

# From the Heart of God



**28 Devotional Readings  
on the Belhar Confession**

The Belhar Confession addresses the themes of unity, reconciliation between Christians worldwide, and the justice God desires in the world.

This devotional helps you focus on those three themes with 28 daily Scripture readings, meditations, and suggested prayers.

Unity  
Justice  
Reconciliation

# From the Heart of God



## 28 Devotional Readings on the Belhar Confession

by **Reginald Smith, Marvin J. Hofman,  
and Kathy Vandergrift**

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# The Belhar Confession

September 1986

*Note: This 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 (U.S.A.).*

**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, prac-

tice 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);
- 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 forever and ever.

## Introduction

Like all other confessional statements, the Belhar arose as a statement of faith in response to a particular situation—in this case, the experience of fellow believers in South Africa. This is the first time that a confession has come from the testimony of Reformed Christians outside of the European and North American context.

These devotions are reflections on the biblical themes contained in the Belhar Confession: unity, reconciliation, and justice. The themes of the Belhar Confession resonate with scriptural teaching. Unity is God's gift to the church and is rooted in Christ. Proclaiming the message of reconciliation is the core ministry of the church because of what Christ accomplished on the cross and in the power of the resurrection. Acting justly is the standard of the church's conduct because our God passionately desires justice for all creation.

Unity, reconciliation, and justice are values for the church in all times and all places and for all people who seek to follow Jesus and live as his disciples. Our calling—indeed, our privilege—is to live out these values in the whole of our being and to observe these values in the totality of God's creation.

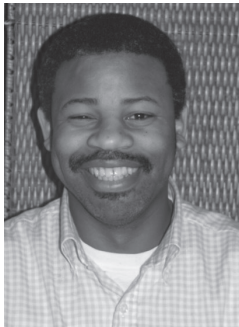
It is our hope and prayer that the Spirit of the living God will fall afresh on the church so that together we may act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our Lord and Savior.

—Peter Borgdorff, executive director emeritus of the  
Christian Reformed Church in North America

# Unity

**“We believe that unity is . . . both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ.”**

—Belhar Confession



The following devotional readings are written by Dr. Reginald Smith, senior pastor of Roosevelt Park Community Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

# Finding Common Ground

**Read: Psalm 133:1**

*“How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!”*

Sometimes it’s hard to believe that others don’t like the same things you like. Psychologists have a name for this phenomenon: they call it “other minds theory.” Author Malcolm Gladwell explains in *What the Dog Saw and Other Adventures*, “One-year-olds think that if they like Goldfish crackers, then Mommy and Daddy must like Goldfish crackers, too: [children] have not grasped the idea that what is inside their heads is different from what is inside everyone else’s head” (Little, Brown and Co., 2009, p. ix).

Finding common ground doesn’t get easier as we get older. There are so many things that can divide us. But for Christians the world over, there’s a sure way to find unity: by worshiping the one and only God together.

As King David traveled to the temple with other pilgrims, he noticed something marvelous: people were coming together out of love for the God who had knitted twelve tribes into one people. David heard their unifying stories of pain, deliverance, and God’s tender mercies. They all found common ground in the God who had kept them safe through many trials.

That same God keeps us today, and is still working to bring us back to the truth that Christians all over the world belong to God, are saved by Jesus Christ, and have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As the Belhar Confession states, “unity is . . . both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ.” May we all experience the blessings of God as we live, work, and worship as one people.

**Prayer**

Dear Jesus, we find all kinds of reasons for not working in unity. Open our eyes to see that our common ground is found in you alone. Amen.

# The Ministry of Walking

## Read: Ephesians 4:1-5

*“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”*

Author Eugene Peterson and his wife were walking near a pond in Pittsburgh. A man riding a bike passed them but then stopped and waited for them to catch up. The man asked a strange question that caught the Petersons off-guard: “How long have you been married?” Peterson sheepishly blurted out, “Thirty-three years.” The man shot back, “I knew it. Do you realize that you walk in perfect step with one another? . . . My wife and I have been married five years and we haven’t got it down yet. We are always just micro-seconds off” (*Practice Resurrection*; Eerdmans, 2009, p. 179).

It takes patience and years of practice to learn to walk together. Perhaps that’s one thing Paul needed to learn.

Paul loved speed. Soon after he arrived in one city he was off to the next. But Paul was reminded that others were on the journey with him. He had to make every effort to walk in unity. In his letter to the Ephesians, he asks them to do the same.

We often walk without regard for our brothers and sisters. We bump into them carelessly or insist on walking ahead and leaving them behind. But the Spirit demands that we leave no one behind. The Spirit insists that we make every effort to keep our unity. Walking together is the best picture of maturity we can show the world. Just ask an old married couple.

## Prayer

Dear Jesus, help me to resist the temptation of running ahead of unity for the sake of my own goals and aspirations. Teach me to slow down and walk with all my brothers and sisters in the unity of the Spirit. Amen.

