

October 25, 2020 - The Belhar Confession for this Moment

"How should the church respond when sin disrupts the church's unity, creates division among the children of God, and constructs unjust systems that steal life from God's creation?"

This is the question that begins the introduction to the Confession of Belhar in our denomination's book of Confessions. This question, while not originally written for us, here today in America, still feels like an apt question for the current moment of our nation.

The question is, however, in direct reference to the context in which the Confession of Belhar was written - in September of 1986 in South Africa, during Apartheid.

Apartheid was a system of laws that separated people by race from 1948 to 1994 and it formed a racially stratified society in South Africa. But the roots of apartheid go back centuries, back to the 1600s when the Dutch East India company wanted to leave just a small contingent of their men at the Cape of Good Hope to found a trading post where food and water could be provided for Dutch ships on their way to and from their colonies in Asia. More Dutch followed, and they brought enslaved peoples with them. In time, some of the enslaved peoples bore children by white sailors and Dutch settlers. Their offspring eventually intermarried with the indigenous black population, and thus, the result was an inter-racial population in the Cape province. Over time the Dutch would lose control of the province to the British, and by that time the diversity of the population had expanded further: an Indian population had come to call the area home, as well as a cemented identity of white Dutch farmers who had been there since the mid 1600s – who also saw the British as their enemy.

In 1907 the union of south Africa was formed and in 1910, it was declared independent of Great Britain. This freedom only brought freedom to some. Laws were then passed ensuring that most of the land and the best jobs were reserved for the whites and strict separation of the races followed. The racial segregation is one found all too similar in our own history: interracial marriage was forbidden, all public facilities were segregated, and people of color had to carry passbooks containing information on the holder.

During Apartheid, the Dutch Reformed Church broke into four churches that directly responded to the racial categories enforced by the government: The dominant group was the white Dutch Reformed Church. There was a Black Church – the Dutch Reformed church in Africa. There was an Indian Church – The Reformed Church in Africa. And then there was the Dutch Reformed Mission

Church for people of color, or the bi-racial and interracial population – especially in the cape province.

Racial violence ensued throughout the decades of Apartheid as well as false theology. The white Dutch reformed church went so far as to create an elaborate biblical interpretation and ideology that supported racial separation. The global community stepped in, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1982 declared apartheid a heresy. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church (The bi-racial population church) saw this declaration as an affirmation of their identity of being people of color and authentically reformed. In response, they appointed a committee to draft an appropriate expression of their judgements on apartheid. And thus, the confession of Belhar was formed.

The confession of Belhar, itself, has three central themes: Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice. These themes are split into 3 sections. It is structured like the Theological Declaration of Barmen, which just means there is a biblical affirmation followed by a rejection of false teaching.

In the section on unity it describes unity as “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 sought.” It makes clear that unity requires work: but this work IS the work of the church of Jesus Christ.

In the section on reconciliation it states “that Gods’ 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.”

It ensures that reconciliation is possible. Not only between God and ourselves but between each other. No hate is so great that can overcome the love and grace of God.

In its section on Justice it states “that God has revealed God’s self 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 frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind.”

It is adamant that God is a God of justice. And we are not doing God’s work if we are not working towards justice for the destitute, the poor, the wronged.

Since it was originally written in 1986, the confession of Belhar has become a gift to the global reformed community because of its true and faithful witness to unity, reconciliation, and justice. But it has not always been a gift readily accepted.

The PCUSA approved the addition of the Belhar confession to our book of confessions in 2016 but moves to add Belhar started much earlier. In 2004, a task force studying the issue or reparations commended the Confession of Belhar to the PCUSA and asked for materials to be prepared and sent for churchwide reflection and study. The general assembly in 2008 approved the addition of Belhar to the book of confessions by a 76% majority, but the presbyteries failed to approve it. Belhar gained a majority vote in the presbyteries but was short 8 presbyteries to make the 2/3 majority.

It took another 8 years to finally make Belhar part of our confessions.

Why the wait? Why was it shot down? One fear of the confession of Belhar was that it could be used to support justice for the queer community. Perhaps the irony of it all, is that the PCUSA moved to affirm the queer community in 2015 – a year before they finally adopted Belhar.

But the truth of it is, is that Belhar does create fear for those of us who are privileged – who are white, who are straight, who are educated – like so many of us are. It can create fear for us because unity, reconciliation, and justice require action. They require sacrifice.

What are we willing to sacrifice to ensure unity, bring about reconciliation, and create justice?

These past few years have been an awakening for me. During my time at Princeton Seminary, the seminary did a slavery audit where they intensely studied the seminary's history in direct relationship to slavery – and how the seminary benefited from slave economy. My own family dug deep into our history and learned of our own direct ties to slavery. And after learning the horror that biased history suppresses and seeing the call to reparations at my own seminary and across the country, I've been plagued by the question: what would I be willing to give up, if it meant unity, justice, and reconciliation for the destitute, the poor, and the wronged – whom the confession of Belhar affirms that God is their God.

It is perhaps the greatest mystery and paradox that God is both the God of the oppressor and the God of the oppressed. We all know the horror done in Christ's name, yet we also know the transforming good and justice done in Christ's name. The confession of Belhar uses that to radically affirm that reconciliation is not only possible, it is necessary in the love of God. That unity in diversity is not only good, we must work to make it visible. That Justice is not only God's plan, if we as the church are not working toward it, we are not the church.

The confession of Belhar had its consequences. Supporters of the confession were attacked as communists, and one of the main authors, Russel Botman, was jailed and tortured. Its consequences have followed as it made its way into the larger global community and more churches have adopted it. Yet, still it persists. Still it makes its way into our hearts and fuels our passion for Christ's justice.

The confession of Belhar has taught me many things, but perhaps most among them it has taught me that my faith in God and Christ requires action – action to affirm Christ's gospel, and action to loudly and openly REJECT what is not. Our faith is twofold that way – as much as we affirm what is good, we must reject what is bad – what goes against Christ's gospel of unity, reconciliation, and justice. This creates fear, for me at least. Perhaps for you too.

And that's okay. Fear, in and of itself, is not bad. It's when fear paralyzes us from doing what is right, that fear is bad. But then – it's not really fear, it's our inaction. It's our complacency to remain content when we know that Christ demands our action.

I don't know what the future will bring. I don't know how, and if, our country and its systems and institutions and people will actively work toward unity, reconciliation, and justice. But I know that through Christ they all are possible, and necessary.

I keep going back to that question that plagues me: the question, what would I sacrifice, to do my part to help make this happen. To help bring the Confession of Belhar alive in this moment. And the truth is – I don't know. Would I sacrifice whatever is required so that justice is served, unity within reach, and reconciliation made possible? I hope I would. But I can say this: I hope I get the chance. I hope we all do.

Amen.

*The history of the Belhar Confession and its journey to be adopted into the Book of Confessions in this sermon was found in resources from the Presbyterian Church USA's study on the Confession of Belhar and its history, mainly from this study:

https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/the_b_elhar_confession-rogers.pdf