

# *By Words and Spirit*



Scriptural Foundations of the  
Belhar Confession

**A 25-Day Devotional**  
and the Belhar Confession

# Introduction

Our meditations on the Belhar Confession begin with words from the Belhar Confession itself: “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.”

From the outset it is clear that the Belhar Confession is a cry from the heart of faith by fellow Christians discerning who God is in their situation. These Christians were hearing very different voices about God. One voice told them that:

- 1) God had established division between peoples as an eternal decree.
- 2) Because division was embedded in God’s mind, reconciliation between peoples was not on God’s agenda.
- 3) In a situation where one group of people clearly held and abused power over others, God took no interest in the injustice and took no side in the matter, preferring rather to focus on the status of the individual soul.

But the Holy Spirit was speaking with another voice, an inner testimony about God as revealed in the Scriptures:

- 1) A God whose will for the beloved is unity.
- 2) A God who thus commanded reconciliation between divisions, especially (but not only) within the church.
- 3) A God who, looking upon a world in which

injustice and enmity seem to hold the upper hand, takes the side of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged.

This was the situation in South Africa during the apartheid regime. Who was God? The God of the first voice, of the dominant Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa? Or the God who was speaking so clearly to the hearts of the black and colored churches?

The Belhar Confession sought to respond to that question. It is a confession not in the sense of a confession of sin, but in the sense that it is a voice arising from a context in which it is urgent that the people of God must speak what God has laid upon their hearts, even if it means punishment and suffering inflicted by the ruling authorities.

These meditations, centered on many of the Scripture passages on which the Belhar Confession is based, are offered to assist you in discerning whether the voice that spoke in the hearts of our South African brothers and sisters is a voice that speaks to your heart as well. Despite the differences (and because of the similarities) in our contexts, can you stand up and say yes to this confession and make it your own? At the end of each day’s brief devotional, there are a few questions that you may wish to ponder as you enter a time of prayer.

May God guide you along the way as you prayerfully open your heart, wait upon the Spirit, and listen for the Word of God.

# UNITY, Day One

By Paul Janssen

## Scripture reading: Ephesians 2:13-16

“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.”

—The Belhar Confession

The Belhar Confession begins where we believe it should: with the work of Christ. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul emphasizes the entirely unexpected, and thus miraculous, impact of Jesus’ death on the cross. How could it be at all possible? In a world where the fundamental division between Jews and Gentiles could never be healed, how could it ever be possible to unite the two groups? Yet that is what Jesus, the Messiah, did. “In his flesh he has made both groups into one...that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it” (Ephesians 2:14-16).

Can we hear how powerful it is for our South African sisters and brothers to begin their confession with this Scripture passage? How could it have been possible, in a world where the color line was absolute

and insurmountable, to speak of reconciling all people to God, thereby bringing hostility to an end? Surely it is an act of supreme generosity for those who were victims of one of the most brutally racist regimes to hear of a God whose primary work is to bring hostility to an end. No doubt there were many who did not want hostility to end; continuing hostility can serve the power base of both the powerful and the powerless.

But the Holy Spirit was speaking louder than the world. The Holy Spirit spoke to the writers of the Belhar, counseling them to seek reconciliation, not only with God, but with one another—which for them meant reconciliation with the very people who were oppressing them. What a miracle the cross of Christ has wrought!

### Questions for thought:

Against what fellow members of the body of Christ are you divided? What happens when you take that division to the foot of the cross? Are there any divisions too powerful for God to unite?

*Paul Janssen is the pastor and teacher of Pasack Reformed Church in Park Ridge, New Jersey.*

# UNITY, Day Two

By Ina Montoya

## Scripture reading: Ephesians 4:1-16

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

—The Belhar Confession

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

—Ephesians 4:3-6, NIV

Isn't it surprising how easily infants and small children can be distracted, turning their attention from one thing to another? One moment a child can be crying for a bottle, then when Mom or Dad says, “Look! Ooh! What's out the window?” he or she is trying to see what Mommy or Daddy is so excited about.

Funny—that's the analogy Paul is using about some members of the body of Christ (v. 14). Why? Because he wants us to focus on unity rather than being so easily distracted. So many talents under one calling are held together by the supporting ligaments of unity. The biggest dividers among any group are differences—differences in opinion, backgrounds, priorities, physical characteristics. We must remember that we are all part of one body.

In February 2009, I stood with five others in the church in Belhar, South Africa, where South African Christians first approved the confession. Chills ran down my spine as our guide, Carl Swart, said, “And that is where I sat on that day.” Such a victory for the body of Christ so far from my home.

Throughout the rest of our trip, however, I saw human weaknesses that kept up that wall against true unity. The effects of apartheid rang louder than ever while subtle but strong actions because of racial indifferences became even more visible. I could see the reason for such a confession as a reminder of God's grace and power to reconcile and unite the full body of Christ for us forgetful humans, who are so easily distracted.

As you pray for discernment, remember to keep growing, to stay focused, and to never stop believing.

True unity lies at the heart of the one faith under one God and Father of all. If we are truly sanctified, then we should be living holy and blameless lives. I saw the first glimpse of true unity during our tour of Robben Island, where political prisoners such as Nelson Mandela were held. Prisoners there refused to live by the caste system assigned to black, colored, or white people. After he was released, Mandela once commented that it was ironic that the effects of separation of race did not penetrate the prison walls.

### Questions for thought:

Will you refuse to live by the effects of separation of race? Are you living a life worthy of the calling you have received? What things distract you from forming the bond of peace?

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# UNITY, Day Three

By Earl James

## Scripture reading: John 17:20-23

As Jesus neared the end of his life on earth, he prayed this prayer. It was part of a larger prayer in which he prayed first for himself, then for his disciples. Finally, he prayed for those who would come after, those who would give their lives to him because of the words of his disciples. Those people include all of us; they include you and me.

Jesus' prayer was not casual. He prayed it when he knew he was about to be arrested, beaten, and killed. His divine side no doubt was at peace; his divine self knew the end game. He knew why he was going to die, that he would rise from death, and that his actions would redeem creation. But his human side no doubt reacted to the knowledge that he was about to die much like the same knowledge would affect us.

Do you know someone who knew her or his death was right around the corner? For some, that knowledge leads them to confidently affirm some core value or belief they held in life. "This," she or he might say, "I take with me to my grave!"

For others, the knowledge that they will be no more leads them to reject the moral and ethical boundary lines they held when they thought their lives were secure. That old saying "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die" grows out of such a lost security and lost hope.

For still others, the knowledge of impending death is too much to bear. This person loses his or her will to live, and merely vegetates. It is as though he or she is dead already.

Jesus' human side likely faced his impending death just as we must. Under the pressure of imminent death, he prayed this prayer.

Jesus' prayer for us is about unity. In it, he offers a picture of his hope for us and the purpose for his hope for us.

