Unity Reconciliation and Justice
A Study Guide for the Belhar Confession
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Introduction

The Belhar Confession was first drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa. It was adopted in 1986, and later it would become one of the standards of unity (along with the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Heidelberg Catechism) for the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, a merger denomination of two South African Reformed churches.

The confession addresses the following three issues: 1) the unity of the church, 2) reconciliation, and 3) the justice God desires in the world. In all three of its articles, affirmations are followed by a rejection of false doctrine (although there is no explicit mention of apartheid, except in an explanatory footnote on the motivation for drafting the confession). No other major confession combines these three issues. Indeed, the historic sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed confessions written out of that context said very little about the unity of the church, and there are no references to the biblical imperatives of reconciliation and God's intentions of justice in the world.

Thus, the implications of the Belhar Confession are far wider than its original context. And therefore, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa has invited the Reformed family worldwide to recognize the Belhar Confession as a gift to all the churches.

This study guide provides an opportunity for Reformed Christians to reflect on and consider the Belhar Confession as a living confession of faith that speaks directly to our mission and ministry here in North America. What is it that we believe God is calling us to be and do in this day and time? How might we as Christian people understand the will of God and live this out as those “called to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world”? And how does scripture guide us in these questions?

In drawing on the collective wisdom of those who prepared the Belhar Confession and of those who commended it for use in the church, we are saying our understanding of God's Word and God's will for our lives and for our world comes not individually, but through our shared discernment in the life of the church. Therefore, we must think, study, and search together, testing our own individual assumptions with each other and against Scripture, being open to the Spirit, risking disagreement, and treating each other with the mutual affirmation and admonition that the gospel of Christ demands.

This study of the Belhar Confession, then, is not the stuff of political debates, in which opposing groups too often marshal their energies and resources simply to “win.” Rather, as the church, we have the opportunity to approach the Belhar, and the challenging issues it raises, differently: to seek together biblical truth, to lovingly speak that truth to each other, and to encourage each other to walk in that truth. Let us be Christian brothers and sisters, seeking to use the greater wisdom of the church to understand more fully who God would have us be and how we might carry out effective mission and ministry together.

*RCA Statement of Mission and Vision
If the church is to grow in faithful and fruitful ministries, and if we are to have mission- 
al credibility and influence in the North American context, we will need to engage the 
challenges of racial reconciliation and the biblical imperative of a multicultural com- 
unity that bears witness in the church to God’s intention in Christ for all humanity. The 
phenomenal growth of the early Christian church, in which “all the believers were 
together and had everything in common” (Acts 2:44), points to the energizing, trans- 
forming power of unity in Christ and the radical witness of God’s transforming love for 
the world. The Belhar Confession has the potential to serve North American Reformed 
denominations as it does the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, “as an 
instrument for profound self-examination, to help determine whether the church really 
lives by the faith it proclaims” (Dr. Molefi Seth Pitikoe, ecumenical representative from 
the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa to the 2002 RCA General Synod).

Simply put, the Belhar Confession provides us with a historic opportunity to consider 
embracing a confession that will undergird our mission and ministry with a fuller, 
biblical understanding of God’s intentions for the church and the world. It provides a 
confessional basis for our commitment to follow Christ in mission in a lost and broken 
world so loved by God. In concert with the working of God’s Spirit, the Belhar 
Confession can guide our churches into further obedience to the gospel as we seek to 
bear witness in word and deed to the love of God in Jesus Christ for all the world.

Brothers and sisters, I trust you will reflect prayerfully on your response to the words 
of this confession of faith.

Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson 
General Secretary, Reformed Church in America
Belhar Confession

Prologue
The Belhar Confession has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in Southern Africa. This “outcry of faith” and “call for faithfulness and repentance” was first drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) under the leadership of Allan Boesak. The DRMC took the lead in declaring that apartheid constituted a status confessionis in which the truth of the gospel was at stake.

