you may discuss difficult issues with honesty, respect, and love.

Share Pre-Session Experiences

Share reflections on the accompanying devotions and the results of the pre-session activities of the past week. What did you learn? What most challenged you? What raised questions for further exploration?

Video

Watch the Session 3 video (download from www.crcna.org/belhar). Share what spoke to you most powerfully, and why.

In-Session Activities

Choose from among these activities as your timeframe allows.

Activity 1

Try this imaginative activity. Ask someone in your group to read Luke 4:14-30 aloud slowly. Then ask them to read the passage again, pausing throughout so you can picture in your mind the events of the passage as they unfold. After the activity, invite group members to share their experience.

As you listen, what impresses you about Jesus?

What is the source of his power?

Does anything about this passage make you nervous or uncomfortable?

Why do you think Jesus chose this Isaiah passage at the beginning of his earthly ministry?

Option: Read the passage together again, imagining Jesus in your own context.

Who are the people about whom Isaiah speaks (the poor, the prisoners, the blind, the oppressed) in your community?

Are some of these people present in your congregation?

If not, picture them in your mind as they enter the place where Jesus is about to speak to you and your congregation. Watch them find seats. How do the people in your congregation respond? Do you sense that some are offended or made uncomfortable by the presence of these "Isaiah people"? How do *you* respond as they enter?

Listen as Jesus reads the Isaiah passage, and observe the various reactions of those gathered. What rebuke do you hear from Jesus? What challenge? What encouragement and hope?

How do the “Isaiah people” respond to Jesus’ words? How do you respond?

What happens when Jesus has finished speaking? Imagine how this story would end in your congregation.

After the activity invite group members to share their experiences/ responses.

Activity 2

What is the legitimate role within society of the institutional church (the universal body of Christ as manifested in denominations, local congregations, and so on)? Specifically, should the institutional church speak to the public sphere? If so, how? Discuss the following questions:

- How specific should the institutional church become in addressing racism and other justice issues? Should it remain silent on issues in the public sphere, should it restrict itself to broad proclamations of biblical principles, or can it legitimately endorse or oppose specific policies, parties, and leaders?
- Is there a place within the institutional church for debate on political justice issues such as affirmative action, health care, immigration, and national defense? If so, at what level—individual conversations? Small groups within congregations? Classes? Synod?
- Many Reformed Christians believe that Christians (as the church in the sense of the body of Christ) should indeed be involved in politics and social justice, but as part of separate, non-church organizations and not under the umbrella of the institutional church. What arguments can be made for and against such an approach?

- What are the pros and cons of Christians working for justice with interfaith or secular organizations versus strictly Christian organizations? What must people have in common in order to work together? Common purpose? Common motivation? Common faith?

Options for Further Discussion

- “God wills that each [person] is to provide for the needy according to the extent of his means so that no [one] has too much and no [one] has too little.” Those are the words of John Calvin. Calvin further states, “Let this, therefore, be our rule for generosity and beneficence: We are the stewards of everything God has conferred on us by which we are to help our neighbor, and are required to render account of our stewardship. Moreover, the only right stewardship is that which is tested by the rule of love. Thus it will come about that we shall not only join zeal for another’s benefit with care for our own advantage, but shall subordinate the latter to the former” (*Institutes* 3.7.5). Calvin is speaking in this passage about what is sometimes called benevolence or charity—individual Christians sharing what they have with those who have less. List ways in which benevolence is different from justice as described in the Belhar Confession. How are benevolence and justice related?
- The Belhar asserts 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.” Ask someone to read those words aloud several times, slowly. Then consider the following questions:

How might a person who is destitute, poor, and wronged respond to that statement? How might the wealthy and privileged respond?

What are your own feelings about the Belhar's assertion? Do you believe that assertion is supported by Scripture? Explain.

Would taking this statement seriously change the ministry priorities of your congregation? Your denomination? If so, how?

- Steve Robbins, a diversity and inclusion speaker, once stated, "Justice requires that those who suffer least speak up the most." How do you respond to that?

Personal Reflection

What have you learned during this session? What difference will it make?

Closing

"Canto de esperanza/Song of Hope"

This Argentinian folk song reminds us that, although Christ has come already and God's full reign is imminent, we are still waiting, struggling, praying, and celebrating as we work faithfully together—in hope—for the world God loves.

Dios de la esperanza, danos gozo y paz!
Al mundo en crisis, habla tu verdad.
Dios de la justicia, mándanos tu luz.
Luz y esperanza en la oscuridad,
Oremos por la paz,
cantemos de tu amor,
luchemos por la paz,
fieles a ti, Señor.