What do you imagine when you consider unity among Jesus' followers? What pictures come to your mind? Pulpit exchange? A community choir? A confession for the world to read and reckon with? Jesus' picture of unity was no less than his own relationship with the Father: "that they may all be one as you, Father, are in me and I am in you." The hunger in Jesus' heart for us was that our togetherness was as tight as his was with the Father, containing no taint of sin and as expansive as the Father's own will to reconcile the world to himself.

Can you take time this week to meditate deeply on this picture of unity among Jesus' followers, between you and others in your everyday life?

Unity among Christians is not an end in itself. In this passage, its purpose is clearly to witness something to the world. What is "the world"? The world includes those who do not know Jesus at all, as well as those who know him and hate him. Our unity is to be something the likes of which they have never experienced or even seen before. Our unity is to compel them to ask who we are and why we behave toward each other as we do. And when the world asks us followers to account for ourselves, all we can say together is that we live, work, and worship like this because of Jesus and because of the Father who sent him.

### Question for thought:

Can you take time this week to meditate deeply on the purpose of a unity that is irresistible both to those who do not know Jesus and to those who know and hate him?

*Earl James is the RCA's coordinator for multiracial initiatives and social justice.*

# UNITY, Day Four

By Abby Norton-Levering

## Scripture reading: Philippians 2:1-4

I feel a little claustrophobic when I read this passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians. The Belhar Confession echoes Paul when it makes the discomforting statement that "this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we...are of one soul and one mind." The idea that I may be merging with the rest of the public into an undifferentiated mass makes me feel like I need to take a breather. I'm not sure I want to be shoved together and forced to cuddle with some of those prickly people at the extremes of the Christian church or even the extremes of my own denomination, with whom I don't agree with on some issues I consider very important.

However, the passage from Philippians makes clear that this experience of "sharing in the Spirit" is what gives Paul joy, and it's what he desires for the church. All of us together are the body of Christ. God has made each of us a part of this body for the benefit of each part, and of the whole. It reminds me of the song "I Need You to Survive," by Hezekiah Walker and the Love Fellowship Choir. "I need you, you need me"—not only to survive, but to be complete. I need even those people I consider my enemies, so I must in humility consider their intrinsic worth. I am called to stand with them and even to find agreement with them, that "full accord" Paul speaks of.

That's not easy! How to begin? Walker's suggestion in the second verse of the song is simple: "I pray for you, you pray for me." When Christians of differing opinions put aside their differences to join hearts and minds together in public prayer, we reach toward the experience of one soul and one mind. This does not mean that in group prayer we are losing our differentiation from one another, thinking exactly the same prayerful thoughts, or saying exactly the same prayerful words. We are somehow held together in the unifying, all-encompassing experience of sending our prayers in the same direction and having them all heard by the one God, even when—and perhaps especially when—we are praying with and for our uncomfortable enemies, as Jesus instructs us to do (Matthew 5:44). If we can learn to pray together, then we can take other steps toward sharing in the Spirit, whether those steps be honest conversation, mediation, or serving together on common ground.

## Questions for thought:

Do you struggle to find unity with fellow Christians who disagree with you on issues you feel are very important? How can you seek to join your heart and mind in prayer with fellow Christians, even those you don't agree with?

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# UNITY, Day Five

By Paul Janssen

## **Scripture reading: 1 Corinthians 1:10-13**

Sometimes we get the idea that the early church was the “ideal” church—that everybody loved one another just as Jesus told them to, and that on account of their mutual love, thousands were drawn to confess Christ as their Lord and Savior. But that was not the case—at least, whatever peace there was in the beginning didn’t last for long. Several of Paul’s letters to the early church speak of controversies and struggles. 1 Corinthians is just such a letter.

Apparently a “party spirit” had broken out among the Corinthian Christians. Some said they were Paulians; others, Apollines; others, Cephasites; and, finally, some called themselves just plain Christ followers. People were drawn to the charismatic personality who appealed to their understanding of the world. It’s not at all hard to see similar tendencies in the church today. There are tribes of Warrenites, Osteenians, Schullerists, and who knows what else.

The church in South Africa has known some of its own charismatic personalities. One such leader of the church is Allan Boesak. Boesak was one of the drafters of the Belhar Confession, but he was by no means the only, or even the principal, writer. The Belhar is a common confession. It was never the voice of a single individual, but rather the voice that emerged from several churches, a voice through which the victims of apartheid heard the voice of God.

Still, it was news when Dr. Boesak presented a report to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern African’s 2008 general synod in which he applied the Belhar Confession to the question of whether gays and lesbians should be included at all levels of the life of the church, including ordination to ministry. Could this be the intent of the Belhar Confession? Did its call to unity demand that the whole church be united in this controversial issue?

The synod heard Dr. Boesak’s report and decided that no one person’s voice—even a very influential and famous person’s voice—could be used to force the church to go where it did not believe the Scriptures were leading it. Members of the URCSA said that they would not be Boesakites or even Belharians. Rather, they were followers of Jesus. Dr. Boesak has since left the URCSA over this conflict. Unity, said the church, was unity around the Word of God: Christ alone.

### **Questions for thought:**

Have you ever been tempted to follow the teaching of a charismatic leader instead of following Christ? How did you get back on track again? How do you tell the difference between what God is saying to you and what God is saying to the church?

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# UNITY, Day Six

By Gene and Sandra Fisher

## Scripture reading: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Service to fellow human beings takes various forms. A South African term, *ubuntu*, embodies the idea that it is impossible to exist as a human being in isolation. (The term is roughly translated “I am who I am because of who we are together.”) It speaks about our interconnectedness. This quality of *ubuntu* is shown both by generosity to help others and by our lack of wholeness when others are in need.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.” He also said, “Everybody can be great because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

On a recent visit we saw a quotation written on a wall in a township near Cape Town, South Africa: “If

every man helps his neighbor then who will need help?” This seems to capture the universal need for serving one another as guided by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Several years ago we were faced with the opportunity to help two Japanese women who were petrified at the prospect of climbing down from the top of a pyramid on Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula. They could not speak English and we couldn’t speak Japanese. So we communicated in our limited Spanish and supported them as we took each step down. At the bottom of the pyramid they were deeply grateful for our help. We were delighted to have been of assistance and felt a sense of joy in being able to help fellow human beings who were in a stressful situation. Together we overcame fear.

### Questions for thought:

Are we avoiding those who might benefit from our help? How do we feel when we receive a helping hand from a stranger? Who has helped you to become who you are? How can we be of greater help to others as we discover and use our gifts from the Holy Spirit?

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# UNITY, Day Seven

By Gerri Yoshida

## Scripture reading: 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

“We...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.”

—The Belhar Confession

For the past 23 years, my husband and I have attended Japanese American United Church in New York City. I wanted to go to this church because when I was growing up our family was usually the only Asian family in our church, school, and community. I grew up feeling isolated and alienated. I wanted my children to have a positive experience of community and identity that I lacked. I find great comfort in being around people who look like me, who have a similar cultural background, values, and experiences. However, it has become a cloistered cocoon.