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

Belhar’s relevance is not confined to Southern Africa. It addresses three key issues of concern to all churches: unity of the church and unity among all people, reconciliation within church and society, and God’s justice. Belhar is currently being studied by a number of Reformed churches. As one member of the URCSA has said, “We carry this confession on behalf of all the Reformed churches. We do not think of it as ours alone.”

Confession of Belhar
September 1986

1. We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit. This, God has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

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

We believe
• that Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another (Eph. 2:11-22);
• that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God’s Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16);
• that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted (John 17:20-23);
• that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of
Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and uphold one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity (Phil. 2:1-5; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; John 13:1-17; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; Eph. 4:1-6; Eph. 3:14-20; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 1 Cor. 11:17-34; Gal. 6:2; 2 Cor. 1:3-4);

- that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-11; Eph. 4:7-13; Gal. 3:27-28; James 2:1-13);
- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutization hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation;
- which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation;
- which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;
- which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.

3. We believe

- that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ, that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Cor. 5:17-21; Matt. 5:13-16; Matt. 5:9; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21–22).
- that God’s lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God’s lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world (Eph. 4:17–6:23; Rom. 6; Col. 1:9-14; Col. 2:13-19; Col. 3:1–4:6);
- that the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;
- that any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.

Therefore, we reject any doctrine

- which, in such a situation, sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.

4. We believe

- that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the
destitute, the poor and the wronged;
• that God calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
• that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;
• that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;
• that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;
• that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right (Deut. 32:4; Luke 2:14; John 14:27; Eph. 2:14; Isa. 1:16-17; James 1:27; James 5:1-6; Luke 1:46-55; Luke 6:20-26; Luke 7:22; Luke 16:19-31; Ps. 146; Luke 4:16-19; Rom. 6:13-18; Amos 5);
• that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
• that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.

Therefore, we reject any ideology
• which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

5. We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence (Eph. 4:15-16; Acts 5:29-33; 1 Peter 2:18-25; 1 Peter 3:15-18).

Jesus is Lord.

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

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.). It is reprinted here with permission.
The first session

Session 1, “Introduction to the Study Guide” (page 11), suggests a structure for your first study group session. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to your group’s needs. If participants do not all know each other, make introductions. In this event, you may also wish to have nametags available.

During the group-building activities, leaders should be first to share in order to model a response and give participants time to reflect on their own answers.

Before the “Meet the Guide” exercise, distribute the study guide to participants. Walk participants through “Using This Study Guide,” emphasizing the pre-session exercises.

Encourage participants to read the Belhar Confession (pp. 3-5), during the coming week.

At the end of the session, you may wish to request volunteers who will take responsibility for music and/or refreshments. If you wish to make assignments with respect to the pre-session exercises, review the exercises with the group and request volunteers. If people are not ready to commit to particular assignments, that’s okay. Simply emphasize again the importance of each participant engaging in some way with the pre-session material. Truly, participants will get out of the material what they put into it!

You may wish to close the session with a familiar hymn expressing unity in Christ or calling on God’s Spirit for illumination and guidance.

Before each session, read through the session material and choose which exercises to go through with your group. (You can always modify this plan according to time constraints if something goes faster or slower than expected.) This will also help you discover if you need to provide extra items for specific activities.

Handling disagreement

This study of the Belhar Confession has been prepared by the Reformed Church in America’s Commission on Christian Unity, based on its ongoing series of encounters with theologians from the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. It addresses the key themes of the Belhar in relation to contemporary issues of economics, justice, and race.

We know from our life together as a church that these issues can be difficult ones for conversation, full of emotion, passion, and differing perspectives. Your task will be to create a climate in which all members of your group can be heard, a climate that will encourage active discussion of the issues, even disagreement, without demeaning persons. How is that best done?