May the God of hope go with us every day,
filling all our lives with love and joy and peace.
May the God of justice speed us on our way,
bringing light and hope to every land and race.
Praying, let us work for peace,
singing, share our joy with all,
working for a world that's new,
faithful when we hear Christ's call.

—Words: Spanish traditional, tr. Alvin Schutmaat.

A Prayer for Justice Based on the Belhar Confession

Lord our God, you have revealed yourself as One who wishes to bring
about justice and true peace among people;
In a world that looks away from injustice,
You cast your eyes on the destitute, the poor, and the wronged;
You have called us to follow you,
to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release for the captives
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
and to proclaim the time of your blessing.
Be present with your church, Lord, as we respond to your call.
Open our eyes to the downtrodden.
Fill us with compassion for the plight of the alien, the refugee, and the
immigrant.
Lead us into ministries that help orphans and widows.
Give us courage to block the paths of the ungodly who exploit the poor.
Set us free from pious exercises that prevent us from the true worship
you choose:
sharing bread with the hungry,
sharing homes with the homeless,
sharing clothes with the naked,
sharing hearts with our own kin.
So may your justice roll down like waters, your righteousness like an
ever-flowing stream.
Lead our footsteps to stand with the poor, that we might stand with you.

Have mercy, O God:
Scatter the proud,
Put down the mighty,
Lift up the lowly,
Fill up the hungry,
And send the rich away empty-handed.
[end with the Lord's Prayer]

—by Paul Janssen, a prayer based on the “justice” section of the Belhar. From resources at www.rca.org.

Digging Deeper

- Some have charged that the Belhar reflects liberation theology. Do some research on this topic at a local library or via Internet.
- Visit www.crcna.org to find out what various agencies and groups within the CRC are doing to promote justice. Check out World Renew at www.worldrenew.net; the Committee for Contact with the Government (Canada) at www.crcna.org/pages/ccg.cfm; and the Office of Social Justice at www.crcjustice.org. Also visit www.crcna.org/disability to learn about efforts involving persons with disabilities, and www.friendship.org to learn about Friendship Ministries for persons with intellectual disabilities. How could you support or get involved in the work of some of these groups?
- Visit the World Communion of Reformed Churches website at www.wcrc.ch for information on justice efforts and position statements of Reformed-family churches.
- Learn more about the legacy of John Calvin with respect to economic justice on the World Communion of Reformed Churches website (www.wcrc.ch); click on Archives, then on WCRC, then on Theological Journal: Reformed World, and then on Volume 57, No. 4, December 2007 (“John Calvin: What Is His Legacy?”).

- Learn more about the CRC’s work in the area of restorative justice (go to www.crcna.org and use the search function). What are the principles of restorative justice, and how does restorative justice differ from retributive justice? How does restorative justice contribute to “freeing the prisoner”?
- Research the Barmen Declaration (1934), a confession written by the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany that formed in opposition to the Nazi-supported German-Christian movement. One of its main purposes was to establish a confessional consensus among Reformed, Lutheran, and United churches in that day. How does the Barmen Declaration compare to the Belhar Confession?

Notes

The Belhar Calls Us to Reconciliation

Session Goals

Christians, the people reconciled to God, are called to be agents of reconciliation in the world. In this session we'll look at how reconciliation opens the way to unity and how it cannot occur without the restoration of justice, whether in our relationship with God, with other people, or in the transformation of society.

Pre-Session Activities

Complete one or more of the following.

- Reread the Belhar Confession, focusing on Article 3, which deals with reconciliation. Jot down words and phrases that you find especially meaningful. Take time to read the Scripture texts used to support the Belhar's assertions. Complete this sentence: "Because I have been reconciled to God through the sacrifice of Christ . . ."
- Reflect on these words from Article 3 of the Belhar: ". . . God's lifegiving 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." Think of a situation or issue that causes conflict in your congregation. Then imagine what it might look like if your congregation lived in "a new obedience" in this situation. How might your congregation's obedience "open new possibilities of life for society and the world"? What do "God's lifegiving Word and Spirit" have to do with this?
- Reflect on the following questions:

Think of a time when you found yourself attempting to rationalize or justify sin in your own life.

What sorts of things motivate people who are Christian to justify sinful behavior, even using Scripture to do so?

How is South African apartheid similar to and different from slavery and segregation in the United States and mistreatment of Native peoples in North America?

- John de Gruchy is a professor of Christian studies at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. In his book *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, de Gruchy explores the relationship between justice and reconciliation, using South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a case study. Look at de Gruchy's elements of the reconciliation process (see box below). Think of an example of a failure of reconciliation in your own experience (personal life, congregation, or community). Imagine how de Gruchy's process could be applied in that situation. Pray for the leading and power of the Holy Spirit to take the first step.