# Making Jesus Smile

## Read: John 17:20-23

*“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one. . . .”*

In 1994 I moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to pastor two churches that had merged into one. The two churches had different histories and identities. As a result, the “unified” congregation fought over things we believed were important. We fought over worship style, ministry direction, and softball teams. Our fighting tore the very fabric of our attempts to build unity. Jesus must have shed tears as he watched us, even as he prayed that we would be one and that our unity would be a witness to our community.

John captured the heart of Jesus when he recorded Jesus’ prayer for unity among brothers and sisters in the Lord. Jesus prayed that we would model the intimate relationship between the Father and himself. He made every effort to please the Father by doing God’s will. He offered concrete ways for the church to make a difference in a world that gravitates toward conflict, strife, and division.

The Belhar Confession states that “unity must be earnestly pursued and sought.” Is that earnest pursuit part of your life and your church’s life? When we fight over our differences rather than build a bold witness of unity, people see us and shake their heads. But when the children of God join hands and pray the prayer of our Savior, that we may be one “so that the world may believe that you have sent [us]”—that makes Jesus smile.

## Prayer

Dear Lord, we pray that our unity will be authentic and lasting. Help us to model your relationship with the Father in every way. We pray that our pursuit of unity will let the world know that you came because of your love for all people. Amen.

# Be Like Christ

## **Read: Philippians 2:1-5**

*“... have the same mindset as Christ Jesus ...”*

In the 2009 movie *Invictus*, newly elected president Nelson Mandela knew he had to make a clean break from the past. The proponents of apartheid had lost and their fears of “black rule” were at a fever pitch. To usher in a new way forward for all the people of South Africa, Mandela’s first act was to walk into his office and ask the white employees to stay and work for him. He asked for their help and knowledge in governing the country. He modeled the vision of a biracial coalition of South Africans working together to build a better future.

In the strength of our union with Christ, Christians worldwide can stand together in a fractured and warring world. As the Belhar Confession says, “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. . . .”

If we love all people with the fierce love of Jesus, we can bring healing to the nations. If we take the hurt of the world into ourselves, we can show people how and why Christ came into the world. If we resist the tendency to be self-centered and to fight for our own way, we can turn heads by letting others go ahead of us even at our own expense.

This was the kind of life Christ modeled from the manger to the grave—and to his church. May we all, in turn, model the attitude of Jesus with each other.

## **Prayer**

Dear Jesus, I want to be like you. Help me to model a life of humility before my fellow believers and before all your children. Help me listen to the Spirit’s voice and obey your words. Amen.

# The Vaccine

## **Read: 1 Corinthians 1:10-13**

*“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you. . . .”*

One of the big stories of 2009 was the outbreak of the H1N1 virus. To help contain its spread, health officials asked everyone to do two important things: wash their hands frequently and cover their mouths when they coughed.

In Paul’s day, a dangerous virus of division and disunity was spreading quickly in Corinth, and Paul found out that Christians there had taken no precautions to stop it. Paul, being a master physician of the Word, acted decisively to stop this menace in the church.

To help the Corinthians heal, Paul began to spread the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. By dying on the cross, Paul said, Jesus had rescued them from a death sentence and placed them into a brand-new relationship with the Father. They belonged to God!

Next, Paul applied generous amounts of the name of Jesus, which offered them a new hope and future in God’s kingdom.

Lastly, Paul sent the Corinthian church a prescription: they should be like Christ, who offered his humanity and divinity out of love for them so they might be one.

The power of the gospel brings unity instead of division and discord. When we spread the vaccine of the Lord Jesus Christ, the unity of the church can fight against the plague of division and promote true health and shalom.

## **Prayer**

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, help us to fight valiantly the virus of discord, division, and dissension that infects the very air we breathe. Equip us with antibodies of unity, love, and mercy—gifts of healing from our only Savior. Bring us to the cross of Christ. Amen.



# For the Common Good

## **Read: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11**

*“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.”*

A former seminary president observed, “In Korea I once saw a blind fortuneteller. A Korean friend told me that many Koreans believe that a blind person has miraculous insight into what is not seen. I think there is some truth to that.”

The Corinthians of Paul’s day would not have recognized that gift. They were accustomed to viewing only the miraculous gifts of tongues, healing, and prophecy as displays of God’s power and presence. Paul needed to remind them that God gives gifts to all his children and all of them matter to him.

The gifts of the Spirit are given for the common good. In other words, we use our talents, abilities, and skills to serve our brothers and sisters. The Belhar Confession goes so far as to say that “we are *obligated* to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another.”

There are many ways, big and small, to use our gifts for each other’s welfare. A word of wisdom can help someone avoid a bad choice or set better goals in life. A waiter’s kind and attentive service can help bring a frazzled mother peace on a bad day. The deft fingers of a surgeon can release a person from an agonizing ailment.

The Lord gave us these wonderful gifts not to show off, to gain attention, or to put others down, but to show the wonderful working power of God with humility and gratitude.

