

The Presbytery of Geneva studies ...

The Belhar Confession

Session Five

The “Liturgy” of Belhar

and What That Means for the Unity of the Church

September 29, 2009

Service of Worship

Please turn off your cell phones during this worship service.

* CALL TO WORSHIP

Isaiah 52:7, 9

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

**Break forth together into singing;
for the Lord has comforted the people
and has redeemed Jerusalem.**

* HYMN

"I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me"

(on next page)

[Insert PH #369 here]

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*** OPENING PRAYER**

adapted from Psalm 40:6-8

**O Lord, sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.
We said, “Here we are; in the scroll of the book it is written of us.
We delight to do your will, Lord God;
Your law is written within our hearts.”**

CONFESSION OF SIN

cf Isaiah 1

Hear the word of God through the prophet Isaiah:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings from before me;
cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbors,
confident in God's steadfast love.

SILENT CONFESSION

So often, what we hear in worship is forgotten by the time we leave the church. God clearly desires that we not just hear and agree with the divine will for justice. God desires that we do the justice and live in the reconciliation that is proclaimed in worship.

During this time of silent reflection, consider:

1. Where do you see a disconnect between the worship and work of your congregation?
2. Where is there a disconnect between what you personally believe and the way you live?
3. When and how have you failed to “stand where the Lord stands”?
4. When, in following Christ, have you failed to resist injustice and challenge the powerful in their self-interest?

Pray for God to remove stumbling blocks
of fear and complacency from your life.

CORPORATE CONFESSION

BCW, 54

**Eternal God, our judge and redeemer,
we confess that we have tried to hide from you,
for we have done wrong.
We have lived for ourselves,
and apart from you.
We have turned from our neighbors,
and refused to bear the burdens of others.
We have ignored the pain of the world,
and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed.
In your great mercy forgive our sins
and free us from selfishness,
that we may choose your will
and obey your commandments;
through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.**

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Isaiah 35

The wilderness and the dry land will be glad,
the desert will rejoice and blossom;
for waters will break forth in the wilderness,
and streams will flow in the desert.
The captives and the lost will return to God
with smiles on their faces and songs in their hearts.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel:
In Jesus Christ you are forgiven.

*** HYMN**
(on next page)

“Song of Zechariah”

*** SHARING THE PEACE OF GOD**

The peace of the Lord be with you.
And also with you.

[Insert PH #602 here]

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HEARING THE WORD

Isaiah 58

1. What phrases or images from the reading stood out or spoke to you?
2. How does the prophet address injustice and oppression in our own time? Name specific examples in connection with the scripture reading.
3. What is the purpose or goal of worship (fast days and sabbaths) expressed in this reading? How does God respond to prayer?

PROCLAIMING THE WORD OF GOD

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Consider your own church and its practices of worship as you revisit the “liturgy” of the Belhar Confession.

1. Who is gathered for worship in the services of your congregation? And who seems to be the one doing the gathering? How is the unity of the people of God (common calling, common sin, common forgiveness) expressed in this part of the service?
2. What is the place of scripture in your church’s worship? How do you see the Word of God transforming your community? How does the Word confront “irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity” (Belhar, Article 3)?
3. How is Christian unity expressed or embodied in your practices of baptism and the Lord’s Supper? How do the sacraments foreshadow or offer a foretaste of the justice and reconciliation of the kingdom of God?
4. What happens at or around the close of worship in your congregation? How does the liturgy propel the people of God out into the world for service? How does the “work of the people” (the literal meaning of “liturgy”) continue between services? What connections do you see between daily life and Sunday worship?

* HYMN

“Lord, When I Came Into This Life”

[Insert PH #522 here]

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As many of you as were baptized into Christ
have clothed yourselves with Christ.

**There is no longer Jew or Greek,
there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female;
for all of us are one in Christ Jesus.**

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,
making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit
in the bond of peace.