In the summer of 2007 I attended the Spirit of Wholeness in Christ conference in Los Angeles, an interdenominational event sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Reformed Church in America. I attended workshops, lectures, meals, and meetings with African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Arab Americans, and even European Americans. My eyes were opened to the universality of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination across countries and cultures. I realized with some shame that I was unconsciously assuming that because Japanese Americans were blamed for Pearl

Harbor and were unjustly imprisoned in American concentration camps, we had a corner on suffering.

I now see the truth of 2 Corinthians 1:3-4: God allows trials and tribulations in our lives so that we can bring healing and reconciliation to others who face similar situations. I can experience unity with an Arab American mother whose children were teased and persecuted after 9/11. I stand united with my black brothers and sisters because I know what it is like to have others look down on me for having a different skin color and facial structure. I feel union with the Hispanic immigrants because my grandparents were immigrants who were denied basic rights because of fear and suspicion based on race.

God calls us to comfort others as God has comforted us, to serve others as God has served us, to minister to others as God has ministered to our own hurts and needs by the power of the Holy Spirit.

### Questions for thought:

How can you reach out to others who are different from you and see that what we have in common is greater than the differences that divide and separate us? How have you been blind in the past to others’ needs because you have felt that your sufferings made you special and unique? How can God use the negative experiences of your past—trials and tribulations, suffering, pain, and hurt—to help others today in a positive way?

*Gerri Yoshida is the Japanese representative to the RCA’s Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries and a member of Japanese American United Church in New York City.*

# UNITY, Day Eight

By Fred Harrell

## Scripture reading: Galatians 3:27-28

Have you ever said something that you now look back on with horror? “I can’t believe I said that” is something each of us has repeated, either out loud or muttered to ourselves many times. The apostle Paul, looking back on his life before Christ met him on the Damascus road, may have said something like that as he recalled a prayer he would have prayed, like any good rabbi of his day: “Lord, thank you that I was not born a woman, a slave, or a Gentile.” This prayer was more complicated than simple racism, elitism, or sexism. It was a prayer about badges of membership in God’s family that gave privilege to free Jewish men, who alone were able to receive the sign and seal of membership in God’s family, circumcision.

But what is Paul now saying? “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” That is not simply a person changing his mind, but a person changing his worldview. Yet thousands of Jews and Gentiles did just this, seemingly overnight. Galatians says that it happened—but not without its challenges! Eventually this kind of thinking turned the world upside down. Why? Something had happened. A new badge of membership for God’s family had been established, a marker that cut across race, social status, and gender. It was faith in God’s long-promised Messiah, the true, faithful Israelite who would display God’s faithfulness to his promise that through Israel all the nations will be blessed. The signs and seals of this new creation, such as baptism, were not gender-specific (like circumcision), but rather “Messiah specific,” proclaiming what God has done in Christ. In fact, most scholars think Paul is repeating an early baptismal formula, which fits well with Paul’s declaration in verse 27 that “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Philip Yancey recounts what a pastor from India told him about unity in diversity:

“Most of what happens in Christian churches, including even miracles, can be duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and

women of different castes, races, and social groups. That’s the real miracle.”

Christians believe the beginning of this miracle was the birth of a new creation in the midst of the old; that with the resurrection of Jesus, the first fruits of this new creation, God’s new world brought with it a new unity as well. And that new unity was the result of what missiologist David Bosch calls the “sociological impossibility” of the early church. It’s well documented that the generosity, moral purity, and compassion of the early Christians were critical traits that led to the church’s rapid growth. But perhaps the most shocking thing of all was a Jew enjoying table fellowship with a Gentile; a woman not only being the first to declare the resurrection, but being encouraged to learn, to lead, and enjoy her equality with men; or a slave being told his status in Christ is his true identity—and that they, too, were heirs of the promise through faith in Christ. Perhaps it was this display of oneness that communicated the gospel in ways that astounded those who observed it.

Oneness is the face of the gospel. Should we be so surprised? Didn’t Jesus pray that when we are one, the world will believe? The Belhar serves us by pointing us to the rich nature of this oneness and challenging us to display our unity to the watching world, to be intentional about unity because it’s what life is already like in the kingdom of God for which Jesus taught us to pray. Like Paul, we must change our old prayers, and thus our lives, and pray in light of the new creation for the life of the kingdom, thus bringing the future into the present, so that a divided world might see with new eyes and be changed.

### Questions for thought:

What would a church look like that sought to model this kind of equality in its leadership, its practices, and its local commitments? In a letter about Jew/Gentile relations, why would Paul bring up slave/free and male/female distinctions? Is it possible Paul is bringing up other distinctions of equality that must still be pursued as these new Christians live into this new creation reality that all are one in Christ? What are the biggest obstacles to seeing this kind of unity displayed in your church? Would this Scripture be a strong apologetic in any context?

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# RECONCILIATION, Day One

By Abby Norton-Levering

## Scripture reading: Matthew 5:9

Proctors Theatre is a large, glittering, historic theater that brings many wonderful movies, shows, concerts, and traveling musical productions to Schenectady, New York. It has anchored downtown renewal over the past few years. Recently the executive director of Proctors, Philip Morris, was speaking to a group of local clergy. My husband, Bill, asked him about the wide variety of artists the theater has booked: Scottish dancers, Chinese warriors, Engelbert Humperdinck. “Are you trying to be intentionally multicultural in developing the program at Proctors?”

“Oh, no,” Morris answered. “God save us from multiculturalism. What I’m trying to do is to bring great makers of art to Schenectady, from wherever in the world I can find them.”

“Makers” was a curious word for Morris to choose. He could have said he was in the business of bringing to town great creators of art, or simply great artists. But he used the word “maker,” which reminds me of the work that creativity requires, and vice versa. The process of making art is not simply cerebral, nor is it solely the expression of feelings. Music, dance, drama, painting, sculpture: all these require the use of the whole body—mind and soul and muscles. Creating art is at the same time exhilarating and exhausting. Those Scottish dancers and Chinese warriors and even Engelbert Humperdinck make art because it gives them life, but I am sure they’re also tired by the end of the night!

Think of the way children are intensely focused when they are making art. When my two-year-old nephew, Jack, makes a sandcastle, he expends a tremendous amount of concentration and energy on the project even though his work will be washed away before the day is over. Making peace requires similarly focused, creative energy. Making peace is not something that can be done by rote; it must be created and recreated in new ways all the time. The Belhar tells us that the church is blessed by God because it is a peacemaker. We as individuals and as church bodies are certainly called to make peace

amongst ourselves and with our non-Christian neighbors, but the making of peace can never be an easy shortcut; it always requires energy and work and creative thinking.

Making peace is something that must be done differently each time, depending upon the context in which the peacemaker is working. For example, my context is Schenectady, which has a significant population of people who have immigrated to the U.S. from Guyana. This summer I found myself at a Guyanese festival in Schenectady’s Central Park. I realized that, even though these folks are my neighbors, I didn’t know the basics of the history, religion, or even the language and location of Guyana. I didn’t know what had prompted the migration of so many people from Guyana to Schenectady, and I was ignorant of what their daily lives were like. For me to be a peacemaker in Schenectady, I would need to know my Guyanese neighbors. But in order to know my neighbors, I needed to ask them a lot more questions. And in order to be in a position to ask questions without impertinence, I needed to make friends with these neighbors. This was going to take time, energy, and work!

