

Proposed Amendments to the Constitution—Part 2 of 3

Confession of Belhar

**Approved by the 219th General Assembly (2010) and recommended to the
presbyteries for their vote.**



Including: Confession of Belhar and Accompanying Letter, Letter from the Stated Clerk, General Assembly information on Belhar Confession, Introduction to the Confession of Belhar, a study guide, and an article on “Confessions of Faith in the Reformed Tradition”

NOTE FROM THE STATED CLERK

The 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved and recommended to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes the addition of Confession of Belhar to *The Book of Confessions*. If approved by a two-thirds majority of presbyteries and by the 220th General Assembly (2012), the Constitution will be amended. Please be sure time is taken by the presbytery to study the Confession of Belhar and its Accompanying Letter, using the materials enclosed prior to voting.

You will note that reference is made to Item 16-12. That indicates the assembly committee report related to Confession of Belhar. This item number also indicates where to find background information from various entities that was available electronically to the assembly commissioners prior to the General Assembly. (That information may now be accessed at <http://www.pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=3353&promoID=174>.) The “Item Number” references are the same as will be found in the Minutes of the 219th General Assembly (2010), Part I [Minutes], which are expected to be available to the presbyteries by the time they consider the amendments.

Unless otherwise indicated, new language to be added to *The Book of Confessions* is on page 6. In providing background material, we have attempted wherever possible to use quotations from the various groups that presented or commented on these materials as they went to the General Assembly. Within those quotations, bracketed material [] has been inserted editorially.

This year there are two other documents with amendments being proposed to the Constitution: the Proposed Amendments to the *Book of Order*, and a revised Form of Government to the *Book of Order*. These have been sent as separate documents (Parts 3 and 1 respectively) to the presbyteries for their vote.

Thank you for your time and careful attention as you prepare to vote on these proposed amendments.

Gradye Parsons

Stated Clerk of the General Assembly

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10-2 CONFESSION OF BELHAR

On Amending *The Book of Confessions* (Item 16-12)

The 219th General Assembly (2010) directed the Stated Clerk to send the following proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes:

Shall *The Book of Confessions* be amended by adding the Confession of Belhar following A Brief Statement of Faith—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its accompanying documents? The “Accompanying Letter” and scriptural references to the confession should be printed with it without confessional status if this proposal is adopted. [The text of Confession of Belhar is found on page 6 of this booklet.]

Background and Rationale

The process of preparing our church for the possibility of adopting the Confession of Belhar began with a task force reporting to the General Assembly in 2004. The Office of the General Assembly response to the Task Force to Study Reparations advised, and the General Assembly approved, that one part of the report be answered by commending “...the Belhar Confession to the church as a resource for reflection, study, and response, as a means of deepening the commitment of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to dealing with racism and a means of strengthening its unity ...” (*Minutes*, 2004, Part I, p. 701). The General Assembly also urged “... each presbytery and all congregations to undertake a study of the Belhar Confession before the 218th General Assembly (2008) ... [and directed] the Office of the General Assembly and the General Assembly Council, Office of Theology and Worship, to receive response, prepare a summary, and report results ... with possible recommendations for further engagement with the Belhar Confession...” (*Ibid.*, p. 701). In 2008, the General Assembly called for the creation of a special committee to study whether the Belhar Confession should be adopted into *The Book of Confessions* (*Minutes*, 2008, Part I, p. 1262–70).

The Special Committee on the Belhar Confession unanimously and enthusiastically recommended that the 219th General Assembly (2010) approve the inclusion of the Confession of Belhar in *The Book of Confessions*, and that the amendment be sent to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes by June 2011.

The Special Committee offered these reasons for adopting a new confession:

1. *Why Should the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Adopt the Confession of Belhar?*

The Confession of Belhar confesses the Christian faith powerfully, touching hearts especially at those places where we are struggling today to be faithful.

