

DIVE INTO DOCTRINE



**UNITY
RECONCILIATION
JUSTICE**

A Visible Witness to Spiritual Truth

The three **Forms of Unity** are the core of the Reformed tradition of the Christian faith, uniting Christians across six continents for over 500 years. Even today, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort continue to form and shape the way that people across the world understand their faith. But what happens when Reformed Christians, who believe and confess the truths of Scripture summarized in the Forms of Unity, live in ways that are obviously contrary to the teachings of Scripture?

This was the case for Reformed Christians in South Africa in the late 20th century. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa supported a government-sanctioned system of racial segregation and discrimination called **Apartheid**. Apartheid was the law of the land for almost 50 years, established on the principle of white supremacy, the false be-

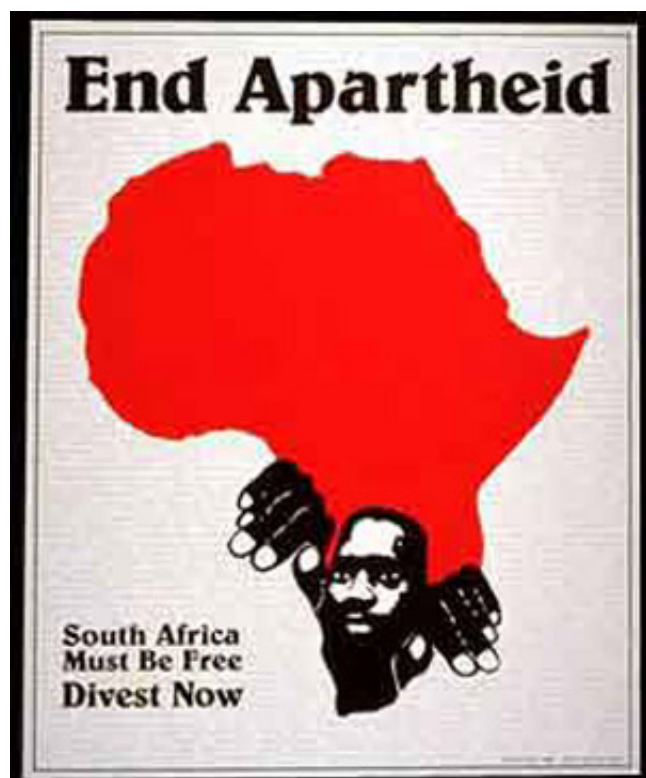
lief that light-skinned people are better than dark-skinned people.

The sad reality is that the practice of apartheid began in the churches of the Reformed tradition, with people who confessed the truths of Scripture as summarized in the Reformed Confessions. As cultural ideas about race began to make their way into the church, white Christians began to protest the fact that they had to take communion with black Christians. This led the Reformed church in South Africa to divide based on skin colour into a white church, a coloured (mixed-race) church, and a black church. All of this was done, remarkably, in the spirit of tolerance. Church leaders wanted to remove any obstacles for people to hear the gospel and experience God's grace. But their practice flew in the face of the gospel's message of the unity and equality of believers in the body of Christ.

How could Reformed Christians commit such obvious heresy against the gospel? The lesson of Apartheid teaches us just how easily cultural ideas can form and shape the way we read the gospel.

What did the church do in response? The Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa drafted the **Belhar Confession** in response to the heresy of Apartheid. The Belhar Confession highlights the teaching of Scripture on the themes of **unity, reconciliation, and justice**. These are spiritual realities which are ours in Christ. Jesus unites us to himself, reconciles all creation to God, and justifies us by forgiving our sins. But the Belhar Confession shows us that Scripture does not end there. The church is called to be a visible witness to these spiritual realities. The church is called, through its words and deeds, to model unity, reconciliation, and justice to a fallen world.

Historical Foundations of the Belhar Confession



Apartheid and its consequences provoked a strong international response. Many countries around the world imposed sanctions against South Africa and called on individuals and businesses to divest from South African businesses.