The multiculturalism from which Philip Morris asks God to save us is tokenism, a wimpy kind of exchange which creates a false impression of inclusivity, allows us to be self-congratulatory, and then returns us to our isolated communities. The peace of God’s kingdom (or neighborhood, as I’ve sometimes heard it translated) is a peace that requires ongoing creative engagement with God’s other children. God our maker calls us not to copy the thin, brittle peace of the status quo, but to co-create with God the rich, lively peace of God’s future.

## Questions for thought:

What neighbors do you need to get to know in order to make peace in your context? How can you creatively engage your neighbors who are different from you? How much energy are you willing to expend to truly know them?

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# RECONCILIATION, Day Two

By Gerri Yoshida

## Scripture reading: Matthew 5:13-16

“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 new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

—The Belhar Confession

Last summer I had a glimpse of the new heaven right here in New York City. A work team of 23 members from Baileyville Reformed Church in Illinois spent a week fixing up the Japanese American United Church building and parsonage in Queens. It was such a blessing to see Christians practice what they preach: bringing light into the darkness of a busy metropolitan city where too often people are too busy to help others. One of their projects was painting the front doors of our church, which had been defaced by graffiti. Many New Yorkers stopped to watch or chat, wondering why people from the farmlands of Illinois would give up their precious vacation time to make repairs when they could be going to the beach or Disneyland.

But it wasn't just the physical labor that our congregation so greatly appreciated. We shared joyous times of fellowship over meals that helped break down walls of stereotyping and ignorance. We shared our Japanese food and culture. They enlightened us about their farming community. We marveled at their cheerfulness and the work ethic that motivated them to spend a week at a county fair selling lemonade in order to raise \$7,000 to finance the trip. I was impressed that two young girls led devo-

tions for the work team one evening, and that a grandmother in her eighties was a valued and respected member of the team. Actions speak louder than words, and their actions said that they cared about us. They were willing to be the hands and feet of Jesus in this broken world, bringing hope, peace, and restoration.

Good works like this cause us to praise and glorify our Father in heaven for filling us with the Holy Spirit so that we can start the process of healing and reconciliation between races and countries. A multicultural future freed from racism is not a distant, unattainable dream, but something that is happening right here and now by those who are willing to take the Scripture seriously enough to act it out. Sometimes familiar Bible verses like today's lose their “saltiness” because we have heard or read them so many times. Do not let familiarity breed indifference. Instead, let us choose to dig deeper, reach higher, and step out in boldness to be God's salt and light in the lives of others in our communities and even across the country and around the globe.

## Questions for thought:

What can you do or say today to let the light of Jesus shine in someone else's life? Are there opportunities in your life to reach out to others in racial reconciliation, perhaps by talking to someone who is different from you—older or younger, or from a different socioeconomic background or culture? Do your choices and decisions really reflect what you say you believe, or are you just giving lip service?

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# RECONCILIATION, Day Three

By Denise Kingdom Grier

## Scripture reading: John 14:27

In the chapter before today's reading, Jesus takes his disciples aside to an upper room where he first kneels down to wash their feet. There are no words spoken as Jesus washes one foot after another, until Peter breaks the silence, protesting Christ's service to him: "You will never wash my feet." Had anyone else thought it a strange thing that Christ, their Lord and Teacher, would wash his disciples' feet? Had others wanted to protest, but thought that to speak would disturb the peace of that moment? Jesus explains to them that he must wash their feet even as they must wash each other's feet. Jesus goes on to declare that one of his disciples is going to betray him. In the quietness of the moment, in a voice barely above a whisper, the disciple reclining next to Jesus asks who it will be.

Later, Peter disturbs the peace again, declaring, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you" (John 13:37). Had anyone else thought the same thing? Did they also want to go with Jesus? What prevented them from speaking out? Could they have been debilitated by the sort of peace that the world gives?

The world gives a peace that mutes and silences. It is under the blanket of this peace that children are molested and spouses are abused. They do not make reports to the authorities or cry out to neighbors, for to do so would disturb the peace of gated communities and family reputations. Behind the stained glass windows of that peace, pastors skip over the texts of terror, like that of the Levite and the concubine in Judges 19 and the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13, and stick to the curse of Cain and Paul's demand for submission of wives. The world

demands quiet, an insistence not to talk about the ethnic, cultural, and geographical differences among peoples. There must be no talk about the pain experienced by ancestors, remembrances of homelands, or the yearnings of human hearts across tribal lines. To speak out would be to disturb the world's peace that demands that we, perhaps like some disciples, avoid talking about things that are uncomfortable, difficult, and maybe even controversial. To talk about these things might force us to acknowledge that we really do see skin color, that we might be wrong about a certain view, that if we dare disturb the peace of this world we might find that repentance would be in order.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." The peace that Christ gives is not a quiet, gentle peace. It is the sort of peace that breaks into the world uninitiated by a woman or a man. This peace disturbed the slumber of the shepherds and their sheep in a field one night by prompting a host of angels to sing of it. It confounded the devil in the wilderness, confronted the religious leaders, and commanded the grave to loose its hold. It is a peace that snatches off muzzles, speaks in many languages, and demands that its voice be heard.

## Questions for thought:

Have you ever experienced an incident when someone who "disturbed the peace" actually helped make for a deeper peace in the long run? What is the difference between Christ's peace and the world's peace? In what situation do you find yourself today where you need to disturb the peace so Christ's peace might come into being? How will you handle that situation in a Christlike way?

*Denise Kingdom Grier is the pastor and teacher at Maple Avenue Ministries in Holland, Michigan.*

# RECONCILIATION, Day Four

By Marisol Ferrer

## **Scripture reading: Colossians 2:13-19**

I love rice and beans. When my family moved to the U.S. from Puerto Rico, we brought all of our traditions with us, and rice and beans was part of our diet. When I entered kindergarten in New York, I was disgusted with the lunch program. The first time I saw something outside of rice and beans was this meat patty they put between two buns and called a meal. That was my first encounter with the hamburger. What do I do with it? I thought. This was the beginning of my school-inspired eating disorder. Don't get me wrong, I now love hamburgers. At some point I had to reconcile my old ways with my new ways. In the beginning, eating different foods, dressing a different way, and speaking a different language was as foreign to my schoolmates as it was to me. I was judged by my rice and beans. And I judged others by their hamburgers.

Christians also have to deal with reconciliation. Colossians states that when we are dead in our sins, we are alive in Christ. It's easier said than done. Somewhere between dying to our sins and becoming alive is the reality of Christ. We cannot settle our differences by changing our ways or by asking someone else to assimilate to our ways. Our reality is found in Christ. In Christ we can eat, drink, and celebrate our traditions without losing what's important to us—that we are connected to one God, one body.