**There is one body and one Spirit,
just as we were called to the one hope of our calling,
one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,
who is above all, and through all, and in all.**

* HYMN

“Behold the Goodness of Our Lord (Psalm 133)”

PSALM 133

Behold the Goodness of Our Lord

CRIMOND CM

Fred R. Anderson, 1986

Jessie Seymour Irvine, 1872
Harm. T. C. L. Pritchard, 1929

1. Be - hold the good - ness of our Lord, How blest it is to be
2. Like pre - cious oil up - on the head, A heal - ing for our strife,
3. As dew on Zi - on's moun-tain-top Brings fresh-ness to its door,

A com - pa - ny of God's be - loved, In ho - ly u - ni - ty.
It flows through-out our com - mon bond, Re - fresh - ing all of life.
Our Lord com - mands this in our midst And brings life ev - er - more.

Text: © 1986 Fred R. Anderson; from *Singing Psalms of Joy and Praise*. Used by permission.
Music: Harmonization from *The Scottish Psalter*, 1929. Used by permission of Oxford University Press.

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CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

We are called to be the church of Jesus Christ,
a sign in the world today of what God intends for all humanity,
as expressed in the great ends of the church.

The great ends of the church are
the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
the maintenance of divine worship;
the preservation of the truth;
the promotion of social righteousness;
and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

The call of Christ is to willing, dedicated discipleship.

Our discipleship is a manifestation
of the new life we enter through baptism.

Discipleship is both a gift and a commitment,
an offering and a responsibility.

[Describe work of the Stated Clerk here]

Tom, the grace bestowed on you in baptism is sufficient for your calling
because it is God's grace.

By God's grace we are saved,
and enabled to grow in the faith
and commit our lives in ways that serve Christ.

God has called you to particular service.

Show your purpose by answering these questions.

CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTIONS TO THE STATED CLERK-ELECT

1. Do you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? **[I do.]**
2. Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness, to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you? **[I do.]**
3. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God? **[I do and I will.]**

4. Will you be a minister of the Word and Sacrament in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and continually guided by the confessions? [**I will.**]
5. Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit? [**I will.**]
6. Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world? [**I will.**]
7. Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church? [**I do.**]
8. Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love? [**I will.**]
9. Will you be a faithful minister, proclaiming the good news in Word and Sacrament, teaching faith and caring for people? Will you be active in government and discipline, serving in the governing bodies of the church; and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ? [**I will.**]

CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTIONS TO THE PRESBYTERY

1. Do we, the members of the Presbytery of Geneva, confirm the call of the Rev. Thomas Montgomery as our Stated Clerk, chosen by God through the voice of this congregation to guide us in the way of Jesus Christ? [**We do.**]
2. Do we agree to encourage him, to respect his decisions, and to follow as he guides us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church? [**We do.**]
3. Do we promise to pay him fairly and provide for his welfare as he works among us; to stand by him in trouble and share his joys? Will we listen to the word he preaches, welcome his pastoral care, and honor his authority as he seeks to honor and obey Jesus Christ our Lord? [**We do and we will.**]

INSTALLATION PRAYER

Faithful God, in baptism you claimed us;
 and by your Holy Spirit you are working in our lives,
 empowering us to live a life worthy of our calling.
 We thank you for leading Tom to this time and place.
 Establish him in your truth, and guide him by your Holy Spirit,
 that in your service he may grow in faith, hope, and love,
 and be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ,

to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit,
be honor and glory, now and forever.

**Almighty God, in Jesus Christ you called disciples
and, by the Holy Spirit, made them one church to serve you.
Let your Spirit rule your church,
so that we may be joined in love and service to Jesus Christ,
who, having gone before us,
is coming to meet us in the promise of your kingdom. Amen.**

CHARGE TO THE STATED CLERK

CHARGE TO THE PRESBYTERY

BLESSING

May the God of peace make you holy in every way,
and keep your whole being, spirit, soul, and body,
free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus. **Amen.**

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

*Please share your joys and concerns
with your brothers and sisters in your small group.*

CONCLUDING COLLECT (unison) BCW, 811 [a prayer from Zaire]

O God, you are the giver of life.

We pray for the church in the whole world.

Sanctify her life, renew her worship,

give power to her witnessing,

restore her unity.