2. *Reconciliation and Unity*

... the PC(USA) is preoccupied with questions about the unity of the church. The Confession of Belhar both reassures and challenges us when it speaks of Christ’s work of reconciliation being made visible in the church:

We believe ... that unity is, therefore, both a gift and a 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; ... 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; that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church. ([from the Belhar Confession] As printed in the *Minutes*, 2008, Part I, pp. 1265–66)

The Confession of Belhar describes the active and practical ways in which unity must be expressed in loving service to one another. It thus reminds us that the confession emerged in 1980s from a South African Reformed community whose leaders and members had been oppressed because of their race and imprisoned for their resistance to their nation’s

legally mandated system of apartheid, a strict segregation of people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Their “mother-church” of European immigrants had divided the Reformed Christians of South Africa into four distinct churches according to the system of apartheid: one for the descendants of white colonials like themselves, one for descendants of immigrants from Asia, one for those of mixed race (the church that produced the Confession of Belhar), and one for black Africans. Their mother-church taught that apartheid was justified on the basis of Scripture and that it properly allowed people of different races and cultures to have their own separate development. In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches declared this reading of Scripture heretical. Subsequently, the Confession of Belhar was written to provide a strikingly different biblical view of the church and insists on its unity across all racial and cultural divides. The confessing community was bold and courageous in directly defying the unjust laws of church and state, echoing at times the Theological Declaration of Barmen confession, and remarkably gracious in its focus on God’s love and justice. We remember that the church of mixed-race people acted on their convictions by merging with that of the black Africans. Then, in an astonishing gesture of forgiveness, they invited the white and Asian churches to join them in one Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. That unification process has not yet reached completion, but unity is still being pursued.

The gift of unity and the obligation to pursue the unity of the church were both accepted by those who wrote the Confession of Belhar with the full knowledge that they would pay a heavy price in suffering. The authors, who themselves represented different racial backgrounds, lived out this reconciliation in the crafting of this confession. The confession challenges us as we realize that it is not armchair theology but costly grace experienced in faithful obedience to Jesus Christ. If we are to be faithful to the Gospel, we also must accept this gift and obligation with the full knowledge that they will be costly in many ways. This confession expresses clearly our own church’s longing for unity across barriers we see in our own situation of different spiritual gifts, backgrounds, convictions, languages, and cultures, both within our church and across denominational lines. We long for concrete testimony of the reconciliation and mutual service in the one church of Jesus Christ. The Confession of Belhar reassures us with its confidence that the good news of Jesus Christ offers hope, liberation, salvation, and true peace.

3. *Justice*

Our church is preoccupied with questions of justice, certainly including racial justice. As we read the Confession of Belhar, we remember that not long ago our own church struggled with overt and even legal racial segregation in church and state. Within the living memory of many of our church members, African American Christians were turned away from white congregational worship and communion; protesters against segregation in civil society were beaten and killed by police and supporters of the existing social structure. We identify profoundly with the struggle in South Africa to defeat apartheid at least partly because we see in that struggle our own story. Our church members, along with many other citizens, protested and boycotted in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in South Africa. We felt the unity of the church across the globe in a special way. Today, like those in South Africa, we celebrate the remarkable transformation of our societies with the lowering of legal barriers; yet we mourn the painful legacies of long years of segregation. Inequalities of resources of education, of health care, of employment opportunities, of respect by society, have left both our societies with vast gaps between the life possibilities of the dominant white society and those of people of color. Recent political discourse has alerted us to the degree to which racism remains alive in our national life and lays a responsibility upon the church to address it.

Again, the Confession of Belhar both reassures and challenges our church. It reassures us that God is active in bringing justice and true peace in the world, and that when we stand with the oppressed, the poor, the orphans and widows, the stranger, and the prisoner, we stand with God. The confession challenges us to take that stand with God.

We believe...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. (as printed in the *Minutes*, 2008, Part I, p. 1267)

At present, *The Book of Confessions* represents well our historical connection with European theology and our own confessing on the American scene. But it lacks any witness to our profoundly significant theological bonds with churches on other continents. It would be appropriate to select the Confession of Belhar for inclusion as such a witness both because of our church’s sense of identification with the struggle for church unity and for racial justice that it represents, and also because it declares the Gospel powerfully to us in our own present situation.

The Confession of Belhar is increasingly recognized and respected by the church outside South Africa. It reflects major themes of the Reformed tradition: its deep biblical roots, its high Christology and Trinitarian theology, its emphasis on the sovereignty of God over all creation, its commitment to seek the visible unity of the church as the body

of Christ in whom the walls of hostility are broken down, its call for justice for all of humanity, its conviction that in our common baptism in the one Lord and one faith all have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to the ministry of reconciliation.