The Belhar Confession was drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, which took the lead among the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in declaring a *status confessionis* concerning apartheid. *Status confessionis* is a Latin phrase meaning “state of confession.” In the 20th century the phrase *status confessionis* started to be used by Protestants to refer to sociopolitical issues in which the gospel was at stake and the church needed to develop a confessional answer. Apartheid was declared a heresy, a threat to the gospel which needed a response from the church.

The following list is adapted from *From the Heart of God: A Study of the Belhar Confession* (2010, 2013, CRCNA: Grand Rapids, Mich.).

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 “coloured” 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 WARC declares a *status confessionis* concerning apartheid 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.

1994 After almost half a decade of negotiations, Apartheid ends after the first multiethnic presidential elections, resulting in Nelson Mandela becoming the first black president of South Africa.

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 Reformed Church in America adopts the Belhar Confession as its fourth confession.

2012 The Christian Reformed Church adopts the Belhar Confession as an “Ecumenical Faith Declaration.”

2017 In response to confusion regarding the category of Ecumenical Faith Declaration, the Christian Reformed Church adopts the Belhar Confession as a Contemporary Testimony.

Reflections on the History of the Belhar

Use the space below to write or draw what you have learned about the history of Apartheid in South Africa and the history and development of the Belhar Confession:

The Belhar Confession

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);¹
- 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);

¹ *The three forms of unity teach that the reconciliation and unity of humanity arise only out of God's saving work through Christ Jesus. The Belhar Confession, which is not a "new summary of our beliefs, but ... a cry from the heart," applies this truth as a call for reconciliation and unity in the church and in its witness to and engagement in the world (see the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa's accompanying letter in Agenda for Synod 2012, p. 238; also at crcna.org).*

- 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.²

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 colour 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

² It is clear, given the original context of the Belhar Confession, that race is the intent here. Because the ambiguity of the term social factor could lead to misinterpretation or misapplication, Synod 2009 noted that the Belhar Confession does not negate the biblically derived statements of synod with regard to human sexuality (e.g., Synod 1973, 1996; Acts of Synod 2009, p. 606).

of the destitute, the poor and the wronged;³

- 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 honour and the glory for ever and ever.

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.). Footnotes were added by a study committee appointed by Synod 2017 (CRCNA) to provide clarity around key aspects of the Belhar Confession.

³ The affirmation that God is “in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged” refers to God’s abiding concern for disadvantaged, ignored, and oppressed people (cf. Ex. 22:21-23; Isa. 1:17; 61:1-2; Matt. 25:31-46; Luke 4:18-19; 6:20-21; James 1:9-11, 27), not to a presumed covenantal relationship based on social and/or economic status.

Reflections on the Belhar Confession

As you read through the Belhar Confession, what jumps out at you? What parts inspire you? What parts challenge you? What parts do you have difficulty with? Write your reflections below:

Introduction to the Blanket Exercise

The Belhar Confession, Apartheid, racism in South Africa, all of these things can seem very far away from our experience and our reality here in North America. So for our second session, we will be inviting representatives from the CRC office of Aboriginal Ministries to show us the need for unity, reconciliation, and justice in our North American context by leading us in the Blanket Exercise. The Blanket Exercise is “a practical, powerful, experiential way to understand Native peoples’ history in the Canadian and American contexts.” It is an interactive exercise (appropriate for all ages!) which involves walking around on blankets that represent North America, while hearing and experiencing the history of the First Nations peoples who originally inhabited our land.

Questions for Preparation & Reflection

1. Do you know the history of the land on which you live? What nations lived here before European settlers came to the region?
2. Are you aware of whether the land on which you live obtained from the First Nations legally or illegally? By treaty or by force?
3. How long have non-indigenous peoples lived in your region? Where do the First Nations who used to live here live now?
4. Do you know any First Nations people personally? How can you thank them for the ways in which their ancestors took care of the land?

*Note: **Please be aware that the Blanket Exercise will involve standing/walking for about 45 minutes, and will involve taking off our shoes.** If this is not possible for you, let one of the pastors know, and other accommodations will be made.*



Roots (1979), by Anishinaabe artist Daphne Odjig, artistically portrays the identity crisis and self-discovery that she experienced after leaving the reservation for the big city.