## **Prayer**

Dear Lord, help me to use the gifts you give me for the benefit and blessing of others. Help me to recognize the gifts of my brothers and sisters. Give me new eyes and ears and a heart to celebrate all the gifts and talents of your children. Amen.

# One Body

## **Read: 1 Corinthians 12:12-25**

*“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.”*

A psychology professor once asked a group of volunteers to count the number of photographs in a newspaper. The task took some a few seconds, and others a few minutes. This had nothing to do with their counting ability. On page 2 of the paper were these words in bold one-inch letters: “Stop counting—there are 43 photographs in this newspaper.” Believe it or not, most of the volunteers did not notice the message; they were too busy counting the pictures.

The Corinthians Paul wrote to were so focused on their individual gifts that they missed the more important message: only by working together can we fulfill the purposes of Christ! Paul used an ordinary image—the image of a physical body—to explain the importance of unity in our witness as followers of Jesus. Paul grabs the Corinthians by the scruff of their necks and reminds them that the body of Christ is about inclusiveness, not division. Are we any different from our Corinthian brothers and sisters?

Paul was proud to say that “the body is not made up of one part but of many” (v. 14). The eye cannot hear a bird singing. The ear cannot see a beautiful sunset. Paul reminded us of Jesus’ plan. He said, “God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. . . . As it is, there are many parts, but one body” (vv. 18-20).

## **Prayer**

Wise Savior, thank you for creating us in all our diversity and uniqueness. Help me to honor all the many people and races that make up your beautiful body. Amen.

# Voted into the Family

## Read: Ephesians 3:1-6

*“This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus.”*

Millions of people plop themselves in front of televisions to watch a group of strangers cajole, cry, and deceive their way to a \$1 million prize on the show *Survivor*. When a contestant is voted off the island, the host snuffs out a flame and wryly says, “The tribe has spoken.”

Let’s be honest—there are a lot of people we would love to vote out of our lives. In Paul’s day, Jewish and Gentile Christians wanted to vote each other out of the family of God. But Paul was struck by the amazing fact that Jesus voted *both* Jew and Gentile into the land of grace and mercy. He wanted the Ephesians to know that we belong to God because of Jesus alone.

Paul knew the story of grace began as a mystery. The word occurs three times in today’s passage because Paul doesn’t want us to miss this point: we were included in the family of God by God’s grace in Jesus. He died on the cross to fulfill the law we could not keep.

No one can vote a child of God out of God’s family. As the Belhar Confession says, “true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership.” In fact, Jesus keeps voting new people in. Jesus paid it all, not us. The Lord has spoken.

## Prayer

Dear God, thank you for gracefully providing our salvation in Jesus. Forgive us for comparing our deeds, heritage, or race in order to get a leg up on our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Help us to share our oneness in Christ. Amen.

# New Designation

## Read: Galatians 3:26-28

*“In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. . . .”*

When Whoopi Goldberg won an Academy Award for best supporting actress, she said something that struck me. She said, “from now on, there will be three words mentioned before Whoopi: ‘Academy Award winner.’ People must say them when they mention my name.” Goldberg went from a struggling actress to a new designation by winning a prestigious award. To keep this title, she does not have to have another successful movie, prove that she has a bankable personality, or give an exclusive interview for the press. She can rest in the fact that nothing can take away her title.

Paul once told a new group of believers in Galatia that they also had a new designation: children of God—a title that makes all the difference in the world.

Paul found out that the Galatians were being hoodwinked by zealous Jews who were determined to make them keep all the Old Testament laws. The laws, they said, were what made one close to God. But Paul set the record straight. He proclaimed that we are children of God by faith in Jesus. We are baptized into new life through Christ. We are given new clothes of grace to wear, not the clunky armor of legalism. Our unity, as the Belhar Confession has it, “can be established only in freedom and not under constraint.”

This promise is for all who believe in Christ Jesus: we have a new title that cannot be removed. For now on, we are sons and daughters of God.

## Prayer

Dear Jesus, thank you for bestowing upon us the title of sons and daughters of God. Help us to live into our new designation and be a witness to the world for your sake. Amen.

# Playing Favorites

## Read: James 2:1-13

*“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom. . . . Mercy triumphs over judgment.”*

I recently learned that in 2008 more Americans voted for the winner of *American Idol* than for president of the United States. On that wildly popular show, a panel of experts passes judgment on amateur singers, but the real draw is that viewers are also invited to act as judges. Millions of people make millions of phone calls and send millions of text messages to help decide the ultimate winner.

If we’re honest, we’ll admit that it feels good to evaluate others. It seems right to pick our favorites. We all feel suited to pass judgment on people. But what if the shoe is on the other foot? What if others pass judgment on you?