This confession has been granted confessional status by some Reformed churches in Europe [Germany and Belgium], Africa, and the Caribbean [the Dominican Republic]. Two of our sister Reformed churches in North America are in the process of adopting it: the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Many of our own church members know and identify strongly with this confession. It is being taught in our seminaries and being used in worship in some of our congregations. In this sense it already plays a role in our church's life. With its formal adoption, we expect the themes of this confession to permeate the life of our denomination in its liturgy, its theological and missional reflections, and its training of church officers, just as has happened with more recent confessions such as the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith. We are indebted to this confession for its reassurances and its challenges to shake us out of our comfort and strengthen us to make a bolder and more faithful witness to the Gospel. (*Minutes*, 2010, Part I, p. 1214–15)

The Advocacy Committee on Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC) and the Advocacy Committee on Women's Concerns (ACWC) both recommended the approval of Confession of Belhar.

The 219th General Assembly (2010) approved these amendments to the motion to send the Belhar Confession to the presbyteries for their votes:

Scripture references should be added by footnotes, using those references found in earlier versions of the Belhar Confession published by the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. The "Accompanying Letter" customarily included with the Belhar Confession should be printed in *The Book of Confessions* as a background document without confessional status. (*Minutes*, 2010, Part I, p. 1213) Scriptural Allusions may be found on page 9.

To direct the Office of Theology and Worship to create a fully inclusive language version of the Belhar Confession for the web similar to the inclusive language version of the Confession of 1967. (*Minutes*, 2010, Part I, p. 1214) This version is found on the PC(USA) Web site at <http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/belhar.pdf>.

The vote of the Theological Issues and Institutions Committee (16) on the proposed amendment was 43/11/1. The 219th General Assembly (2010) approved the committee's recommendation by a vote of 525/150/3. (*Minutes*, 2010, Part I, pp. 8, 9–10, 1213–19) For the full report go to <http://www.pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=3353&promoID=174>.

CONFESSION OF BELHAR

September 1986*

11.1. 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.

11.2. 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;¹
- 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;²
- 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;³
- 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;⁴ 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;⁵
- 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;⁶
- 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.

11.3. 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.⁷
- 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;⁸
- 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.

11.4. We believe

- that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;⁹
- 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;¹⁰
- that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right;
- 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;¹¹
- 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.

11.5. 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.¹²

Jesus is Lord.

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

Endnote

* 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.). Section numbers are OGA suggestions based on the document's five original sections and the numbering from *The Book of Confessions*.

SCRIPTURAL ALLUSIONS

Section 11.2.

1. Eph. 2:11–22
2. Eph. 4:1–16
3. Jn. 17:20–23
4. Phil. 2:1–5; 1 Cor. 12:4–31
5. Jn. 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
6. Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:1–11; Eph. 4:7–13; Gal. 3:27–28; Jas. 2:1–13

Section 11.3.

7. 2 Cor. 5:17–21; Mt. 5:13–16; Mt. 5:9; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21–22
8. Eph. 4:17–6:23; Rom. 6; Col. 1:9–14; Col. 2:13–19; Col. 3:1–4:6

Section 11.4.

9. Deut. 32:4; Lk. 2:14; Jn. 14:27
10. Eph. 2:14; Isa. 1:16–17; Jas. 1:27; Jas. 5:1–6; Lk. 1:46–55; Lk. 6:20–26; Lk. 7:22; Lk. 16:19–31
11. Ps. 146; Lk. 4:16–19; Rom. 6:13–18; Am. 5

Section 11.5.

12. Eph. 4:15–16; Acts. 5:29–33; 1 Pet. 2:18–25; 1 Pet. 3:15–18

ACCOMPANYING LETTER

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 so or should have been experienced as 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 risks 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 everyone 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 God before whom all is revealed. We do not make this confession from God's throne and from on high, but before God's throne and before other human beings. We plead therefore, that this Confession should 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 that threatens the gospel itself in our church and our country. Our heartfelt longing is that no-one will identify themselves 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, learned 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 their own eye. We know that the attitudes and conduct that 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 that 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 God's Spirit. We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope, liberation, salvation and true peace to our country.

Endnote

1. "The synod of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) adopted the draft Confession of Belhar in 1982 with an accompanying letter. These two documents should always be read together...." From the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO SESSIONS AND PRESBYTERIES FOR STUDYING CONFESSION OF BELHAR

We recommend that congregations, sessions, and presbyteries plan for a time of study prior to the presbytery's vote on the Confession of Belhar. This study can be done individually, but will be most effective when done with others so that different perspectives can be shared and the theology and understanding of the church expressed in the document can be discussed together. We recommend that participants read the introduction below before the meeting. Presbyteries should plan to allow at least two hours on the docket of a stated meeting for the purpose of this study.