## **Questions for thought:**

What is causing you to lose connection with the body of Christ? With what things from your past do you need to reconcile in order to be alive in Christ?

*Marisol Ferrer is a specialized minister in the RCA serving the Congregational Church of Bound Brook, New Jersey.*

# RECONCILIATION, Day Five

By Ina Montoya

## Scripture reading: Revelation 21:1-4

Do you remember how Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39)? The second greatest commandment. And when I read today’s Scripture, I wonder about neighbors in a new way. Who will be your neighbors in the “new heaven and [the] new earth?”

Think of your neighbors on either side of your home, neighbors who lived by you when you were growing up, those with whom you work, and those with whom you worship. How well do you really know them? How do you love your neighbor as yourself?

In South Africa, we visited a black church building and a separate Dutch Reformed church building. They were very different buildings with very different congregations and locations and facilities, yet so close to each other in the spirit of worship. One was in a dry valley and the other was on a green and fertile hill overlooking the whole town. One was very poor, one was well off. Neighbors.

I’ve seen churches whose neighbors are very close, but outreach and mission just happens to miss them. I’ve seen people whose neighbors are different and so conveniently ignored.

The Belhar Confession asks us to think beyond the neighbors we have today, to think of all the neighbors we will have in God’s tomorrow. It asks us to go to that difficult place where we see what we are personally afraid of—why do we avoid racially different people?

Did you ever think about how different races view their neighbors? Miss Hendrina Hospers was an Anglo missionary to the Jicarilla Apache people. The stories I’ve heard about her from the elders living today put most contemporary missionaries and congregations to shame. She would ride miles for days on horseback, tracking down family camps (Apaches were nomads). She was said to be able to speak the Apache language without accent, and she was fully dedicated to loving her neighbor as herself.

In times when reconciliation was needed most, she was a light for other people so they could praise their Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). Her neighbor did not live right next door; her neighbor did not look like her or speak like her. Yet in the name of Christ, she made the effort. Today, this contemporary missionary (me) sometimes has a hard time riding a horse and is not fluent in her native language, though her neighbors talk, dress, and look like her. So the second greatest commandment should be easy, right?

Well, let’s just say that I “tip my hat” to Christians who strive for unity, social justice, and racial reconciliation as Miss Hendrina did. To God be the glory for the things God has done.

### Questions for thought:

Who are your neighbors? Who is your God? Do you love yourself in a godly way? Do you love your neighbors in a godly way? Who will be your neighbors in God’s tomorrow?

*Ina Montoya is youth pastor at Jicarilla Apache Reformed Church in Dulce, New Mexico.*

# RECONCILIATION, Day Six

By Paul Janssen

## Scripture reading: 2 Peter 3:13

“We believe...that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

—The Belhar Confession

One of the first things I noticed when I moved from Iowa to New York was the amount of time New Yorkers spend waiting for the subway. Some waited patiently, but most had an air of urgency. To my rather laid-back Midwestern sensibilities, it seemed they waited actively, even aggressively. Apparently there’s waiting, and then there’s *waiting*.

As followers of Jesus, we wait for the dawning of new heavens and a new earth. What are we waiting for? For a way of being “where righteousness is at home” (2 Peter 3:13).

The Belhar uses an expression that sounds odd to our ears: “in which righteousness dwells.” Righteousness is a manner of being and acting in which right relationships are practiced. You could say that to the extent that we are following Jesus’ command to love God and love one another, righteousness is dwelling in us, because the relationships are what God intends them to be.

Thus, to use a pair of Cold War-era ideas as foils, we wait for a world that is beyond *détente* (lessening tensions with our enemy but remaining enemies) and even beyond *entente* (agreeing to work together on some policy or project). Righteousness is a positive condition. It is reconciliation—a new and right relationship with a former enemy.

We witness this new way of being, says the Belhar, both by word and by deed.

We witness it by word: every time we see reconciliation—whether it is between a couple who has patched up their relationship, between colleagues who have begun to listen to one another instead of carping, between parties within a nation, or between nations—we can point to it and praise God that enemies have become friends. How would you respond if your pastor said in a weekly sermon, “Look at all the reconciliation God has accomplished this week.”?

We witness the new heaven and new earth by deed as well. As a pastor, I have been a witness to many broken relationships that began to heal when the two parties came together at the Lord’s Table. Perhaps they really heard that the bread and the cup are a “pledge and foretaste of the feast of love of which we shall partake,” as our order of worship puts it. As the formerly warring parties ate together, they were proclaiming to the world that “God’s life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers...of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity” (the Belhar Confession).

How good and pleasant it is when, in the power of Christ, enemies become friends!

### Questions for thought:

How impatient do you feel for the new heaven and the new earth? Has your sense of urgency compelled you to be reconciled to an enemy? What deed can you perform today that will bear witness to the right relationship with God and with others that Christ has made possible?

*Paul Janssen is the pastor and teacher of Pascack Reformed Church in Park Ridge, New Jersey.*

# RECONCILIATION, Day Seven

By Marisol Ferrer

## **Scripture reading: Colossians 3:1-11**

“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.”  
—The Belhar Confession

In the book of Genesis we learn that we are made in the image of God. From Genesis to Revelation we learn that we have not only received the image of God, but that we are now fulfilling and are destined someday to fully actualize a divine design. The image of God as Creator, Jesus as God’s image revealed to us, and the Holy Spirit as a continued relationship shows us that God is community throughout eternity. If we are made in the image of God, then we are called to live in loving community together. We have been given the opportunity, privilege, and responsibility of reflecting this image of God. This is still a work in progress.

Paul states that we don’t have to live in disharmony. We can take off our old self and put on our new self, which is being renewed. Again, we are a work in progress. Our old practices did not include community, yet we are destined for community. We rejoice in knowing that we can still change our ways and live in a new obedience, open to possibilities of life, of love, and of community.

## **Questions for thought:**

How do you represent the image of God on a daily basis? With whom are you in disharmony, and how can you reconcile? Where can you add new possibilities to your life?

*Marisol Ferrer is a specialized minister in the RCA serving the Congregational Church of Bound Brook, New Jersey.*

# RECONCILIATION, Day Eight

By Abby Norton-Levering

## Scripture reading: Colossians 3:12-17

Every year on Halloween, a horde of tiny princesses, miniature superheroes, and other costumed nightmares comes to my door. They take great delight in the experience of being someone other than themselves, someone stronger or braver or endowed with miraculous powers.

I wonder, when they take off their costumes, if they are completely themselves again. At what point in our lives do we begin to acquire more permanent costumes, for the purposes of projecting an image or protecting ourselves from ridicule?

As adults we also wear costumes, though they are more subtle than plastic masks or fluttering capes. We put on a happy face, or a game face, or dancing shoes. We hide our feelings behind the mask of "I'm fine, how're you?" Sometimes it even feels necessary to wear these costumes at church. One of the marks of a healthy church is that it provides opportunities for us to take off our masks and let others know what we really look like, with all our feelings, frustrations, annoyances, and delights. Deep relationships of mutual support and accountability cannot develop between people who are pretending in some basic way to be other than they really are.