**Give strength to those who are searching together
for that kind of obedience which creates unity.**

**Heal the divisions separating your children one from another,
so that they will make fast, with bonds of peace,
the unity which the Spirit gives. Amen.**

INVITATION TO THE LORD'S TABLE

GREAT THANKSGIVING (E)

BCW, 142 ff; alt.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Blessed are you, strong and faithful God. All your works, the height and the depth, echo the silent music of your praise. In the beginning your Word summoned light, night withdrew, and creation dawned. As ages passed unseen, waters gathered on the face of the earth and life appeared. When the times at last had ripened and the earth grown full in abundance, you created in your image man and woman, the stewards of all creation. You gave us breath and speech, that all the living might find a voice to sing your praise, and to celebrate the creation you call good.

So now, with all the powers of heaven and earth,
we sing the ageless hymn of your glory:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.**

**Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

All holy God, how wonderful is the work of your hands! When sin had scarred the world, you entered into covenant to renew the whole creation.

As a mother tenderly gathers her children, as a father joyfully welcomes his own, you embraced a people as your own and filled them with longing for a peace that would last and for a justice that would never fail.

Through countless generations your people hungered for the bread of freedom. From them you raised up Jesus, your Son, the living bread, in whom ancient hungers are satisfied.

He healed the sick, though he himself would suffer;
he offered life to sinners, though death would hunt him down.
But with a love stronger than death,
 he opened wide his arms and surrendered his spirit.

Gracious God, as we offer you our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, we commemorate Jesus, your Son. Death could not bind him, for you raised him up in the Spirit of holiness and exalted him as Lord of creation.

Great is the mystery of faith:

**Christ has died,
Christ is risen,
Christ will come again.**

Eternal God, let your Holy Spirit move in power over us and over these earthly gifts of bread and wine, that they may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ, and that we may become one in him. May his coming in glory find us ever watchful in prayer, strong in truth and love, and faithful in the breaking of the bread.

Then, at last, all peoples will be free, all divisions healed, and with your whole creation, we will sing your praise, through your Son, Jesus Christ.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours, almighty God, forever and ever. **Amen.**

LORD'S PRAYER (ecumenical)

BCW, 73

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sin,
as we forgive those who sin against us;
Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.**

BREAKING OF THE BREAD

COMMUNION OF THE PEOPLE

Communion will be celebrated by intinction today.

*** PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION (unison)**

BCW, 77

**Gracious God,
you have made us one with all your people
in heaven and on earth.
You have fed us with the bread of life,
and renewed us for your service.
Help us who have shared Christ's body
and received his cup,
to be his faithful disciples
so that our daily living
may be part of the life of your kingdom,
and our love be your love
reaching out into the life of the world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

*** HYMN**

“Song of Mary”

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[Insert PH #600 here]

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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;

**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;**

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.**

Thus we bodily proclaim:

**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. Amen.**

A Word of Introduction

The recent 218th General Assembly adopted the following motions:

1. Direct the Moderators of the 216th, 217th, and 218th General Assemblies (2004, 2006, and 2008)—in consultation with the Stated Clerk, the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC), the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, and the Office of Theology and Worship—to initiate the process described in G-18.0201b by appointing a committee, separate from any committee assigned to the Heidelberg Catechism, to consider amending the confessional documents of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to include the Belhar Confession in *The Book of Confessions* and to report to the 219th General Assembly (2010).
2. Urge all Presbyterians in congregations, middle governing bodies, and other entities related to the PC(USA) to engage in study, prayer, reflection, and discernment, of the Belhar Confession and the Report of the Task Force to Study Reparations, utilizing the following resources:
 - *A Study Guide of The Belhar Confession and Its Accompanying Letter*, Eunice T. McGarrahan. Published by the Office of Theology and Worship, General Assembly Council, PC(USA), 2008. Available online at: <http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/confession.htm>
 - *Report of the Task Force on Reparations* (216th General Assembly (2004)). *Minutes*, 2004, Part I, pp. 701–20. This report includes the full text of the Belhar Confession. Available online at <http://www.pcusa.org/reparations/>
 - *A Study Guide for the Report of the Task Force on Reparations*, Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, 2008. Available online at <http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/>

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

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

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

The practice of apartheid began in the exclusionary practices of the church’s worship in South Africa. This injustice emerged from distorted understandings of the sacraments and the unity of the church. Baptismal unity was shattered at the Lord’s Table and racial injustice was the consequence.