An Introduction to the Confession of Belhar

The Confession of Belhar emerged out of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. In the nineteenth-century the Dutch Reformed Church decided to separate all non-white members into the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. Eventually, as Grand Apartheid was implemented in the middle of the twentieth century and separate homelands were established, this Mission Church became three: The Dutch Reformed Mission Church (the *colored* church), the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (the *black* church), and the Indian Reformed Church in South Africa (the *Indian* church).¹ The Belhar Confession was originally a product of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church as it protested the sin of apartheid. Just a few years later it became the confession of the Uniting Reformed Church, the reunion of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. It is a product of a conversation between the Theological Declaration of Barmen and the unjust realities of South Africa.² Clearly, the Confession of Belhar is a specific act of confession that emerged out of a specific context—a context that is non-European and non-North American. Commenting on Karl Barth's understanding of the act of confession, Dirk Smit, a South African theologian and one of the principal authors of the confession, says:³

Confession is a commentary on scripture, representing insight given to the church and presupposing risk and danger. It is born out of compulsion. It is geographically, temporally and materially limited. It always arises in a definite antithesis and conflict. It says a definite Yes only because a definite No is implied, otherwise it is no confession. It is public speech, on the basis of solid theological preparation and is intended to be heard, tested, and evaluated by others. Since there is a "notorious connection, even a unity, between the heresies of every age and place," it can be confidently expected that confessions written for another time and place, if they really express the Word of God, can again reveal and address conflicts at other times and in other places.⁴

The South African Context

While the legal, governmentally enforced practices of apartheid were in force from 1948–1994, the fact of "separateness" began early in the colonization of South Africa. Over time laws developed that pushed blacks and other "coloreds" to the margins, taking their lands and disenfranchising them.

As South Africa developed, there were two targets in the missionary enterprise. First, churches for settlers were established along the familiar lines of theologies and structures of the churches in their countries of origin. Second, missionary societies established churches among those whom they were converting to the Christian gospel. Thus, they were organized in rural areas, among mine workers, and in tribal areas. As missionaries went to settled, urban areas or to differing tribes and social classes, church structures divided along practical lines, creating economic, tribal, and racial separations.

In 1829, "some rural Dutch churches specifically asked for separate facilities and services for black converts."⁵ Properly understanding a theology of the Lord's Supper, the synod said, "No." There was to be no distinction among the baptized, *all* of whom are welcome at the *Lord's Table*. During the mid-nineteenth century, however, church officials reversed their earlier, clear decision. They allowed for the "weakness" of others (1 Corinthians 10:28) who did not understand or could not accept that the unity of the church meant very concretely *racial* unity. The church came to permit division—separation—along

racial lines. Ominously, what started as *permission* eventually became a legally enforced policy, not only in the church, but in society as well.

As disheartening as it is to see theology in service to sin, it is exactly because South African Christians claimed Scripture as authority that they were eventually persuaded that—on the basis of Scripture—a new way of living together was possible. “The claims of justice that weigh so heavily in the Scriptures worked their way into the consciousness of the people who read the whole Bible and were awakened to their plight.”⁶ According to Smit, there is a strong “spirituality of the Bible” among South African Christians. The writers of the Confession of Belhar considered that as they approached their work. They did not see their job to teach a new theology to the church. Rather, they asked the church “Is this what you believe? If so, affirm it.” Their confession was always in terms of the Bible. It was why they said what they said.⁷

The history of the development of apartheid is complex, and the history of its demise is equally complex. Uprisings in the townships, the death of Steve Biko, the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela were all part of a spiral of violence that led to strict enforcement on the part of the government. As well, there was intense international pressure on the government of South Africa to change. By 1990, F. W. de Klerk was in negotiations with Nelson Mandela (still imprisoned) to dismantle some of the structures of apartheid, but the change in the government cannot be understood without looking at the role of the churches. Smit says:

The international ecumenical movement played an increasing role in the anti-apartheid struggle. In 1970 the World Council of churches established the Programme to Combat Racism. During these years, many Christian churches rejected apartheid as sin and its theological justification as heresy. The Lutheran World Federation (1977) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1982) declared a *status confessionis*. WARC said: “We declare with Black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid (‘separate development’) is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the Gospel and, in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy.”⁸

In addition to this international and ecumenical pressure, there were statements from various Christian groups and denominations challenging the church’s support of racial separation. In particular, the *Kairos Document* (1985) radically attacked both the state theology and any church theology that proposed a cheap form of social harmony. The *Kairos Document* was a call to action. It even declared that force could be met by force in certain circumstances (cf. *Kairos*, paragraph 3.3, on Non-Violence).