James, who was considered a man of prayer, was keenly aware that judgment was outpacing mercy by a huge lead. James found a community that was hell-bent on judgment and favoritism. Community-building had turned into a pecking order of egotism and sizing people up. But mercy, according to him, was the only way to level the playing field in promoting Christian community. The Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard agreed. He once said, “Mercy has converted more souls than zeal or eloquence or learning or all of them together.”

James implored Christian believers to live in unity. “Love your neighbor as yourself. . . . If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers” (2:8-9). In other words, the law will put us on trial before God!

Because we have received mercy from God, we must also show mercy to our sisters and brothers in the Lord.

## Prayer

Jesus, have mercy on me. I forget how your mercy was poured out on me and I have often turned off the spigot of mercy to others. Transform my heart to give mercy as I have received mercy from you. Amen.

# Reconciliation

**“God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ. . . .”**

—Belhar Confession



The following devotional readings are written by Rev. Marvin J. Hofman, pastor of 14th Street Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan.

# New Creations

## Read: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

*“We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”*

Reading Paul’s letters to the Corinthians is like listening in on a lovers’ quarrel. Out of deep concern and affection, Paul had harshly confronted the schism in the church he helped plant. Problems had arisen between rich and poor, flamboyant and shy, spiritually gifted and average, Jew and Gentile, so Paul had stepped in. As a result, his popularity had waned—so much so that false teachers had crippled his authority.

Here in his second letter Paul tries to make amends. He assures the Corinthians of his deep love, reasserts his credentials as an apostle, and points to the heart of the gospel: God’s reconciliation through Christ.

Reconciliation means overcoming conflict between people or groups. The supreme good news is that Christ has overcome the alienation between God and people caused by our sin. In Christ we are new creations. That is both a declaration of God and a lifelong challenge to “put to death the old nature and bring to life the new” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 88). As new creations, we have both the mandate and the capacity to take on the ministry of reconciliation.

In his insightful account of the 1994 “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” hearings in post-apartheid South Africa, Bishop Desmond Tutu said this: “We have survived the ordeal and we are realizing that we can indeed transcend the conflicts of the past; we can hold hands as we realize our common humanity. . . . Forgiveness will follow confession and healing will happen, and so contribute to national unity and reconciliation (*No Future Without Forgiveness*, Doubleday, 1999, p. 120).

## Prayer

Gracious God, we believe that you have entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ. Find us faithful and give us strength. Amen.

# Abolish the Wall

## Read: Ephesians 2:11-22

*“His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. . . .”*

It is a clarifying exercise: each time Paul writes, “we” or “us” or “the church” in the book of Ephesians, mentally add “Jew and Gentile.” For example:

- 1:1—“To God’s holy people [Jew and Gentile] in Ephesus. . . .”
- 1:4—“For he chose us [Jews and Gentiles] in him before the creation of the world. . . .”
- 1:9—“. . . he made known to us [Jews and Gentiles] the mystery of his will. . . .”

In the Ephesian church, both Jews and Gentiles had been made alive in Christ, called into fellowship, and given the mandate to break down the “wall of hostility.” But that wall, which had been torn down by Christ’s cross, was in danger of being reconstructed. Whether the groups still hated each other or not, it seemed apparent that they liked—or were at least comfortable with—the old ways of separation.

Racial reconciliation and cross-cultural acceptance are very difficult to achieve. Today, the vast majority of churches seem comfortable with the racial and ethnic sameness of their membership. Recent studies have shown that in big-city public schools, which were long ago formally integrated, students in the cafeteria clearly are grouped by race. It is always challenging to move past the nice talk of getting along and to take action toward reconciliation.

For it is by grace that you—Jew and Gentile, male and female, black and white—have been saved. Consequently, you are fellow citizens and called to continue Christ’s reconciling work: abolish the wall.

## Prayer

Lord God, by your empowering Spirit, make us wall-wreckers and body-builders for Christ’s sake. Amen.

# Salt and Light

## Read: Matthew 5:13-16

*“You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world.”*

A talk show host recently said to evangelical activist Jim Wallis, “So you’re one of those ‘red-letter Christians’ who’s really into those verses in the New Testament that are in red letters.” “That’s right,” said Wallis. The interviewer was apparently familiar with Bible publishers who print the words of Jesus in red letters. By adopting the name “red-letter Christians” some evangelicals mean that they are committed to radically living out what Jesus said.

Reformed Christians believe that the *entire* Bible is God’s message to be lived out—red *and* black letters. Yet the words of Jesus speak with unique power to Christians trying to live God’s way in God’s world.

The red-lettered Sermon on the Mount is packed with calls to radical kingdom living. “You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus said. “You are the light of the world.” Here, *You are* is a simple statement of identity. There is no getting around it. *We are* salt and light. Salt implies preservation in a spoiling world. Light implies direction in a dark world. That means that kingdom citizens take the lead in bringing people back to God and to each other.

As the Belhar Confession says, “God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ.” Red-and-black-letter Christians, let’s take the lead!