To meet the call of the General Assembly, the Presbytery of Geneva will be using the above-named *Study Guide of the Belhar Confession* to shape our worship and theological reflection beginning in our November 2008 meeting and continuing throughout 2009.

1. Session One—Introduction: Setting the Stage (11/19/2008, HWS/Geneva)
2. Session Two—Apartheid and the Belhar Confession: It Happened in Church (1/24/2009, Arkport)
3. Session Three—What Does It Mean for a Church to Confess? (3/24/2009, Waterloo)
4. Session Four—The Belhar Confession and the Book of Confessions (5/26/2009, Palmyra Western)
5. Session Five—The “Liturgy” of Belhar and What That Means for the Unity of the Church (9/29/2009, Bellona)
6. Session Six—Belhar, the Unity We Seek, and the Mission of the Church (11/17/2009, Hector)

The Belhar Confession

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

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

We believe

- that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;
- 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;
- 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;
- 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;

- 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;
- 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.

- 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;
- 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;
- 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.

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

Accompanying Letter

1. We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the Church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. We are aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is so threatened as to be at stake. In our judgment, the present church and political situation in our country and particularly within the Dutch Reformed church

family calls for such a decision. Accordingly, we make this confession not as a contribution to a theological debate nor as a new summary of our beliefs, but as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand. Along with many, we confess our guilt, in that we have not always witnessed clearly enough in our situation and so are jointly responsible for the way in which those things which were experienced as sin and confessed to be sin have grown in time to seem self-evidently right and to be ideologies foreign to the Scriptures. As a result many have been given the impression that the gospel was not really at stake. We make this confession because we are convinced that all sorts of theological arguments have contributed to so disproportionate an emphasis on some aspects of the truth that it has in effect become a lie.

2. We are aware that the only authority for such a confession and the only grounds on which it may be made are the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. Being fully aware of the risk involved in taking this step, we are nevertheless convinced that we have no alternative. Furthermore, we are aware that no other motives or convictions, however valid they may be, would give us the right to confess in this way. An act of confession may only be made by the Church for the sake of its purity and credibility and that of its message. As solemnly as we are able, we hereby declare before men that our only motive lies in our fear that the truth and power of the gospel itself is threatened in this situation. We do not wish to serve any group interests, advance the cause of any factions, promote any theologies, or achieve any ulterior purposes. Yet, having said this, we know that our deepest intentions may only be judged at their true value by him before whom all is revealed. We do not make this confession from his throne and from on high, but before his throne and before men. We plead, therefore, that this confession would not be misused by anyone with ulterior motives and also that it should not be resisted to serve such motives. Our earnest desire is to lay no false stumbling blocks in the way, but to point to the true stumbling block, Jesus Christ the rock.

3. This confession is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches. We proclaim it against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion which threatens the gospel itself in our church and our country. Our heartfelt longing is that no one will identify himself with this objectionable doctrine and that all who have been wholly or partially blinded by it will turn themselves away from it. We are deeply aware of the deceiving nature of such a false doctrine and know that many who have been conditioned by it have to a greater or lesser extent learnt to take a half-truth for the whole. For this reason we do not doubt the Christian faith of many such people, their

sincerity, honor, integrity, and good intentions and their in many ways estimable practice and conduct. However, it is precisely because we know the power of deception that we know we are not liberated by the seriousness, sincerity, or intensity of our certainties, but only by the truth in the Son. Our church and our land have an intense need of such liberation. Therefore it is that we speak pleadingly rather than accusingly. We plead for reconciliation, that true reconciliation which follows on conversion and change of attitudes and structures. And while we do so we are aware that an act of confession is a two-edged sword, that none of us can throw the first stone, and none is without a beam in his own eye. We know that the attitudes and conduct which work against the gospel are present in all of us and will continue to be so. Therefore this confession must be seen as a call to a continuous process of soul-searching together, a joint wrestling with the issues, and a readiness to repent in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world. It is certainly not intended as an act of self-justification and intolerance, for that would disqualify us in the very act of preaching to others.