And yet we can't walk around completely unclothed. The author of Colossians advises us to put on a new costume that is distinctly unfashionable and often uncomfortable: "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... above all, clothe yourselves with love." It's even more critical for us to put on these clothes on the days when we feel unlovely, unlovable, or unloving. It helps us to be more like ourselves as we understand our true identities as "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved." The Belhar Confession reminds us that God's word and Spirit have already conquered the "irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity" we risk in the formation of human relationships. We have already been "called in the one body" of Christ (v. 15). The clothes of that body are the love of Christ, and they allow us to remain in relationship, even when it is difficult.

## Questions for thought:

What masks or costumes do you wear in front of others? How can putting on the "clothes" listed in Colossians 3 help you put aside pretense and form deep relationships with fellow Christians?

*Abby Norton-Levering serves Glenmont Community Church (RCA) in Glenmont, New York, as pastor under contract.*

# RECONCILIATION, Day Nine

By Fred Harrell

## Scripture reading: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

When you encounter a new world, a new way of living goes with it. I can remember well the new world I encountered when I arrived in San Francisco 13 years ago. It was unlike any place I'd ever lived. Attached homes, steep hills, fog-then-sun-then-fog-then-sun weather, and urbanity in all its quiriness and beauty. It was intimidating and challenging to our old ways of living. The way we shopped, the way we parked, the way we played with our kids (parks instead of yards!)—the way we did just about everything changed. It was a new world, and we either had to adapt or live in confusion. For us, making these changes was both scary and exhilarating...and absolutely necessary.

Verse 17 exclaims rather bluntly in the original language: "If anyone in Messiah, new creation!" A new world has been birthed in the midst of the old, requiring us to make adjustments to its realities, and this will always be both scary and exhilarating...and absolutely necessary. Why? Because Paul's theme of what has happened in and through the Messiah is reconciliation—God reconciled the world he made to himself and has now "given us the ministry of reconciliation."

Theologian N.T. Wright comments: "Something new has happened; something new must now happen. The world has never before seen a ministry of reconciliation: it has never before heard a message of reconciliation. He (Paul) was behaving like someone...who lived in a whole new world."

This is what the Belhar does for us: it presses us to take up our calling as ambassadors for Christ living into the reconciliation realities of Jesus' death and resurrection. God is making his appeal to the watching world through us when we take up those priorities and embody the reconciliation we have with him through the way we intentionally embrace "the other" to bring about reconciliation between groups and individuals who quite frankly, in the old world, couldn't stand the sight of one another. But there's a new world now, brought about by a God who looks at corruption and decay and doesn't walk away. Rather, through the sinless Messiah, he "becomes sin" so that we might embody in our own lives the righteousness of God and his covenant faithfulness to reconcile the world to himself by our own ministries of reconciliation, pointing others always to Jesus, who makes us one.

### Questions for thought:

What does being reconciled with God have to do with being reconciled with others and intentionally embracing "the other" in our lives? Are there practices, emphases, or agendas in your life or in your congregation that only exist because "if anyone in Messiah, new creation!"? 2 Corinthians 6:1-2 isn't part of this reading, but perhaps it should be. There Paul says, "We urge you...not to accept the grace of God in vain." What are the implications of that statement directly following Paul's description of his ministry, and ours, as one of reconciliation?

*Fred Harrell is senior pastor at City Church in San Francisco, California.*

# JUSTICE, Day One

By Carol Bechtel

## Scripture reading: Isaiah 1:16-17

Isaiah is not amused. Or, to put it more precisely, God is not amused, and Isaiah voices that divine displeasure on God's behalf in the first chapter of the book in the prophet's name.

At first glance it looks as if God is angry about the way the covenant people are worshipping. "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?" God asks. "I have had enough of burnt offerings...trample my courts no more" (Isaiah 1:11-12). But when we read a little further, we realize that it's not the sacrificial system that God finds offensive; it's the people's proclivity for false piety. "I cannot endure solemn assemblies *with iniquity*," God says (italics mine). "When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood" (1:13, 15). Aha. So *that's* the problem.

I do not think this is an ancient problem. We still risk God's wrath when we fail to "walk our talk," when we go through the motions of religion without living lives of justice and generosity. The good news—then and now—is that God reigns in that wrath long enough to give us another chance. "Wash yourselves," God pleads, "make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1:16-17).

God's impassioned plea lies behind every line of the Belhar Confession. The confession arose out of a situation where the disconnect between surface piety and lived injustice was so stark it could no longer be borne. It continues to speak wherever people of faith need to be reminded that our actions need to be consistent with our words. Injustice has many manifestations, and all of us are called to examine ourselves and our systems to bring them into better alignment with God's will and way.

When I was in South Africa last year, I was struck by the ways this confession still calls those who have adopted it to a deeper integrity as believers. I hope that it could function the same way for us. One South African leader confided, "I knew that when we stood up and we voted that my life would never be the same." Another said, "It's about the integrity of the gospel. It gives us no choice but to stand where God stands."

According to Isaiah, God stands for justice. The only question is: will we?

### Questions for thought:

What are some of the ways we (or you personally) need to "wash our hands" before we can lift them up to God in worship? What is one thing you can do today to "seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow?"

*Carol Bechtel is a General Synod Professor and teaches Old Testament at Western Theological Seminary.*

# JUSTICE, Day Two

By Denise Kingdom Grier

## Scripture reading: Luke 4:16-30

It's 8:00 a.m. and my routine is the same as every other day: pour the morning coffee with one sugar and one cream, then step out on the porch hoping the newspaper reached the front step so the cold and wetness of morning doesn't overwhelm. While sitting down and unfolding the paper, I have but one prayer: "Lord, please let there be good news."

"I've got a crown up in a' God's kingdom; ain't that good news?" the slaves used to sing from a shack down by the riverside. Good news for them—and for oppressed people throughout history who claimed faith in the God of heaven—was to be grasped in the life beyond this one. Somehow in the sweet by and by, they believed that the wicked would cease troubling them and the weary would be at rest. This life was a place to endure until such time that one reached the other side. "There's a crown up in a' God's kingdom; ain't that good news?"

Good news it is, but it is only half of the good news, for the whole fair and balanced report is found in the "late edition," or the New Testament, as some call it, where Jesus takes the elevated place in the synagogue and proclaims, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news... Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

There is good news for today, even good news for the poor, like the news delivered on the porches of the barrios of South Africa where blacks displaced by apartheid were forced to squat and squander. There was good news that declared them free to

roam, free to vote, and free to be. There still is good news to heal the brokenhearted: one would need only to ask mothers who prayed for God's assurance that their sons would not be the next to die in outbreaks like the one that occurred in Sharpeville, South Africa, on March 21, 1960, when police shot hundreds of people for demonstrating in protest against the unfair laws of apartheid. There is good news that the captives are free, even as it was declared on February 11, 1990, when the whole world watched Nelson Mandela walk away from 22 years of imprisonment, marking the end of his captivity and the end of apartheid as it had been known.