Elements of the Reconciliation Process

- Create space within which the process of reconciliation can take place, a place in which victim and perpetrator can speak face-to-face.
- Tell the truth about the past.
- Listen to the "sound of fury," those actions of vengeance that express legitimate rage rather than pardon.
- Recognize that victims have the right to decide about and pronounce forgiveness. This helps to restore the balance of power between perpetrator and victim.

—compiled based on information in chapter 5 of *Reconciliation* by John W. de Gruchy (Augsburg Fortress, 2002)

- Go to the CRC's website at www.crcna.org to find out what is being done in our denomination to promote racial understanding and reconciliation.
- If you are a white person, talk with people of color: How have they experienced exclusion and discrimination in society and in the

church? How free do they feel to share their experiences and feelings with respect to racism? Where do they feel safe, and where not? What makes a place safe for honest sharing, and what makes it unsafe? How could the number of safe places be increased, especially in the church? If you are a person of color, reflect on these questions and share your answers with your group.

- Reflect: What would happen in your congregation if persons of color or other excluded groups began to express their pain and anger? Could your congregation deal with it in a way that healed rather than further alienated people? Find out what resources are available to churches in your area that want to work for racial reconciliation.
- In *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, Peggy McIntosh states: “As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.” Go online to learn more about white privilege. How has your life been affected, positively or negatively, by white privilege? How can white privilege be an obstacle to racial reconciliation?
- The Belhar states in Article 3 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.” How do these words speak to the increasing polarization of Christians in North America (on social, environmental, and political issues)? Do they speak also to the reality that the Christian church in North America is still largely segregated by race?

Session Opening

Reading

Ask for a volunteer to read the following paraphrase of Article 3 of the Belhar Confession:

We believe

that God has entrusted the church with the good news that we have been reconciled in and through Jesus Christ;

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 witnesses by what it says and by what it does to the new heaven and the new earth, where righteousness dwells;

that through the lifegiving work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, God has conquered the powers of sin and death, and so, also, of alienation and hatred, bitterness and enmity;

that Christ through his Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience, obedience that can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;

that when those who proclaim the message of reconciliation nevertheless separate people by race, promoting and perpetuating alienation, hatred and enmity . . . the credibility of this message of reconciliation is seriously affected, and the beneficial work of this message is obstructed;

that anyone who attempts to justify racial separation by appealing to the gospel and is not prepared to venture on the road to obedience and reconciliation, but because of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief denies that the gospel has the power to reconcile, that person holds to false doctrine—which doctrine we reject.

Share Pre-Session Experiences

Share reflections on the devotional readings and the results of the pre-session activities of the past week. What did you learn? What most challenged you? What raised questions for further exploration?

Video

Watch the Session 4 video (download from www.crcna.org/belhar). Share what spoke to you most powerfully, and why.

In-Session Activities

Choose from among these activities as your timeframe allows.

Activity 1

Allow time for reflection on the following question: What examples of non-reconciliation and hatred have you seen or heard of within your church and your community?

- Share your examples.
- When all have had a chance to share, invite participants to reflect silently on the situations named.
- Have someone read the paraphrased version of Article 3 of the Belhar Confession (p. 46). To the words “nevertheless separate people by race” add the issues you have identified together.
- End this activity with a time of prayer. Invite participants to pray for their situation during the coming week and to find one small thing they can do to promote healing and reconciliation.

Activity 2

Consider the following quotes:

“Acts of vengeance and retribution are the sounds of fury, an expression of righteous anger against those who undermine or destroy human life and social well-being . . . there is a sense in which the desire for vengeance must be seen as a blessed rage for justice, blessed because it is a divine call to repentance and reparation before it is too late” (de Gruchy in *Reconciliation*).

“The paradox is that the single-minded pursuit of justice can lead to destructive vengeance, just as the pursuit of reconciliation without justice perpetuates evil” (de Gruchy in *Reconciliation*).

“If the oppressors are willing to say, ‘I am sorry,’ and to make what restitution is possible, even if it is largely token and symbolic, then creative justice becomes possible through the generosity of the victim” (Duncan Forrester in *Christian Justice and Public Policy*).

“. . . forgiveness enables those who forgive to overcome their bitterness and redeem their future, and those who sinned against them to recover their own humanity” (de Gruchy in *Reconciliation*).

Think about situations involving injustice and vengeance in your community and around the world. Using de Gruchy’s elements of reconciliation (see p. 44), discuss what would need to happen to restore not only justice but also unity. Why is restoring justice not enough to restore unity? Why is it important that a statement focusing on Christian unity should also address reconciliation and justice?