## Prayer

Great God, we believe that the church has been called to be the salt of the earth and light of the world. We are privileged to take up our calling of reconciliation. Give us courage and wisdom so your kingdom may come. Through Christ, our Redeemer, Amen.

# Telling the Truth

## Read: Ephesians 4:25-32

*“. . . each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor . . . .”*

Telling the truth is essential in learning to live together. A truthful person is a trustworthy person, and when I have your trust, I have your respect.

The first thing we often associate with telling the truth is accurately representing the facts. If a child breaks a window, we expect him or her to own up, and we can usually tell when the child is lying.

It’s harder by far to detect when a custom, tradition, or long-held assumption is based on a lie. For example, for centuries white people justified the slavery of black people by referencing the “curse of Ham” in Genesis 9. After Noah’s youngest son Ham, who is also called “the father of Canaan,” dishonored his drunken father by telling others about his nakedness instead of covering him, Noah said, “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.” For various reasons, throughout history some Christians came to believe that Ham and his descendants were black. In reality, the Canaanites were Caucasian. This mistaken belief, the misery that resulted from it, and the command to “love our neighbors as ourselves” makes the long practice of enslavement of blacks ignorant and sinful.

But it is easy to believe and perpetuate a lie. It is easy to base societal evil on a longstanding false assumption. Putting off falsehood and speaking truthfully calls for clear thinking, brutal honesty, and deep confession for letting lies persist while standing idly by.

## Prayer

God of all creation, forgive the lies we have easily believed and readily perpetuated. Remove the hurt and alienation that our sin has caused. Help us to love the truth and to speak it in Christ’s name. Amen.

# Party Clothes

## Read: Colossians 3:12-17

*“Therefore, as God’s chosen people . . . clothe yourselves. . . .”*

What an evocative metaphor: taking off dirty clothes and donning a glorious, new wardrobe. In Ephesians 6, Paul uses the metaphor of putting on armor. But the ensemble he recommends in Colossians feels more like attire for a grand party.

These clothes are elegant and beautiful, because the party we have been invited to is Jesus’ grand banquet. He is the honoree and the host. But he also serves as valet, helping the attendees dress for the occasion. Jesus says, “Since you have stripped off the dirty rags of your former life, let me help you into these new clothes”:

Compassion: “Oh, that suits you so well.”

Kindness: “That looks great on you.”

Humility: “You look simply elegant.”

Gentleness: “Oh, that’s definitely you.”

Patience: “The perfect fit.”

Forgiveness: “Smashing!”

And, as a finishing touch, “put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

Jesus’ party guests are now all dressed up with plenty of places to go. Putting off the rags of sin and putting on the splendid royal clothing of the new life is the privilege of all Christians.

“Getting dressed up for church” has lost favor in many congregations. Perhaps that isn’t such a shame. What *is* tragic is when people who have been invited to change into their “heavenly banquet clothes” prefer to remain in the dirty rags of their former lives. Let us accept Jesus’ invitation and Jesus’ help in donning our new wardrobe.

## Prayer

Lord our God, help shed the rags of hatred, bitterness, and enmity, and by your Word and Spirit help us live the elegant lives of the new obedience. Through Christ, Amen.

# The Light Shines

## Read: Colossians 1:9-14

*“He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness . . .”*

Spiritual darkness surrounds us when we turn away from God, when we choose to stay lost in the depravity of sin, when we refuse to turn to the light of Christ. But here is the good news for those caught in the slavery of the darkness: God has come to the rescue. God invites them into the kingdom of the Son he loves. In God’s light they can see where they’re going. The rescued are drawn to his radiance. Evil scatters when the light shines.

It is impossible to claim to be citizens of the kingdom of the light and at the same time to promote racial hatred and exploit the poor. These attitudes demonstrate that the light of Christ has failed to penetrate our hearts.

How blind the church has often been to the light of Christ! How willfully Christians have looked the other way as Christ shines his light on the road to justice and reconciliation.

The Belhar Confession encourages us 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.”

If we have truly been rescued from the dominion of darkness by Christ’s redemption on the cross, we have also been given the Holy Spirit’s power to escape darkness and to flee to the light.

## Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, in your Light we see light. Expose our sinful ways. Break the patterns of darkness. Shine brightly on us and through us. Amen.

# Singing New Songs

## **Read: Revelation 5:6-10**

*“And they sang a new song . . .”*

Sadly, one of the greatest sources of dispute in our churches is music. We say we need new songs to keep our young people interested. We talk about singing solid hymns as a remedy for the perceived slippage of sound doctrine in our churches. Because music is such a deep expression of the heart, Christians have strong convictions about what songs are best. When these convictions clash publicly, worship wars result.

The reality of our contentious, imperfect worship makes the imagined moment of this passage in Revelation all the more glorious. Instrumental music (harps), prayers (golden bowls), and a spectacular choir all bring praise to the Lamb of God. A worldwide choral ensemble made up of people from every tribe, language, and nation joins the tens of thousands of angels in adoration.