Jesus Christ has come into the world so that we who are blind may see that separation of individuals on the basis of race is a sin, and that the chains of racism, sexism, and classism were broken when Christ spoke with the Samaritan, was anointed by the woman, and broke bread with Zacchaeus.

There is good news—and not just good news "up in 'a God's kingdom," but good news as accessible as this morning's *Sentinel*, *Post*, and *Observer*. Let us pray to see, to hear, and to read about it every day.

### Questions for thought:

What signs of God's good news did you read in the paper or hear about on the radio or TV this morning? How do you feel God was at work in the story you heard? How have you thanked God for it? Do you think you will be more likely to find good news tomorrow morning if you wake up looking for it?

*Denise Kingdom Grier is the pastor and teacher at Maple Avenue Ministries in Holland, Michigan.*

# JUSTICE, Day Three

By Gene and Sandra Fisher

## Scripture reading: James 1:27

We believe that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right.

God's plan is realized as connections are made, children to children. Watts Learning Center, a charter school in Los Angeles, took 15 elementary school students and their parents to South Africa for a shared learning experience and to gain a new worldview. As a part of the travel itinerary, we visited the Baphumelele Children's Home in Khayelitsha Township near Cape Town. Each traveler carried an extra suitcase, 36 in all, filled with school supplies, books, and clothing. When the gifts were presented to the orphanage director, Mamma Rosie Mashale, and the children, she told us that she had had no idea how she was going to provide the school supplies and clothing the children needed for that school year. With deep appreciation, she shared that the gifts were especially timely because she did not have enough money to cover these expenses, and even if she did have money, it is difficult to find a place that sells the things that she needed for the children.

Upon return, one student of a single parent said, "I see my mom every night and I see my dad every now and then, but these children would never see either parent. We have no right to complain."

This child is not from a privileged background by American standards, but this American child from the inner city could see the devastating impact of a broken society on some South African children. The act of giving opened his eyes to his blessings and brought joy to less fortunate children a continent away.

Before this trip took place, many people did not believe such a missional trip was possible for children from low-income families in the inner city. Discerning and following God's pure and faultless plan showed again that all things are possible.

## Questions for thought:

What are we called by God to do? Are there times when we do nothing because we are influenced by "conventional wisdom" or naysayers? How could you change a life by letting your Christian light shine that others might see God's plan for justice in the world? In what ways might you soften your heart and show more compassion for the less fortunate?

*Gene and Sandra Fisher attend Park Hills Community Church (RCA) in Los Angeles, California, where Gene is an elder and Sandra is a deacon.*

# JUSTICE, Day Four

By Gerri Yoshida

## Scripture reading: Luke 1:46-55

“We believe that God calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry...We believe 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.”

—The Belhar Confession

Last summer our son worked for a nonprofit organization called the Financial Corps, whose purpose is to use the expertise of the privileged, educated class to help those at the bottom of America’s socioeconomic pyramid. As I read the Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise because she was chosen to be the mother of the Son of God, I see her as one of these “bottom of the pyramid” persons. She was a member of the Jewish nation, which was groaning under the oppression of Roman dictators and an occupying army. She was poor and uneducated, with no hopes for social or financial advancement. Her status as a woman made her all but invisible in Jewish society. Women of her day had few rights and many responsibilities and burdens to bear.

Why didn’t God choose one of Herod’s wives or concubines to be Jesus’ mother? He would have been born into political power. God could have chosen a wealthy family, perhaps a tax collector who could have provided Jesus with a fine education and influential contacts. Or the Lord of hosts could have chosen the wife of a Pharisee or high-ranking official of the Sanhedrin to be Jesus’ mother. Then he would have been a member of the religious elite. But all these people were also examples of corruption based on personal gain and the exploitation of others.

No, God intentionally chose a woman of low social standing—someone who looked to God alone for redemption because she had no political power, social status, or religious credentials to boast about. She was chosen for her innocence and purity, for her total faith and dependence on the God of Israel. She was humble and had sympathy for the downtrodden in life because she was one of them. God wants all of us to know that he has a special place in his heart for those who are at the bottom of the pyramid. Those at the top so often have no need of him, so he turns them away empty-handed.

I also note that Mary’s great blessing came with a great price. In those days, having a child out of wedlock was not supported by welfare, but resulted in social ostracism and condemnation to the point of not only being put away quietly as Joseph considered, but perhaps even being stoned to death as the strict Mosaic laws required. What young lady would consider accepting such an assignment? Mary’s obedience is akin to that of Abraham, who was unquestioningly willing to sacrifice his one and only son, Isaac, so he could show obedience to God. God demands that we obey him completely even when it doesn’t make sense and entails great personal risk.

### Questions for thought:

Through the Belhar Confession, God is calling us to seek justice for our neighbors who are suffering poverty and oppression. What issues do you see in your community that need to be addressed by your church or by you personally? Can you answer God’s call for radical obedience even if it means being rejected or ridiculed?

*Gerri Yoshida is the Japanese representative to the RCA’s Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries and a member of Japanese American United Church in New York City.*

# JUSTICE, Day Five

By Carol Bechtel

## Scripture reading: Amos 5:14-15, 24

It's never a good sign when someone starts singing a dirge over you. But that's exactly what the prophet Amos does over the house of Israel in Amos, chapter 5. "Fallen, no more to rise," he laments, "is maiden Israel; forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up" (Amos 5:2).

Most of Amos's audience probably thought he was crazy and walked away. But for those who hung around long enough to listen to this cranky southern prophet, these words must have raised both goosebumps and questions. What was he talking about? The economy was thriving. National borders had been expanded as never before. The king was safely ensconced in his ivory palaces in the capital city of Samaria. What was Amos talking about?

Amos was talking about justice—or, more precisely, the lack of it. Imagine, for a moment, that you are among those who have lingered to hear his ominous words. His eyes scan the stragglers, and suddenly he points an accusing finger directly at you. "Ah!" he shouts, startling you with the sudden accusation. "You that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!" (Amos 5:7).

This, you think to yourself as you scurry away, is not a man who makes friends easily.

And yet, if you had hung around a little longer you'd have realized that Amos isn't concerned about your relationship with him so much as your relationship with God. In fact, he cares about your whole nation's relationship with God. He cares so much that he has left his own farm in the southern kingdom of Judah (see Amos 7:14) to come and plead with you on God's behalf, because it may not be too late after all. "Seek good and not evil," he begs, "that you may

live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph" (5:14-15).

It is hardly surprising that the Belhar Confession references this chapter in Amos in the context of confessing, "We believe that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right." Amos's words bear witness to the fact that God has been trying to teach this lesson for a very long time.