It is into this mix that the Dutch Reformed Mission Church spoke the words of the Belhar Confession in 1982 and adopted it in 1986.

An Ecumenical Confession

The Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) are also in the process of adding the Confession of Belhar to their confessional standards. The RCA began a decade of study of Belhar in 2000. The 2010 RCA General Synod adopted the Belhar Confession as a standard of unity following an affirmative vote by two-thirds of the RCA’s classes (which are comparable to our presbyteries). The 2009 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America set in motion the process of adding the Confession of Belhar as the fourth confession of the CRCNA, with a final decision to come in 2012.

Endnotes

1. In South Africa, the term *black* is sometimes used broadly to refer to all non-white persons (*black*, *colored*, and *Indian*) and other times to refer more specifically to those of sub-Saharan ancestry. *Colored* persons have ancestry from Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Holland, England, France, and sub-Saharan Africa—the term *brown* is used as well. *Indians* trace their ancestry to the Indian sub-continent. *White* refers to persons of Northern European ancestry, primarily Dutch, English, and French.

2. Comment noted in discussion at a meeting at the American Academy of Religion, November 21, 2005.
3. The two principal authors of the Confession of Belhar were H. Russell Botman and Dirk Jacobus Smit.
4. Smit, Dirk J., “‘No other motives would give us the right’—Reflections on contextuality from a Reformed experience,” in *Christian Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Studies in Reformed Theology 8, M.E. Brinkman & D. van Keulen, eds., Zoetermeer: Meinema, pp. 130–159; see also *Essays in Public Theology*, Dirk J. Smit, African Sun Media, 2007, Chapter 9, p. 157.
5. Smit, Dirk J., “Reformed Faith, Justice, and the Struggle against Apartheid,” *Reformed World*, 55/4 (December 2005), p. 356.
6. Clifford Anderson, Review of *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, eds., (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society*, 41,4 (December 1998), p. 658.
7. From a phone conversation between Eunice T. McGarrahan and Professor Smit on May 26, 2006.
8. Smit, Dirk J., “Reformed Faith, Justice, and the Struggle against Apartheid,” *Reformed World*, 55/4 (December 2005), p. 359. The quotation is from “Resolution on Racism and South Africa.” *Ottawa 1982—Proceedings of the 21st General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational)* Held at Ottawa, Canada, August 17–27, 1982. Geneva, Offices of the WARC, 1983, p.178.

This introduction was adapted from *A Study of the Belhar Confession and Its Accompanying Letter* by Eunice T. McGarrahan (Louisville: Office of Theology and Worship, PC(USA), 2008). Copies of the study can be purchased at the PC(USA) online store <http://store.pcusa.org/2116208001> or downloaded at <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/belhar-confession-study-guide/>.

**ABBREVIATED STUDY GUIDE FOR
CONFESSION OF BELHAR AND ACCOMPANYING LETTER**

I. Call for God’s help and focus those gathered on the task at hand (10 minutes)

Call to Worship

One: In life and in death we belong to God.

Many: **Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.** (A Brief Statement of Faith, *The Book of Confessions*, C-10.1, 1-6)

Opening Hymn “When We Are Living” (SOMOS DEL SEÑOR) Presbyterian Hymnal #400

Opening Prayer

Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our minds to your Spirit that we may be one with Christ our Lord, and serve as faithful disciples, through Jesus Christ. Amen.
(*Book of Common Worship*, page 30)

II. Introduce the process that will be used to study and discuss the Confession of Belhar (5 min.)

III. Engage the text of the Confession of Belhar (60 min.)

Break into smaller groups (preferably 6–8 people) around tables, for the following: (45 min.)

A. Have someone read the Accompanying Letter aloud

1. In what ways and with what words did the authors of the Confession of Belhar demonstrate their understanding of the unity of the church?
2. How did they see the relationship between unity in the church and justice (or lack thereof)?

B. Have someone read Articles 1 and 2 of the Confession of Belhar aloud

1. How does Article 1 set the stage for the rest of the confession?
2. How is the church confessed here?
3. How does Article 2 speak of diversity and reconciliation? Does anything surprise you about this?
4. What truth is being confessed?
5. What falsehoods are being rejected?