1. Create a safe environment for conversation by encouraging questions.
2. Allow participants to wrestle with the statements in the Belhar; fight the temptation to seek or provide neat, tidy answers.
3. Encourage participants to engage seriously with the biblical texts offered in support of the Belhar’s assertions; they are the basis for the Belhar’s authority.
4. Make sure that those who hold opposing viewpoints are neither ignored nor intimidated.
5. Watch for people in the group who are silent; some people need a gentle invitation to participate.
6. Don’t be afraid of vigorous dialogue. Important issues arouse strong emotions. Be open to those emotions; encourage people to express them in ways that build community and foster deeper understanding.
Additional suggestions

Delegate. The study guide includes world songs and world recipes for refreshments; you may wish to delegate leadership for those to others in the group.

Take liberties. The elements of each session are intended as a guide, not as a rigid structure. Do not feel obliged to discuss every question. They are there to help the group engage with the material presented and with the confession itself. Mold the sessions to your group's backgrounds, needs, and interests.

Stay on topic. You may find yourselves wanting to leap to related issues or to related Belhar topics. Resist the urge; what isn't addressed in one session will likely be addressed later. Don't allow sessions to be derailed from the focus.

Plan ahead. You might consider assigning pre-session exercises to specific group members in order to ensure a variety of explorations.

Encourage preparation. Pre-session preparation by group members will be important to the success of the study. Encourage participants to spend at least half an hour during the week reflecting on the biblical text for that session, and at least half an hour more on one or more of the pre-session exercises.

Be sensitive. Ask periodically how people are feeling. If there is significant uneasiness, step back from the material and explore those feelings. Allow participants to evaluate each session as they go, and use those reflections in planning and leading later sessions.

Pray. As group leader, pray daily for the members of your group, for your group as a whole, and for other groups throughout the denomination engaged in this study. Make it a practice to pray at the beginning and end of every study group session. Encourage participants to pray about what they are learning and to pray for one another.

Remember: What we say is very important; so is how we say it. We must continue to talk with each other and, through the Scriptures, to seek God's guidance and grace.
Using This Study Guide

There are nine sessions in the study guide. In a group setting, which is where this study guide will be most useful, you will need a minimum of nine gatherings to cover this material. However, each session could provide material for two to four weeks, depending on how deeply the group wishes to explore the issues. Here is an outline of session structure and content for Sessions 2 through 9. (As an introductory session, Session 1 has a different format.)

Focus: State the main point of the session.

Pre-session exercises
- Scripture reading: in keeping with the Reformed principle of sola scriptura (scripture alone as our ultimate authority), everyone is asked to read and reflect on the biblical text. It is suggested that approximately half an hour be set aside each week for this.
- Other readings (see Appendix A): These readings come from a variety of sources. Each group member is asked to read one selection or more before each session.
- Choose one: each group member is asked to engage with at least one question or activity in preparation for the group session.

Introduction: Briefly explain the content and direction of the session.

Song: (optional) Sing a song from the world church to reinforce the session focus and enhance appreciation for Christians from other cultures. Songs are found in Appendix B.

In-session exercises
- Reflect: Group members share the work they have done in preparation for the session.
- Connect to the Belhar: Explore the Belhar Confession from the standpoint of the session’s focus.
- Respond: “Bring the Belhar Confession home”—explore its relevance to your own contexts and begin to make the choices and changes that will allow the Belhar to “do its work in us.”
- Further options: Choose from alternative or additional questions and activities.

Prayer (and sometimes an activity) closes the session.

Dig deeper: (optional) There are options for those who wish to pursue the issues raised in the session in greater depth.
Ground Rules for Constructive Communication

Here are ground rules that contribute to constructive communication:

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

2. Do not interrupt when others are speaking.

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

4. Paraphrase what you heard another say before responding to it.

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

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

7. Don’t lay blame on yourself or others.

8. Don’t personalize issues.

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

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

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

12. Look for points of agreement.

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

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

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

If your group chooses to use these ground rules, be ready as leaders and as group members to enforce them.

Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of love.
—Frederick Buechner