4. Our prayer is that this act of confession will not place false stumbling blocks in the way and thereby cause and foster false divisions, but rather that it will be reconciling and uniting. We know that such an act of confession and process of reconciliation will necessarily involve much pain and sadness. It demands the pain of repentance, remorse, and confession; the pain of individual and collective renewal and a changed way of life. It places us on a road whose end we can neither foresee nor manipulate to our own desire. On this road we shall unavoidably suffer intense growing pains while we struggle to conquer alienation, bitterness, irreconciliation, and fear. We shall have to come to know and encounter both ourselves and others in new ways. We are only too well aware that this confession calls for the dismantling of structures of thought, of church, and of society which have developed over many years. However, we confess that for the sake of the gospel, we have no other choice. We pray that our brothers and sisters throughout the Dutch Reformed church family, but also outside it, will want to make this new beginning with us, so that we can be free together and together may walk the road of reconciliation and justice. Accordingly, our prayer is that the pain and sadness we speak of will be pain and sadness that lead to salvation. We believe that this is possible in the power of our Lord and by his Spirit. We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope, liberation, salvation, and true peace to our country.

The “Liturgy” of Belhar and What That Means for the Unity of the Church

from the Belhar Confession Study Guide, 34-40

When Isaiah encountered God in the Temple (Isaiah 6), he became immediately aware of his own sin and that of his people. Having been cleansed by God, however, he responded willingly to God’s call to mission. We understand that worship provides an encounter with the Holy One, who expects that, as we hear holy words and remember holy deeds through word and sacrament, we will be “transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Romans 12:1-2). This is so that we actually do what God has set before us: to love God and neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28); to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). We are shaped—ordered—by worship.

*Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our minds to your Spirit,
that we may be one with Christ our Lord,
and serve as faithful disciples, through Jesus Christ. Amen¹*

It is apparent that Isaiah was startled when he encountered the holy God. This surprising, transforming encounter with God is at the heart of our four-fold order of worship, which moves from The Gathering to Hearing the Word to Responding to the Word, as “hearing becomes doing,”² and finally to The Sending, where we are “sent forth with God’s blessing to serve.”³

THE GATHERING: If the church doesn’t get this part of worship right, the whole service loses its foundation. There are two basic questions that to be addressed here: (1) who is doing the gathering? and (2) who is gathered? We are tempted to think that we have gathered ourselves into worship. After all, we say—we planned the service, we hired the clergy and musicians, we built the sanctuary, we announced the times for worship. Yes, we did all these things, but those meager acts are in response to the first, great move God made toward us in

1 *The Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 30.

2 *ibid*, 33

3 *ibid*, 33

creating and redeeming us. Without the understanding that it is God who gathers us, and not we ourselves (cf. Psalm 100), our worship is nothing more than that solemn assembly denounced by the prophet Amos (Amos 5:21). We must always remember this, or soon we will think that if we do the gathering, we can decide who will be a part of our worship. This is why we pray:

Holy Spirit, Creator,
in the beginning you moved over the waters.
From your breath all creation drew life.
Without you, life turns to dust.

Come Holy Spirit!

Holy Spirit, Sanctifier,
you created us children of God;
you make us the living temple of your presence;
you intercede within us with sighs too deep for words.

Come, Holy Spirit!⁴

This prayer for Pentecost reminds us that our own lives and our life together are a creation of the Spirit of God. If in Christ and by the work of the Holy Spirit we are all the “living temple” of God’s presence, no one may be excluded from the gathering of God’s people. We must always remember that “Christ has gathered the church in unity through the Spirit.”⁵

Article 1 of the Belhar Confession affirms this: “**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.” To think otherwise, to think that being gathered for worship is a product of human initiative rather than a human response to God’s gracious call, would be to set the stage for idolatry.

And who is it that God calls into the church? Belhar, in Article 2, says that the ones called are “the communion of saints from the entire human family.” The family imagery is biblical and deliberate. We do not choose our families. As much as we might wish it could be true, we are not gathered as an association of like-minded individuals. The only assured commonalities in our life together are our universal rebellion against God and the gracious reconciliation with God we have in Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is clear that the unity of the church is shaped by the fact that it is God who calls us all together from across the entire

4 “The Litany for Pentecost,” *Book of Common Worship*, 340.