C. Have someone read Article 3 aloud

1. How does the Confession of Belhar describe the message of reconciliation?
2. Why is the credibility of the Gospel affected by “enforced separation of people on a racial basis”?
3. What truth is being confessed?
4. What falsehoods are being rejected?

D. Have someone read Articles 4 and 5 aloud

1. Based on Article 4, describe who God is and what God does.
2. Article 4 is, in a significant way, an elucidation of the phrase “God ... is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged.” How do you respond to this portrayal of God?

3. How do you respond to the description of the church “as the possession of God”?
4. What are we called to do in response?

Re-gather as a large group and invite groups to share their responses to the questions above, taking sections A–D in sequence. Allow time for responses to each group of questions and each of the articles of the confession.

IV. Shall we incorporate the Confession of Belhar into our confession of the faith that constitutes us? (30 minutes)

The 219th General Assembly (2010) has asked the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to add the Confession of Belhar to our Constitution by adding it to *The Book of Confessions* and thereby making it part of the articulation of the faith that constitutes us as a denomination within the one church. We have noted in our *Book of Order* that the documents in *The Book of Confessions* tell us and the world “who and what [the church] is, what it believes, what it resolves to do.” (*Book of Order*, G-2.0100a; the proposed new Form of Government also includes this affirmation in F-2.01) Invite the group to respond:

A. “... who and what it is, ...”

1. What does the Confession of Belhar tell us and the world about what and who we (the church) are?
2. How does this add to what the documents in *The Book of Confessions* say about who and what we (the church) are?

B. “... what it believes ...”

1. What does the Confession of Belhar tell us and the world about what we (the church) believe?
2. How does this add to what the documents in *The Book of Confessions* say about what we (the church) believe?

C. “... what we resolve to do ...”

What does the Confession of Belhar commit us to do?

V. Conclude with prayer

CONFESSIONS OF FAITH IN THE REFORMED TRADITION¹

The designation “Reformed” for our ecclesial tradition derives from a distinctive appreciation of what it means to confess the faith, and a characteristic understanding of the role of confessions in reforming the church. From the beginning, churches that followed the lead of Zwingli and Calvin were characterized by the conviction that each church is called to confess the faith *in tempore* and *in loco*—in its particular “time” and “place.” As the influence of the sixteenth century Swiss reformation spread, new churches generated confessions of faith as expressions of both the freedom and the obligation to proclaim the gospel in their own contexts. In the sixteenth century alone, Reformed churches produced over sixty confessions of faith.² In the twentieth century, more than twenty-five churches adopted new confessions.³ Because of the profusion of personal, local, and national confessions in the sixteenth century, the early Reformed Christians were dismissively called “the confessionalists.”

Multiple confessions grow from a firm conviction about declaring the faith, coupled with alertness to the danger of reliance on a particular declaration. In addition to the Reformed obligation to confess the faith in each time and place, Reformed churches have been acutely aware of the dangers of idolatry, including the idolatry of exalting creeds and confessions above their status as secondary authorities, subordinate to Scripture. The Reformed stance toward confessing the faith is evident in the statement of Heinrich Bullinger at the signing of the First Helvetic [Swiss] Confession in 1536:

We wish in no way to prescribe for all churches through these articles a single rule of faith. For we acknowledge no other rule of faith than Holy Scripture.... We grant to everyone the freedom to use his own expressions which are suitable for his church and will make use of this freedom ourselves, at the same time defending the true sense of this Confession against distortions.⁴

There have been times when particular Reformed churches have embraced a single historic confession to express their faith and guide their action—often the Westminster Confession of Faith—but even then it is understood that confessional practice entails the recognition of confessional mutability. Westminster itself attests that “All synods or councils since the apostles’ times ... may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith and practice, but to be used as a help in both.”⁵ Nevertheless, confessions remain essential components of the church’s faith and life, for it is through confession of core beliefs, as an aid to faith and practice, that a Reformed church defines for itself and declares to the world “who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do.”⁶

Within the Reformed tradition, the confessional witness of each church in its own time and place is understood to be a vital aspect of the continuing reform of the church. But before a church can confess faith, the church must first listen, for it is in hearing the Word of God that the church’s faith and life are questioned and renewed. Faithful listening to God’s Word is essential to ensuring that a church’s confession is shaped by the gospel rather than by its own interests. Because self-absorption is a corporate as well as a personal possibility, churches must measure their faith and life by the norm of God’s Word: does the church speak and act in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture?