So if songs of worship unite and focus the praise of musicians in the new heaven and new earth, why not now?

Members of orchestras, choirs, and other musical groups testify to the thrill of offering music *in concert*—in tune, in unity, as with one voice. The Belhar Confession emphasizes that separating people into racial or economic categories destroys the symphony of the kingdom. Let us aspire to sing the songs of the new heaven and new earth, and in so doing experience the reconciliation we have already been given in Christ.

## **Prayer**

For the gift of music, for the vision of the heavenly ensemble, and for the call to sing together the new song, Lord, we give you thanks. Train us today to sing in concert with every tribe and language and people and nation. Through Christ, Amen.

# From Eden to Eternity

## **Read: Revelation 22:1-5**

*“And they will reign for ever and ever.”*

This passage gives us occasion to look ahead to eternity—the time beyond time. The description of the new heaven and new earth finds creation back in harmony with God. The Tree of Life is yielding fruit. The River of Life is refreshing city and countryside. And the servants of God—those the Lord has assembled from every tribe and language and people and nation—will see the Lamb face to face in the splendor of eternal light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

This glorious picture of eternity also gives us occasion to look back to Eden. There at the beginning was the River of Life and the Tree of Life. From one garden to another, from one end of time to the other, we witness the restoration of all things.

There is one significant stop in the journey from Eden to eternity: Easter. There we realize the resurrection of Jesus as the “firstfruits”—the reestablishing of Eden. At Easter’s empty tomb we find the expectation of eternity. Easter overcomes the power of death. Easter conquers evil. Easter brings down barriers. Easter affords a look ahead and a guarantee that all impediments to fellowship with God will be gone forever.

“We believe,” states the Belhar Confession, “that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ.” Easter, Christ’s empty tomb, gives us this truth and this task. Easter recreates the way to eternity. Easter recovers Eden. What a day that will be. What a day that is already becoming.

## **Prayer**

Eternal God, help us each day recover Eden, to anticipate eternity, and to live in the power of Jesus’ resurrection. In that powerful name we pray. Amen.

# Justice

“... the church ... must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged ...”

—Belhar Confession



The following devotional readings are written by Kathy Vandergrift, who teaches public ethics and works as a policy analyst in Ottawa, Ontario.

# God Loves Justice

**Read: Isaiah 61**

*“For I, the LORD, love justice.”*

Think the words “just God,” and the image of a stern-faced judge with scales weighed down by sin is likely to come to mind. But that is not the image in Scripture. Justice is portrayed as refreshing rain or a river that makes life flourish. God loves justice because he created a good world and wants his creatures to be all they can be. That’s the biblical picture of justice.

Justice is not a legal document or a philosophical treatise. It is a way of living. Stories of life with justice and life without it are found throughout Scripture. The call for justice comes with action words: do justice, defend the weak, rescue the oppressed.

God reminds us often of his love for justice with a promise: “Good will come to those who ... conduct their affairs with justice” (Ps. 112:5). “Blessed are those who act justly” (Ps. 106:3).

There is a sense of urgency in God’s call for justice—the urgency of the lover who wants the best for his beloved. Creation works best when every part lives in right relationship with every other part. That makes justice more than a hobby for the few in the “social justice club.” It is the essence of God’s good news.

Scripture calls us to be God’s agents of justice in a world that badly needs it, and the Belhar Confession reminds us of that. Our challenge is how we respond to our justice-loving King.

**Prayer**

Thank you, God of justice, for loving us enough to care about how we live together on your earth. Deepen our understanding of how to live justly. Teach us to love justice as much as you do. Amen.



# God Hates Injustice

## **Read: Amos 5:21-24**

*“I hate, I despise your festivals. . . . But let justice roll on like a river . . . .”*

Few sins arouse God’s anger as much as the strong preying on the weak. The Bible is clear about what injustice is. It is the misuse of power to take from others what God has given them, whether that is life, dignity, the fruits of their labor, or freedom. Injustice draws down the wrath of God.

I am always taken aback when I read the blunt message of prophets like Amos. I was raised to think that praising God, prayer, and going to church were top priorities. Not so, says Amos. You can’t worship God if you don’t care about justice. That message is repeated in Isaiah and Jeremiah, picked up by Jesus himself, and reinforced by James.

A verse in Proverbs provides a key to why God hates injustice so much: “Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker” (14:31). Carl F. Henry, a theologian, captured a similar thought: “If the church preaches only divine forgiveness and does not affirm justice, she implies that God treats sin lightly.” That’s why God gets angry.

God confronts injustice directly in Scripture. The stories found there compete with the horror in the daily news. We prefer a nice God who is above all the mess, and worship that allows us to escape reality. We don’t like to talk about injustice. It makes us uncomfortable.

But if we want to know God, we will see the world the way he sees it—including the injustice—and get angry enough to change it.

## **Prayer**

Teach us, God, to be upset by the things that make you upset. Help us to seek repentance and bring about change in an unjust world. Amen.