Options for Further Discussion

- In *Reconciliation*, de Gruchy describes “covenanting” as the sequel to the reconciliation process: “Covenanting implies accepting responsibility for the past and committing to participation in its healing, sharing together in the task of restoring justice in the present, and keeping hope alive for greater reconciliation in the future.” How could “covenanting” be used to move the CRC toward racial reconciliation and unity? Who would the covenanting partners be? What might the elements of the covenant be?
- On a dry-erase board or newsprint, list local or global situations in which the behavior of Christians, whether internal fighting and disunity or discrimination and injustice against others, has damaged the credibility of the gospel. *Option:* If you have a world map, place stickers on each of the locations where Christians have brought dishonor to Christ. Next, name Christian people and groups who have, by their actions, borne witness to the light of Christ.

Personal Reflection

What have you learned in this session? What difference will it make in your life?

Closing

Conclude with a time of prayer, asking God to reconcile all people—not only those within the body of Christ, but also all nations. Think of nations that have experienced great division, that have seen boundaries redrawn, such as Korea, Serbia, and Sudan. Think of communities that have become divided in various other ways. Pray that the Prince of Peace, our Savior, will come to bless all nations and peoples with the reconciliation and restoration of his kingdom.

Digging Deeper

- Develop a readers' theater presentation based on Article 3 of the Belhar Confession (or the paraphrase at the beginning of this session) for use in your congregation's worship. (*Option:* Accompany the reading with drama to suggest applications of the Belhar's affirmations to your context.)
- Learn more about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. What were its principles and processes? What difference has it made in that country? Where else has this model been applied? If you did research on restorative justice for Session 3, in what ways are the principles of the TRC similar to the principles of restorative justice?
- De Gruchy comments that many Christian churches lack a sacrament of confession or penance (Protestants typically recognize only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper). He wonders about the consequences of that in the life of a church. Research the meaning of sacraments in the Reformed tradition and in traditions in which confession and penance are sacraments (for example, the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches). Do you think de Gruchy's question

warrants further consideration? Might confession, if elevated to the level of sacrament, strengthen reconciliation, particularly racial reconciliation, and unity within the church? Explain.

- Read *Hand in Hand: Helping Children Embrace Diversity* (second edition) (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2009).

Notes

What Shall We Do with This Gift?

Session Goals

Because the use or application of the Belhar Confession in the life of the church is far broader than its original context, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) has offered the Belhar Confession as a gift to the worldwide Reformed community. By way of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the URCSA has asked Reformed churches around the world to consider adopting the Belhar Confession. As stated in the introduction to this guide, the Christian Reformed Church in North America adopted the Belhar Confession as an Ecumenical Faith Declaration and recommends it “to the churches for study and for incorporation of its themes into their discipling and liturgical ministries” (*Acts of Synod 2012*, p. 767).

In what ways can we apply the issues of unity, justice, and reconciliation, as outlined for us in the Belhar, into our lives today so that we can help to transform the lives of people and communities around us in today’s world?

Pre-Session Activities

Complete one or more of the following.

- Read Isaiah 6:6-13 and think about the following questions:

In this passage, the angel of God purifies Isaiah by touching a hot coal to his lips before calling him to service. Why?

As you have progressed through this study, what parts of the Belhar Confession have been hot coals in your life?

God sent Isaiah to call the people to repentance and healing. The response? Dull hearing, closed eyes, and callous hearts. What must we do to avoid a similar result when we hear God’s

call in our lives? To what is God calling you through this discussion? To what do you think God is calling the CRC?

- Revisit and reflect on the background and historical material about the Belhar Confession at the beginning of this study guide and consider how this document can enrich the CRC’s witness today.
- Read and reflect on the following quotes. Then note the things that stand out most for you from your reading and reflection. Be prepared to share these at your next session.

“Like the confessions that preceded it, the Belhar Confession becomes a gift from a particular expression of the church to Christians in other parts of the world—a testimony for all of God’s people in our time. South Africa is not alone in its journey with conflict, injustice, racism, poverty, and the subjugation of the disenfranchised. The history of oppression in our own countries, and the reality of racism and injustice in our own time call for the voice of the Christian church to be heard with unmistakable clarity—to confess that the Lord of life, who entrusted to us the ‘message of reconciliation’ (2 Cor. 5:19), is the Lord of our hopes and aspirations for a just and reconciled people” (from “A Statement of Introduction by the CRC and the RCA,” p. 5).

