

# **The Belhar Speaks to Us: Experiencing Prejudice in Our Midst A Lesson on the Belhar Confession**

By Charlie White

## **Audience**

This lesson is oriented toward youth of high school age in the Reformed Church in America (or another church focused largely on western European confessional models). Ideally, it should be offered to children of adults engaged in a study of the Belhar Confession; it corresponds well to lesson 4 of *Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Study Guide for the Belhar Confession*, available from Faith Alive Christian Resources, and parts of the discussion questions are framed from this study guide. It is written from a North American perspective, but can easily be adapted for your local context.

## **Purpose**

By experiencing exclusion, students will develop a deeper understanding of the exclusion inherent in the structure of the Reformed Church in America.

## **Objectives**

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Identify what it feels like to be excluded (albeit in a safe way).
- Identify ways in which the church is exclusive.
- See how the Belhar Confession addresses the problem of exclusion in the church.

## **Material and Space Requirements**

This lesson breaks students into groups based on school district or gender and ethnicity, or along other lines that work well for your particular group of students. For each group, you will need:

- One copy of the attached “School Values” worksheet.
- A pen or pencil.

You also will need a space for each group to collaborate on the worksheet. For the large-group activity, students should gather in a circle.

You will also need a writing surface large enough for the large group to see, and a world map, and push-pins or post-it notes. Lastly, provide a copy of the Belhar Confession to each student.

## Lesson Outline

### **Introduction and Statement of Purpose** (*20 minutes*)

In order to help students experience exclusion firsthand in a meaningful way, the purpose will be stated twice in the course of this lesson. It will be the same purpose, but it should take on a distinct meaning by the second time you state it. Because of the nature of this lesson, the introduction is longer and a mini-lesson unto itself.

**First Introduction and Statement of Purpose:** Explain that you will be exploring prejudice and exclusion in your local community and, based on personal experiences of exclusion, work toward understanding how the global church participates in exclusion.

**Mini-Lesson:** Tell students they will be filling out a survey to facilitate the discussion. Break the large group down into smaller groups based on social factors—school districts work well for this. It is preferable if you end up with one very large group and several smaller groups.

Distribute the survey, and have each group fill one out. Go over the questions together, and give the groups time to fill them out. Smaller groups will finish more quickly than larger ones. Allow them to converse with one another on matters not related to the lesson, but do not allow groups that have not finished to stray off task.

Have each group pick a representative. Once all groups have finished, invite the representative from the “most privileged” group (ideally one of the smaller groups) to present their group’s findings. Write their findings on the board.

When they are done, ask students in the privileged group pointed questions about their answers. Assume that the group’s interpretations are correct. Hopefully, a student will point out that your methods are disagreeable; if not, stop this questioning after a few minutes.

### **Reflect** (*15 minutes*)

Acknowledge that the survey is not actually the main tool of this lesson, and explain that its purpose was to show students what institutional exclusion feels like. Restate the purpose: explain that you will be exploring prejudice and exclusion in your local community and, based on personal experiences of exclusion, try to better understand how the global church participates in exclusion.

Ask your students these questions:

- (Groups that did not present) How does it feel to be excluded?
- (The group that presented) How does it feel now that you are aware of this exclusion?
- What are some ways this kind of exclusion is practiced around or by us?
- How does the church practice exclusion?

Explain that the Reformed Church in America is founded on three confessions: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Belgic Confession. (If your students should know this, encourage them to list the confessions.) Ask the students what they understand a confession to be, and how important it is to the church.

### **Connect** (10 minutes)

Pick three students who were not members of the “privileged” group that was the focus earlier in the lesson. Give each a pushpin of the same color. On the map, have two of them put their pushpins in the Netherlands and one put his or her pushpin in Belgium. When they are done, explain that these are where the three RCA confessions came from. Ask students if—given their experience and understanding of a confession—this seems fair to the global church.

Have a fourth student place a pushpin of a different color on the western end of South Africa, and explain that a church in South Africa has made a gift of a new confession to the Reformed Church in America, which is considering whether to adopt it as a fourth RCA confession.

As a group, read paragraphs 1 and 2 of the Belhar Confession.

### **Respond** (10 minutes)

Ask students:

- What does the Belhar say about what we’ve learned and experienced today?
- What stands out to you in these paragraphs of the Belhar Confession?
- How could the church live out the values of the Belhar?

Let the conversation flow organically—whether or not you address all the questions is secondary to the quality of the students’ discussion. Encourage students to take home the document and read through the rest of it, and to talk with their families about exclusion and unity.

## **Prayer (5 minutes)**

Move into a time of prayer, stating that you will be praying for unity and justice. Tell students you will begin with a time of silence and conclude with a prayer of Clement, third bishop of Rome. Ask them to reflect on injustice in their lives, and ask God to show them ways to bring justice into their community.

### **Prayer**

We beg you, Lord, to help and defend us.  
Deliver the oppressed,  
have compassion on the despised,  
raise the fallen,  
reveal yourself to the needy,  
heal the sick,  
bring back those who have strayed from you,  
feed the hungry,  
lift up the weak,  
remove the prisoners' chains.  
May every nation come to know that you are God alone,  
that Jesus is your Son,  
that we are your people, the sheep of your pasture.

# Confession of Belhar

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

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

## We believe

- that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another (Eph. 2:11-22);
- that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16);
- that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted (John 17:20-23);
- that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity (Phil. 2:1-5; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; John 13:1-17; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; Eph. 4:1-6; Eph. 3:14-20; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 1 Cor. 11:17-34; Gal. 6:2; 2 Cor. 1:3-4);
- that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-11; Eph. 4:7-13; Gal. 3:27-28; James 2:1-13);
- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church.

### **Therefore, we reject any doctrine**

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

### **3. We believe**

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

### **Therefore, we reject any doctrine**

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

#### **4. We believe**

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

#### **Therefore, we reject any ideology**

- which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

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

Jesus is Lord.

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

## SCHOOL VALUES WORKSHEET

Take time in your groups to discuss the answers to these questions. You may not all agree on the responses, so when disagreements come up, compromise on the numbers. For all answers, 1 is “Strongly Disagree” and 5 is “Strongly Agree.”

Our school is ethnically diverse.	1	2	3	4	5
White students are the ethnic majority of our school.	1	2	3	4	5
Non-white students are a small minority of our school.	1	2	3	4	5
Minorities are treated fairly in our school.	1	2	3	4	5
Most of our students graduate.	1	2	3	4	5
Most of our graduates go to college.	1	2	3	4	5
Most of our students get good grades.	1	2	3	4	5
Our school is well-funded.	1	2	3	4	5
Our school has a good sports program.	1	2	3	4	5
Our school has a good arts program.	1	2	3	4	5
Our school has some exceptionally good teachers.	1	2	3	4	5

For the following questions, write one- or two-sentence responses.

The greatest challenge our school faces is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Increasing ethnic diversity at our school would \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The best solution to inequality in education is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_