5 *ibid*, 341

spectrum of the human community. Borrowing from the wedding liturgy, we must say that what God has put together, no one may separate.

Additionally, as we are gathered by God into God's holy presence, we realize our common sinfulness. We realize that none of us has lived a life that is worthy of the calling to which we have been called (Ephesians 4:1). We realize that we share a common rebellion against our Creator. This is made clear in the Accompanying Letter to the Belhar Confession.⁶ It is in the Accompanying Letter that you see a strong sense of humility from those who were oppressed, who admit that they, too, shared in the sin of apartheid. They were the ones who suffered, but they also confess that they also have a common burden of sin. And it is in the Gathering, when we hear the word of the holy God, that we understand that all of us have sinned and fall short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). Sinfulness, as well as God's common call, binds us together. That is not the last word, however, for it is also in our gathering that we hear the words of assurance given to us all, forgiving all of us. Thus, in being gathered by God, we learn three things about our oneness in the Body of Christ: we are commonly called, we are commonly sinful and we are commonly forgiven.

HEARING THE WORD: If we are the body of Christ, then how is Christ present with us and us with him? Our *Book of Order* says: "The church confesses the Scriptures to be the Word of God written, witnessing to God's self-revelation. Where that Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. For this reason the reading, hearing, preaching and confessing of the Word are central to Christian worship (W-2.2001)." Describing God's word as "written" when referring to the scriptures and as "living" when referring to Jesus Christ is in accordance with the Johannine declaration that "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14)

We do not believe that the Word we are to speak and hear is just a historical record of human religious thought and experience. The Word of God is embodied in Jesus, who reveals the very nature of God. The words of Jesus are the words of God and the acts of Jesus are the acts of God. Nor is the Word merely literary inspiration or theological information. We believe that the Word is transformative.⁷ The Word of God *does* what it says. When God says, "Let

6 The authors of the Belhar Confession have a strong sense that the Accompanying Letter should always be read with the Belhar Confession. They should not be separated in their publication or reading.

7 "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

there be light,” the lights go on. The Word of God is central to worship because it shapes our lives as we receive and respond to it.

Speaking from Scripture was essential for the framers of Belhar. Dirk Smit has said:

For the Reformed there is more at stake than simply description, namely the conviction that God’s Word should be heard truly and truthfully as a Word for every particular context. Truth is at stake. A discernment of the spirits is called for. The question is that of true and false prophecy, whether the way in which the voice of the living God and [his] Christ is heard and appropriated is indeed true and faithful for that moment.⁸

Belhar, in its Third Article clearly affirms this shaping power of the Word as it is appropriated by believers who seek to live the word they have received.

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.
- that God’s life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God’s life-giving 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.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD: It is not enough, however, for the church to claim the authority and power of scripture. The church must also recognize that it is claimed by God’s Word. Thus, it is after the Word has been proclaimed and heard that we respond to that claim in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The sacrament of baptism is a visible, tangible sign of the very real

8 Smit, Dirk, “No other motives would give us the right – Reflections on contextuality from a Reformed perspective,” *Studies in Reformed Theology* 8. Christian Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective, eds. M.E. Brinkman & D. van Keulen, Zoetermeer: Meinema, 130-159.

grace of God that joins believers to Christ and Christ's church. The liturgy of baptism, from its opening sentences of scripture to its closing prayers reminds us that we are all one in Christ because God makes it so. This baptismal unity is foundational to understanding how the Belhar Confession describes our unity in Christ in its second section:

We believe ... 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.