# Restoring Those Who Suffer Injustice

## **Read: Isaiah 58:6-12**

*“If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness . . . .”*

Scripture tells us that God weeps when he sees people hurt by the misuse of power. God has compassion for the oppressed and wants to restore them to their rightful place in his creation. He wants us to be his agents of repair and restoration.

Scripture says to those who suffer that they are not forsaken by God, even when their situation seems hopeless. For many this is a key to their survival—a fact they bear testimony to when they tell their stories.

From the outside, it is not always easy to respond with compassion to the victims of injustice. When disaster strikes or when we see pictures of hungry children, compassion is a natural response. But when the cause of suffering is the misuse of power by another person, a government, or another authority, compassion is not so automatic. Stories of abuse and unfair treatment are more complicated. Sometimes we hear them only from the side of the authorities who justify their actions and blame those who suffer. When we do recognize injustice, we can’t erase it by giving food or providing clothing; we need to remove the barriers that keep people down. That’s more difficult.

The Belhar’s focus on justice alerts us to the use and misuse of power in human relations. The Bible calls us to restore dignity and make the streets good places for all to live. That’s redemption.

## **Prayer**

Lord, open my eyes to see injustice. Guide my actions so that I may be a repairer of broken relations and a restorer of justice in my community. Amen.

# Judgment for Oppressors

## Read: Luke 6:20-26

*“Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.”*

In our world, those who practice injustice are often successful—but only in the short term. Jesus says, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep” (Luke 6:25). The writer of Psalm 10 prays that those who persecute the poor will be called to “account for [their] wickedness.” In Isaiah, God himself rises to convict his own people: “It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses” (Isa. 3:14).

Turning the tables, or the last becoming first, is a common theme in biblical texts about justice. Does this mean a reversal of roles? No. Bringing down those who misuse their power is the counterpart of raising up those without power, in order to restore the right relations that God intended for his creation.

The Bible judges with particular harshness those who abuse power behind a cloak of legitimate authority. In Isaiah 10, for example, God warns people who write laws that take advantage of the powerless: judgment is coming. Many Christians grow up with a strong emphasis on respect for authority. But a focus on justice makes us aware that authority can be misused.

The Belhar Confession has its roots in a time and place where the “legitimate” government was the oppressor and much of the church was complicit in covering up injustice. It reminds us that justice is the norm God uses to test the legitimacy of authority, and it encourages us to do the same.

## Prayer

Dear God, our Ultimate Authority, teach us to know the difference between the misuse of power to harm others and the legitimate use of authority to serve you. Amen.

# Love, Justice, and Power: Shalom

## Isaiah 32:1-8

*“See, a king will reign in righteousness, and rulers will rule with justice. Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm . . . .”*

Does love trump justice for Christians? Does love mean giving up power? These questions often arise when we focus on justice. Love and justice sometime seem to be opposites. In Scripture, they are both part of *shalom* or well-being.

In one of his sermons, Martin Luther King Jr. provided a useful explanation. “Power without love,” he said, “is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

Take time to read that again, ponder it, and take it in. I draw on it when I find myself falling into the trap of separating love and justice.

Power comes in many forms in our society, and at all levels. When we are working for justice, we need to consider how we can use our influence or power to bring about the kind of just relations that God would love in our community or nation. When we become aware of issues that involve an abuse of power, we need to think through how we can show love and pursue justice in a way that tries to restore all the parties to their rightful places. Love and peace without justice will not last.

Peace, security, and rest are outcomes of the search for justice in love.

## Prayer

Prince of Peace, we pray for the peace that comes when justice and love permeate our use of power and our lives together. Amen.

# Hope Replaces Despair

## **Read: Luke 1:46-55**

*“. . . my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”*

In this second decade of the twenty-first century it is easy to despair. The scale of injustice in our global society is daunting. For instance, every day 30,000 children die from preventable diseases. Is there any hope?

Mary, the mother of Jesus, had every reason to despair. Young, pregnant, and powerless, she lived in a time when girls in her condition were discarded or mistreated. But her song is a song of hope. She had hope because God is faithful and will turn the world right side up again.

In dark times, hope is not just a psychological boost. It is part of the solution. People without hope are the most vulnerable. Many of the stories of the great social reformers testify to the importance of hope and a vision for the future to keep going. Hope leads to persistence, which is essential in seeking justice.

Martin Luther King Jr. worked to end racism under constant threats to his life. When he was asked whether he thought his cause would succeed, he drew deeply on his roots in the study of Scripture. “The moral arc of the universe is long,” he said, “but it bends toward justice.” These words help me when I am inclined to despair. Instead of fretting about what I can’t control, I can ask if I am helping or hindering the bend toward justice that is God’s deepest desire and ultimate victory.

## **Prayer**

God of hope, revive my spirit and keep me from despair. Help me to give hope to others, because your justice will prevail. Amen.