Even as a particular church listens expectantly and then speaks faithfully, it should not imagine that its confession of faith belongs to itself alone, however, or that its contextual witness takes place in isolation from other churches. The church in each place is bound to churches in other places by deep patterns of mutual responsibility, and thus no one church should act unilaterally. At its best, the Reformed tradition’s deep commitment to the catholicity of the church encourages shared witness, not solitary declaration. A striking instance of the Reformed sense of mutual responsibility and accountability can be seen in the Preface to the Scots Confession of 1560. The church in Scotland was pleased “to have made known to the world the doctrine which we profess and for which we have

suffered abuse and danger,” but it was not content simply to announce its confession. Thus, the Preface goes on to request that

... if any man will note in our Confession any chapter or sentence contrary to God’s Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity’s sake to inform us of it in writing; and we, upon our honor, do promise him that by God’s grace we shall give him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from Holy Scripture, or else we shall alter whatever he can prove to be wrong.⁷

This “testing” of confessional witness within a wider community of churches is a guard against the parochialism that imagines one church’s time and place to be the only time and place that matters.

North American churches are privileged to hear contemporary Reformed confessions of Christian faith that are voiced in contexts that differ from our own. Their very difference informs and challenges our confession in our own context. Does *our* context also influence our reading of Scripture? Can our reading of Scripture be deepened by receiving insights that come from the readings of others?

The church’s contemporary context is a necessary element in the authentic articulation of its faith and life. Receiving present witness does not mean discarding previous witness, however, as if we, in our time and place, have reached the pinnacle of Christian knowledge and church life. Those who have lived and died the faith before us have Christian wisdom to share with us, insights that can expand our horizon and deepen our comprehension of God’s Way in the world.

Reformed churches agree that the church’s present witness is not confined to what we think and say in our own time and place. Affirming the convictions of those who have lived and died the faith before us is one form of the church’s contemporary witness, together with the present witness of new statements of faith. From the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds to the formal confessions of present-day churches, the whole communion of saints bears witness to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Thus, contemporary confession of faith may find its full expression in the re-appropriation of past articulations—not as accounts of what people used to believe, but as deep expressions of current faith and faithfulness.

The Continuing Reform of the Church

Reformed confession of faith is not a casual undertaking. Churches typically make confession out of necessity, not simply because they think it would be a pleasant thing to do. Necessity comes in many forms, but most often churches are compelled to express their faith when they experience threats to the integrity of their witness coming from internal confusion about core matters of faith, from the culture’s rival accounts of truth and morals, or from threats to the church’s freedom.

Internal confusion: Churches consistently express their faith when confronted by confusion about the truth of the gospel that jeopardizes the integrity of their proclamation. In the fourth century Nicene Creed, the church confirmed fully Trinitarian faith in opposition to theologies that consigned Christ and the Spirit to subordinate status. The church’s confession was more than ecclesial quibbling over a theological abstraction. The crucial question was whether God had come to humankind in the person of Jesus Christ, or had remained aloof, only sending an emissary. The answer had profound implications for Christian confidence in the reality of salvation. Could Christians believe that Christ was “true God,” and therefore trust that the salvation announced and accomplished in Jesus Christ was God’s gracious will? Or was Christ something less than God, so that God’s will remained mysterious—an uncertain purpose behind, above, and beyond the words and deeds of Jesus?

Culture’s challenge: Churches also express their faith in order to make clear to Christians the points at which cultural, social, and political realities embody norms and conventions that are contradictions of the gospel. In 1960’s America, churches were faced with multiple forms of social fragmentation and

antagonism. The United Presbyterian Church was convinced it had an insight into the gospel that needed to be heard by the world and by its own members. In its Confession of 1967 it declared that, “God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the mission of reconciliation to which he has called his church are the heart of the gospel in any age. Our generation stands in peculiar need of reconciliation in Christ. Accordingly, this Confession of 1967 is built upon that theme.”⁸

Threats to the church: In 1930’s Germany, the churches were faced with Nazi government pressure to compromise their theological and ecclesial independence. Representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches came together and spoke boldly: “Be not deceived by loose talk, as if we meant to oppose the unity of the German nation! Do not listen to the seducers who pervert our intentions ... We publicly declare before all evangelical churches in Germany that what they hold in common in this Confession is grievously imperiled, and with it the unity of the German Evangelical Church.”⁹ The Theological Declaration of Barmen did not assume a protective or defensive stance, but rather set out six “evangelical truths” that proclaimed the church’s freedom from all human events, powers, figures, and truths, and the church’s freedom for the one Word of God, Jesus Christ.