When we witness a baptism, we remember that our own baptism means that

[we] are in Christ one church and we already share one baptism, therefore we cannot give up the precious visible unity of the people of God. In other words, Belhar, arising from a painfully divided church, is concerned about the "entrance" into visible unity based on the already achieved "entrance" into the church, exactly because we confess **one baptism**.⁹

Now, this unity does not mean uniformity. Nor should believers be coerced into agreements for the sake of a superficial or false unity. Oneness is not destroyed by disagreement. In fact, it is possible to say that even the divisions of apartheid did not destroy the unity of the church. Rather, they obscured the truth of the gospel. Worse, those divisions bore a false witness to the gospel. Everything that

9 Smit, Dirk, "Confessing the One Faith: Theological Resonance Between the Creed of Nicea and the Confession of Belhar," a paper read at the Fifth Ecumenical Forum, Ecumenical Institute of Heidelberg, January 11, 2003, page 17. Emphasis is the author's.

baptism proclaims – the washing away of sin, being buried with Christ and raised to new life with him, being ingrafted into the body of Christ, the gift of the Spirit, the sing of the kingdom of God – is muted or mocked when Christians do not live into their baptismal identity or unity.

The Lord’s Supper us builds on our baptismal identity and unity. It reminds us of Christ’s body broken and blood shed for us, for *all* of us. All are invited to meet Christ at this table. Remember, it is precisely at this point where the injustice of apartheid began, as Christians presumed that it was they rather than Christ who sent out the invitations to the feast. The Eucharist is a remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice, but it is much more—praise and thanksgiving to God, prayer for the gift of the Spirit, communion with Christ, and a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. Celebrating the Lord’s Supper frequently in all its richness opens up possibilities for powerful transformation of congregations. *The Book of Common Worship* describes the promise of the Eucharist this way:

Christ’s love is received, the covenant is renewed, and the power of Christ’s reign for the renewing of the earth is proclaimed. Being made one with Christ, we are made one with all who belong to Christ, united with the church in every time and place. In this sacrament we also participate in God’s future It is a means, given to us by Christ, through which the risen Lord is truly present as a continuing power and reality.¹⁰

The Belhar Confession draws heavily upon Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 10-11. These texts are deeply related to the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. Thus, the sacramental impulses of the Belhar Confession cannot be ignored. One implication of the Belhar Confession is that a renewed understanding and practice of the sacraments can prepare us for—and perhaps even propel us towards—reconciliation and justice.

THE SENDING: There are some, unfortunately, who think that the “Amen” after the benediction means “The End” – church is over. On the other hand, there are congregations with a different understanding, sometimes expressed by a plaque over the exit that says “Servants’ Entrance.” Belhar states “Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled to God and to one another.” (Article 2) In other words, what has been done by Christ *in* us must now be made known *through* us. Again, our *Book of Common Worship* tells us that in the Sending we are to be charged to go into God’s world: “The charge renews God’s call to us to

10 *Book of Common Worship*, op. cit., 42

engage in obedient and grateful ministry as God’s agents to heal life’s brokenness. By the power of the Spirit, we are to be in life and ministry what Christ has redeemed us to be.”¹¹

We are all familiar with the Great Commission of Matthew 28, but the Belhar Confession evokes, in its fourth article, the Great Sending of John 20:21, in which Jesus says, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so send I you.” Article Four declares the hope for the world that comes from the gospel of Jesus Christ. The authors of the Belhar Confession affirm that God will bring true peace and justice, and will care for the poor and oppressed. They assert that “the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lords stands.” If the church stands where the Lord stands, it must go where the Lord goes, *in the way* in which the Lord goes. As we think about seeking justice, how will the conduct of Christ’s ministry affect the conduct of our ministry?

11 *Book of Common Worship*, op. cit. 44.

Assignment for the next meeting of Presbytery—November 17, 2009

1. Read:

- Session Six of the Study Guide: “Belhar, the Unity We Seek, and the Mission of the Church”
- Read the entire Belhar Confession and the Accompanying Letter
These texts are available online at
<http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/confession.htm>
- Read the Nicene Creed
- Read Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, chapters 2 and 4

2. Think about this:

- What does it mean to be and to believe in (in the words of the Nicene Creed) “one holy catholic and apostolic church”?
- When and how have you experienced or participated in the mission of the church?

3. Checking in: At this point in your study, what are your thoughts and/or resolutions concerning

- the nature of the unity the church has been given?
- how that unity provides a foundation for justice?
- the mission of the church?

4. Note: Session Six will be our last session studying the Belhar Confession. Please send any reflections, thoughts, comments, critiques to Jeff Falter at hezekiah316@gmail.com so that he may send our responses to this study forward to the national church.