# Courage Overcomes Fear

## **Read: Psalm 31:19-24**

*“Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD.”*

Fear is a valuable tool in the hands of those who use power to oppress others. Fear is used to silence voices of protest, isolate people from potential allies, divide communities, and shield those in power from tough questions. Fear is a very effective obstacle to justice.

But Jesus’ message to his disciples is a message to us as well: “Take courage!” We are called to combat fear, to bring justice, to be God’s hands and feet in the world. As the Belhar Confession states, “God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people. . . . God calls the church to follow him in this.” And if God calls us to be agents of justice, he will empower us to do the job.

It is often easier to help victims of injustice than to confront those who oppress them—especially when it means looking in the mirror and admitting that we are part of unjust systems ourselves. But fighting against injustice means mustering the courage to stand up to its perpetrators.

Jesus was a master strategist. He knew when to confront and when to cajole, how to use a trap set for him to open the eyes of his tormentors. He used every tactic in the playbook to work for justice.

Doing justice is like a game of chess. Those who play chess know that the lowly pawn can sometimes topple a king. So take courage!

## **Prayer**

Gracious God, give me the courage and wisdom to be an effective agent for justice. Empower me to speak out against injustice in your Son’s name. Amen.

# Stand Up for Justice

## Proverbs 31:8-9

*“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves . . . .”*

People who pursue justice are likely to be unpopular at times. Seeking justice means asking difficult questions and exposing the ways that some take advantage of others. One of the challenges within churches is a spirit of “quietism.” We don’t want to rock the boat. People who speak up to raise difficult questions about justice don’t win friends.

However, the accounts of the gross injustices in history—such as slavery, the Rwandan genocide, the Holocaust, and apartheid—all reveal moments when the failure to speak up allowed evil to grow. The truth from Scripture and history is that silence can enable abuses of power.

A second barrier to justice is withdrawal from the larger world into the safe cocoon of the church. The Belhar Confession calls on churches to be witnesses against injustice, even though that would be a new role for many church communities. David Bosch, a well-known missiologist, observed that the evil one achieved a big victory in the twentieth century by convincing Christian churches that the social conditions and structures in the world did not need change. Many churches, he argued, became “blind to our responsibility to the world en route to fulfillment in heaven.”

I’ve witnessed cases where the voice of the church community made a big difference in the outcome of a claim for justice. Are you sitting on the bleachers in the struggle for justice? Are there justice issues within your sphere of influence that beg for you to speak up?

## Prayer

Free us from the temptations of quietism and withdrawal, O God. Use our gifts to speak out for justice and give us wisdom to do it well, for your honor and glory. Amen.

# Taking Sides for Justice

## Micah 6:6-8

*“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”*

God uses his people to achieve justice. We often ask, “Where is God? Why doesn’t he stop this abuse?” But God looks for someone to send and asks, “Who will go?”

Some say that the church should be above the struggles for justice and never take sides. They believe the church should remain neutral. But the Bible is quite clear. We are called to take the side of those suffering injustice and stand with them. Neutrality is not an option, because silence reinforces the abuse of power.

Missiologist David Bosch expressed it well in his book *Transforming Mission*: “Like its Lord, the church-in-mission must take sides, for life and against death, for justice and against oppression” (Orbis Books, 1991).

How a church engages in working for justice is a matter of wisdom. In their own way and with a voice of integrity, church communities need to stand with those who suffer and stand up to those who abuse power and harm others. Acts of solidarity are important tools for justice.

As the Belhar Confession puts it, the church as the body of Christ must stand where Christ would stand. That message is particularly powerful because it comes to us from churches who struggled to understand their role in the fight against apartheid. Christ stands on the side of justice; our challenge is to do the same.

## Prayer

Lord, free us from the temptation to be benchwarmers instead of active agents for justice in the struggles of our time and in our communities. Amen.

# The Least as the Measure of Success

## **Read: Luke 4:14-22**

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. . . .”*

We love “winners.” During the Olympics we cheer the best on the podium, while the host city removes the street people so we will not be “distracted” by them. Our TV shows make celebrities of the rich and famous. These are the symbols of success in our culture.

God’s measure is different. The Bible repeatedly draws our attention to a quartet of those at the bottom in social status: the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor. This theme in Scripture has resulted in a lot of debate about whether God loves the poor more than the rich. That debate misses the point. The poor receive special attention because they are the barometer of how just—or unjust—a society is.

Children who wrote a manifesto for a global conference on children in 2001 caught this when they said: “We want a world fit for children, because a world fit for children is fit for all of us.”

Social science research now provides evidence to show that societies who treat “the least of these” with dignity are more productive overall. We should not be surprised at that. God said it long ago.

Justice gives us a different scorecard to measure progress and set priorities. The Belhar Confession reminds us of God’s measures and encourages us to reset our own standards.

## **Prayer**

I confess that my measures of success don’t always match God’s measures. Help me, God, to reset my standards and rearrange my priorities to reflect the scorecard of your kingdom. Amen.