“The fact that this confession deals with a very specific context at a very specific time in history, with reference to a very specific land, ironically gives it greater significance for the worldwide church. This is because it is not theory, but a statement of truth arising out of a very real life situation. At the same time, we must say that its contextual nature means we cannot just take the Belhar Confession as it is to use for our [Palestinian] situation, which reflects yet another context. This is the work of the Holy Spirit—to help us to take the Word of God spoken in the Belhar Confession and help us articulate it in a new way for our context” (Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, from an address to the RCA General Synod 2004).

“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 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” (from the original accompanying letter to the Belhar Confession issued by the moderamen [delegates] of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa—see pp. 7-8).

“[The Belhar Confession] functions in the Uniting Church as an instrument for profound self-examination, to help determine whether the church really lives by the faith it proclaims” (Dr. Seth Petikoe, URCSA, in an address to the RCA General Synod 2002).

Session Opening

Song

“Thuma Mina/Send Me, Lord” (*Lift Up Your Hearts*, 945; *Sing! A New Creation*, 280)

This song, which appears in different versions throughout South Africa, is essential to the worship of many denominations. The musical style is a synthesis of traditional Western hymns and the popular township sounds of South African urban areas.

Reading

Read aloud together the CRC’s mission and vision statements:

Our Mission

As people called by God,
We gather to praise God, listen to him, and respond.
We nurture each other in faith and obedience to Christ.
We love and care for one another as God’s people.
We commit ourselves to serve and to tell others about Jesus.
We pursue God’s justice and peace in every area of life.

Our Vision

The Christian Reformed Church is a diverse family of healthy congregations, assemblies, and ministries expressing the good news of God’s kingdom that transforms lives and communities worldwide.

Share Pre-Session Experiences

Share reflections on the daily devotions and the results of the pre-session activities of the past week. What did you learn? What most challenged you? What raised questions for further exploration?

In-Session Activities

Choose from among these activities as your timeframe allows.

Activity 1

Distribute index cards to group members. On one side of the card, write one thing you have learned from your study of the Belhar Confession that gave you joy. On the other side of the card, write one thing you learned that caused you anger or sorrow. Share what you’ve written, if comfortable doing so.

Activity 2

Create a list of ways you could use the Belhar Confession in your own congregation. For each item, identify a person or persons in your congregation who could make it happen. What steps would need to be taken next?

Activity 3

Create a list of ways the CRC could make use of the Belhar Confession in the life of the denomination. How would doing those things help to change the CRC?

Activity 4

Make a list of things you want the rest of your congregation to know about the Belhar Confession and about your experience with the Belhar

study. Assign someone from your group to communicate these things to your congregation, perhaps through your church's newsletter.

Share

What has made the greatest impact on you in this study? What will change in your life because of what you have learned? How do you hope to make a difference in your congregation and in your community?

Closing

Close this final session by reading together these words from the Belhar Confession and praying as a group.

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. . . .

Jesus is Lord.

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

Prayer

God of the church, guide our denomination, its congregations, its leaders, and its assemblies in discerning your will for the ways we confess our faith today. As we give thanks for the stirring confession of faith wrung from the struggles of the church in South Africa, help us understand how we can best use this gift in the Christian Reformed Church today. Above all, Lord, inspire in us a renewed commitment to seek unity, justice, and reconciliation in our church and in our world. Amen.

Digging Deeper

- Reflect on opportunities the Belhar Confession presents for church educators, such as

developing a greater understanding of and appreciation for confessions in general and the CRC's confessions in particular.

understanding the biblical and theological basis for Christian social action and justice initiatives.

learning more about the worldwide Reformed family of churches.

- Write a song, prayer, litany, or responsive reading based on the Belhar Confession. Use it in your congregation's worship, and consider sending it to the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship.
- Write an article on what your congregation is doing in response to the Belhar Confession and publish it in your church newsletter.
- Decide on at least one concrete thing you can begin to do regularly to live out the truths of the Belhar Confession in your own life.

Bonds of Peace

Gathered from all places, many homes and lands,
Many tongues and races: can we understand?
Learning common language, seeking one accord,
Time to hear each other, time to end discord.

Refrain

May your Spirit guide us, may we come to see:
Bonds of peace will keep us in your unity.

Let's keep peace among us, as we walk through life.
Set aside the conflicts, set aside the strife.
Nourish all God's people, give them room to grow,
Offer living water and let mercy flow.

With our hearts wide open, to communion called:
One God of many, one Lord of all,
One church, one Spirit, one cup, one bread,
One font, one body, to the table led.

Sharing our resources we can reach worldwide;
We will work for justice for those long denied.
"What can we accomplish? We are just a few."
Then we hear God's answer: "It must start with you."

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