Often, multiple motivations are present in churches’ declarations of faith, but confessions that endure are more than bland restatements of Christian verities. A recent theological statement of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly may overstate the case, but it is true more often than not that, “the church writes confessions of faith when it faces a situation of life or a situation of death so urgent that it cannot remain silent, but must speak ...”¹⁰ Since urgent situations are seldom unique to a particular time and place, the church may need to hear the voices of the whole communion of saints from all times and places. In this way, the integrity of confession can be protected from the distortions of ecclesial nearsightedness.

Confessional testing of the church’s witness demonstrates the Reformed conviction that all confessions of faith must be interrogated by Scripture, the word of God to us and for us. Churches in the Reformed tradition understand themselves as churches that are “reformed and always to be reformed [*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*] according to the word of God [*secundum verbum Dei*].” This motto of the Reformed tradition makes clear that it is God who has reformed the church, and that it is God who will continue to reform the church. One popular but mistaken translation of the Latin motto is “the church reformed, always reforming,” as if the church were always reforming itself, or worse, simply changing itself. Reform of the church is not mere change, certainly not “modernization,” and never a product of the church’s own achievement. The church is not the agent of its own reformation; reform of the church comes from the leading of God’s word, made present in the power of the Spirit.

The church is always to be reformed “according to the word of God,” that is, in accord with, consistent with, the clear witness of Scripture. The Reformed tradition has always understood itself to be “Scripture-shaped.” Sixteenth century reformers were denounced for advocating change for its own sake. “We are accused of rash and impious innovation,” wrote Calvin, “of having ventured to propose any change at all in the former state of the church.”¹¹ Calvin responded that reform of the church’s doctrine, worship, and governance had no ground other than “the exact standard of the Word of God.” Reform of the church was happening because Christians “look for the good which they desire from none but God, that they confide in his power, trust in his goodness, depend on his truth, and turn to him with the whole heart, rest on him with full hope, and resort to him in necessity ...”¹² Reform of the church—in the sixteenth century and the twenty-first century—grows from response to the gracious action of God; the church is always *to be reformed* by God.

Reformed understandings of Scripture and its use are not simple or uniform, but Scripture remains at the center of Reformed thought and life. The centrality of Scripture is more than a formal distinctive, however. Nothing less than the continuing reformation of the church is at stake in preserving ecclesial acknowledgment of Scripture’s authority. Scripture is the primary means by which the Holy Spirit

reveals God's truth and purpose to the church: "Reformed doctrine, in order to be itself at all, needs the free winds wherein the word of God is recognized in Scripture and Spirit; it needs the vastness and energy of untamed nature whereby once the Reformed churches, as by a volcanic eruption were 'born'—or, as Christian churches, born again. 'Reformed by God's Word' is the ancient and real meaning of the name we bear."¹³

Endnotes

1. This resource document consists of excerpts from Joseph D. Small, *To Be Reformed: Living the Tradition* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2010) chapter 1, "Why Reformed?"
2. cf. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*.
3. cf. Lukas Vischer, ed. *Reformed Witness Today: A Collection of Confessions and Statements of Faith Issued by Reformed Churches* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1982)
4. Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1877) vol. I, p. 389f.
5. The Westminster Confession of Faith, XXXIII. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2004) 6.175, p.158.
6. *Book of Order*, G-2.0100. (Louisville KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2009)
7. Preface to "The Scottish Confession of Faith" in Cochrane, *A Collection of Confessions*, p. 165.
8. The Confession of 1967, *The Book of Confessions*, 9.06, p. 253.
9. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, *The Book of Confessions*, 8.03, 8.07, p. 247–248.
10. "The Confessional Nature of the Church" in *The Book of Confessions*, p. xiii.
11. John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, J.K.S. Reis, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954) p 184.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
13. Karl Barth, "The Doctrinal Task of the Reformed Churches" in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Douglas Horton, trans. (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1928), p. 247.

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CONTENTS

Note from the Stated Clerk	1
General Assembly Action	3
Confession of Belhar	6
Scriptural Allusions	9
Accompanying Letter	10
Recommendations for Studying Confession of Belhar	12
Abbreviated Study Guide.....	15
Confessions of Faith in the Reformed Tradition.....	17