As a gardener, I'm especially struck by the fact that Amos accuses the people of turning justice to "wormwood." Wormwood is the common name for the beautiful perennial bush also known as artemisia. At least, it's beautiful to look at. Its smell is especially strong, and it yields a bitter, bad-tasting oil. The implication is that ignorance, arrogance, and complacency can turn something sweet—like justice—into something so foul that it's only fit to be spat out onto the ground.

This is not a pretty or pleasant image. But it does get our attention. And perhaps it makes us long for the other image Amos uses toward the end of this chapter. Perhaps it makes us want to be a part of that day when "justice [will] roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24).

### Questions for thought:

Why is justice so sweet to God's taste? What actions or attitudes of ours turn justice to wormwood?

*Carol Bechtel is a General Synod Professor and teaches Old Testament at Western Theological Seminary.*

# JUSTICE, Day Six

By Earl James

## Scripture reading: Deuteronomy 32:4

Moses sang this verse as part of a song to his people Israel as they prepared to enter the land God promised them for the first time. “*Yahweh Tsur*,” he called out, naming God for the first time “the Rock.”

The people of Israel had been a slave people, had become a desert people, and were about to become a settled people and a new nation. Moses called to their minds the many huge slabs of rock they saw on their journey from slavery in Egypt to nationhood in the Promised Land. Some of these rocks protected and sheltered them from harsh elements. Others provided windbreaks for the roaring fires they used for cooking and warming themselves. Still others hid them from the eyes of dangerous tribes who called the desert their home. Still other rocks, seen on distant horizons, showed them the way they should go.

God was like that, Moses declared. God was solid and of substance. God provided security and comfort. Though winds blew against him, though hot fires roasted beneath him, though enemies would slay around him, he was invincible. He could not be broken apart or worn down or eroded away. God’s very nature, Moses taught, made him fully dependable, fully reliable, and absolutely faithful.

Moses, in that poem, taught his people something else about God. Deeply embedded in the character of *Yahweh Tsur*, God the Rock, is justice. God is justice and everything God does is fully just. Though people fail each other, God does not. Though people go back on their word, God does not. What God covenants, he keeps. Where there is wrong, he rights it. God does nothing in the dark. With God, what we do in the dark will be brought into the light and dealt with accordingly. We can always count on God, Moses sang, to be just and to stand for justice.

As God fully prizes and values justice, Moses declared, so must God’s people. They had to reflect justice as fully in their personal and national character as God did in his own. The Rock is justice; the people of the Rock are justice. Upon that rock the nation of Israel was born in its new home.

### Questions for thought:

How does God’s heart for justice live in your soul? What is done in the dark that must be brought to light? Can others find safety and comfort and passion for right when they are with you?

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# JUSTICE, Day Seven

By Carol Bechtel

## Scripture reading: Psalm 146

Imagine for a moment what God's résumé might look like. "God," it might say, "creator of heaven and earth." That's a pretty impressive start! But what else would it say? What would go in Part B? Perhaps a reference to some of God's greatest victories or a list of God's most impressive attributes. Lots of "omni" words come to mind: omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, etc.

If we look at Psalm 146, we see a very different list for God's résumé. There God is described as the one "who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry" (v. 6b-7a). But wait, there's more!

The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the Lord loves the righteous.  
The Lord watches over the strangers;  
he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin  
(v. 7b-9).

The fact that God's résumé highlights things like this says a lot about God's values. It's not that God has not won impressive victories or embodied all those "omni" words. It's just that these characteristics are upstaged by God's acts of compassion and justice.

When John the Baptist sent word to Jesus and asked "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered,

Go and tell John what you hear and see:  
the blind receive their sight, the lame  
walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf  
hear, the dead are raised, and the poor  
have good news brought to them  
(Matthew 11:2-5).

It's a résumé that's strikingly similar to the one the psalmist gives for God in Psalm 146. If it boasts of anything, it boasts of Jesus' acts of compassion and justice.

There's another similarity. Both of these "résumés" include a beatitude. Jesus says, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Matthew 11:6). Psalm 146 says, "Happy [blessed] are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God" (v. 5). These beatitudes are an invitation of sorts—an invitation to ally ourselves with the writers of the résumés. In fact, they encourage us to rearrange our values to reflect the compassion and justice of both God the Father and God the Son. With the help of God the Holy Spirit, we may just be able to pull it off.

The Belhar Confession invites us to rewrite our own résumés to reflect God's values of compassion and justice. We do it, of course, not for our own good, but for God's glory. We do it knowing that when we show compassion and work for justice, we do it as for Christ himself (Matthew 25:40). But we also do it knowing that there is a blessing—a beatitude—that comes when we align our values with the one who loved us and gave himself for us.

## Questions for thought:

What's in your résumé? How does it reflect your values? What could you do to better align it with God's values?

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# JUSTICE, Day Eight

By Paul Janssen

## Scripture reading: Acts 5:29-33

“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. Jesus is Lord. To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory for ever and ever.”

—The Belhar Confession

When Peter and the apostles were brought to trial, they offered up a courageous defense from the heart of their faith: “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

The Belhar Confession has been called “a cry from the heart of faith.” Surely, as it closes, we can see how deeply passionate is this cry from our fellow followers of Jesus from South Africa. The poignancy of these ending words is evident in the historical record: authorities and laws did in fact forbid the church from confessing unity, reconciliation, and justice, and punishment and suffering were indeed the consequences of confession. Why did they confess, despite persecution? Because Jesus—and only Jesus—is Lord.

The South African context may seem half a world away from North America. But it is not so far from Belgium in 1561, when the letter attached to the Belgic Confession proclaimed that its writers would “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire,” rather than deny the truth expressed in their confession. Why did these ancestors of our faith dare to face punishment for their faith? Because Jesus—and only Jesus—is Lord.

When Ulrich Zwingli was wounded in battle (and the next day quartered and burned) in an effort to defend the evangelical witness of Zurich against the onslaughts of the defenders of Rome, he was willing to sacrifice himself because of his conviction that Jesus—and only Jesus—is Lord.

When Martin Luther stood up against the church hierarchy to proclaim justification by faith, he did so because Jesus—and only Jesus—is Lord.

When John Calvin proclaimed with great passion that he would cross 10 seas to gain the unity of the church, he did so because Jesus—and only Jesus—is Lord.

The Belhar Confession thus ends where it begins: with Jesus Christ. The lordship of Christ was at stake in South Africa. It is still at stake, and will forever be at stake wherever powers and principalities claim to hold full sway in God’s world. In this way, this new confession is as old as the church itself, and at its core it proclaims the ancient gospel: Jesus—and only Jesus—is Lord.

## Questions for thought:

Have you ever been forbidden to confess Jesus as Lord, or have you been punished for your confession of his lordship? How has God strengthened you in those times? How do you see the lordship of Jesus at stake as you consider what is happening in the world today? How does your congregation proclaim the ancient confession that Jesus is Lord?

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# Confession of Belhar

September 1986

The confession is available online in Spanish and Korean: [www.rca.org/belhar](http://www.rca.org/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.

*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. This inclusive language text was prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*

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