Reflections on the Blanket Exercise

Use the space below to write or draw what you learned about the First Nations experience in Canada. Use the box to write a prayer to God about how the exercise made you feel.

Dear God,

Called to Unity

Article 2 of the Belhar Confession calls all Christians everywhere to work toward unity. Reflect on the types of things that prevent unity in your own life and in your church. How can you begin to work to dismantle these obstacles? Use these two pages to take notes or doodle about what you learn today.

one baptism
 one Spirit
 one God and Father
 one body
 one Lord
 one faith
 one hope
 —Eph. 4:4-6



Circle of Friends
 by Alice Beasley
 (2012)

“It is necessary to heal the wounds of the past if you are going to build your country and to have unity. I am working with people who fought me very bitterly before the elections. It was my responsibility as the man who is leading the majority party, my responsibility to heal the wounds of the past and to work with people who were my opponents.”

—NELSON MANDELA

The Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC)

The Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee (EIRC) is appointed by the synod of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) to engage and participate in the life of the global church, particularly interacting with churches and ecumenical organizations that share the heritage of the Reformed understanding of the Christian faith. **This engagement is based on the biblical injunctions that the unity of the Church is of paramount importance to reflect the unity Christians share as a gift from God in Jesus Christ.** As we draw closer to Christ, we draw closer to each other.

—CRCNA.ORG/EIRC



Anthony Elenbaas is a pastor at Immanuel CRC in Hamilton. He is also a member of the EIRC.

“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

—JOHN 17:22-23

Called to Reconciliation

Article 3 of the Belhar Confession calls all Christians to pursue reconciliation, both as individuals and as the body of Christ. As you prepare for this lesson, read and reflect on the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis, especially the story of their reconciliation in Genesis 32-33 (note also Genesis 35:27-29). North American Christian teaching often focuses more on forgiveness than reconciliation. Why do you think that is? What can we learn about reconciliation from the story of Jacob and Esau?



Jacob and Esau by George Frederik Watts (1878)

“We believe ... 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.”

—BELHAR CONFSSION, ARTICLE 3

Office of Race Relations (ORR)

The Ministry of Race Relations is mandated by synod “to design, organize, and implement programs that will assist the denomination, churches, and members in eliminating the causes and effects of racism within the body of believers and throughout the world.”

—CRCNA.ORG/RACE



Bernadette Arthur is the Race Relations Coordinator in Canada for the CRCNA.

Called to Justice

Article 4 of the Belhar Confession calls all followers of Christ to work together toward justice, in our lives, in our communities, and in the world. Look up the word “justice” in a Bible concordance, then look up related words: judge, just, judgment, justify, etc. Read through some of these passages and reflect on what the biblical vision of justice looks like.



“At his ascension, Jesus commanded his disciples to be his witnesses in the world. They are to witness to the reign of Jesus as King of Kings. Jesus’ current status as cosmic King is invisible. The world is either ignorant of his sovereignty or denies it. It is the task of the church to give visible witness to the invisible kingdom.”

—R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths*

**“Let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a
never-failing stream!”**

—AMOS 5:24



Injustice for the Just by Cree artist Ovide Bighetty (2002) depicts the unjust trial and condemnation of Jesus before Pilate and the chief priests.

Centre for Public Dialogue (CPD)

The Christian Reformed Centre for Public Dialogue, is a justice and reconciliation ministry of the Christian Reformed churches in Canada. In 2018, CCG celebrates 50 years of seeking justice and speaking hope in the name of Christ in Canadian public affairs. Building on that heritage, the Centre for Public Dialogue works to encourage active Christian citizenship, studies critical issues facing Canadian society from a Reformed perspective, and interacts with legislators in a constructive manner.

—CRCNA.ORG/PUBLICDIALOGUE



Danielle Rowaan is the Justice Communications Team Coordinator for the CRC, working closely with the Centre for Public Dialogue and a variety of justice-related denominational ministries.

