

The Bible and Belhar



CONFESSION OF
BELHAR

Stephen A. Hayner Mark Labberton

Produced by the Special Committee on the Belhar Confession

Table of Contents

The Bible and Belhar

Letter	iii
Author Bios	v
The Bible and Belhar	1
The Confession of Belhar	5
Accompanying Letter	9
Discussion Questions	11

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR

September 24, 2013

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

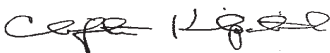
It is with great joy that we, on behalf of the General Assembly Special Committee on the Confession of Belhar, share with you this essay, *The Bible and Belhar*. This is a welcome resource for all of us in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), as we seek to discern the will of God for the PC(USA) relative to adding the Confession of Belhar to the *Book of Confessions*, where it can serve as one of the subordinate standards that articulate for our church “what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do” (*Book of Order*, F-2.01).

We are particularly grateful to two Presbyterian seminary presidents, Stephen Hayner at Columbia and Mark Labberton at Fuller, for being co-authors of this important essay. We are in full agreement with them that “the biblical basis of this confession is clear” and are grateful for the lucid way in which they give substance to that assertion in *The Bible and Belhar*. We were deeply enriched by reading this text and hope the same will be true for you.

In addition to *The Bible and Belhar*, you will find in this booklet the Confession of Belhar (with scriptural citations), its accompanying letter, and a series of questions you may wish to use in studying this document and the Confession of Belhar. In addition to this booklet, a wide variety of articles, workshop designs, PowerPoint presentations, and other resources can be accessed at the Special Committee’s website, www.pcusa.org/belhar.

The Confession of Belhar calls us to unity, reconciliation, and justice as the cornerstone of our commitment to one another in the body of Christ. May those blessings be with you and your congregation as you seek to follow Christ.

Grace and peace,



Clifton Kirkpatrick
Co-Moderator



Matilde Moros
Co-Moderator

Author Bios

Stephen A. Hayner

Stephen Hayner is the president of Columbia Theological Seminary. He joined the seminary's faculty in 2003 as professor of evangelism and church growth after a long history of experience in ministry to the church and to university students.

He has degrees from Whitman College, Harvard University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

He was the president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship for 13 years and has served on a number of national and international boards, including World Vision, International Justice Mission, ScholarLeaders International, The Navigators, Presbyterian Global Fellowship, Fuller Theological Seminary, and the Evangelical Environmental Network.

Mark Labberton

Mark Labberton is the president of Fuller Theological Seminary, having held the Lloyd John Ogilvie Chair of Preaching and serving as the director of the Lloyd John Ogilvie Institute of Preaching since 2009.

He is a graduate of Whitman College, Fuller Theological Seminary, and the University of Cambridge.

For 16 years, he served as the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, California. He was a co-founder of ScholarLeaders International, which trains theologians and scholars in the developing world. He is also a former chair of John Stott Ministries and a senior fellow of the International Justice Mission.

The Bible and Belhar

Stephen A. Hayner, PhD

Mark Labberton, PhD

C. S. Lewis wisely observed that every age has its own outlook. In an introduction to what was then a new translation of St. Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*, Lewis wrote that every age "is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. . . . We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century—the blindness about which posterity will ask, 'But how could they have thought that?'—lies where we have never suspected it."¹

Lewis went on to observe:

None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the *same* mistakes.²

If this is the effect that "old books" can have by giving us a better perspective on where we are veering from the truth as a culture and as a church, then the effect of reading the Bible as God's inspired Word is certainly many times as strong and important. And documents such as the Confession of Belhar, birthed in a time of cultural upheaval and pain, can be extremely helpful as well.

Kwame Bediako, who was ordained in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and became one of the most remarkable scholars in the African theology movement, points out that

when our cultures pass through the prism of Scripture, we see them in a new way. The light and shade intrinsic to our cultures are revealed. We are no longer being defined by our traditions, but are allowing Scripture to interpret those traditions. Scripture is more than just a record of the history and religion of Israel and the early church. Rather, it records God's dealings with his people and with their culture, and is itself the fruit of that engagement. It thus provides a yardstick or a model for encouraging, identifying and controlling all subsequent engagements of gospel and culture in the continuing divine-human encounter that characterizes our faith. Scripture is the authoritative road map on our journey of faith.³

The Confession of Belhar (originally written in Afrikaans in 1982) is a wonderful illustration of a particular people wrestling to understand its own culture and long tradition of ethnic segregation against the backdrop of the Bible. Eventually it came to see that the cultures of both South Africa and its own churches needed to

be transformed in light of what God had been saying to and doing with God's people throughout the ages, especially with regard to race, ethnicity, and justice.

So what are the lessons that the Confession of Belhar derived from Scripture?

First, Belhar affirms what the Bible teaches: that all humanity is created in the image of God, and therefore each person possesses dignity and worth granted by the Creator. When humans were first created (Gen. 1), God said that they were "very good." Even after the fall, every human being is still made in God's image (Gen. 9:6) and is to be valued. Throughout the Bible, God's care for the individual is clear, no matter what his or her social or economic state, ethnic origin, heritage, or even the manifestation of sin in his or her life. God cares for every living being—for every sinner, for every child or adult. "For God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone* who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16, italics added). This vital biblical truth must be underlined in a world that often dehumanizes to justify violence, oppression, and horrors such as "ethnic cleansing."

Second, Belhar affirms God's desire that all humankind live in unity—in right relationship—with God and with one another. The Bible teaches that unity and peace were God's plan from the beginning, and this part of God's perfect creation plan was most obviously damaged when sin entered the world. From Genesis 3 onward, we watch the God-who-never-gives-up on a great mission to restore the unity that was intended. When God selected Abram and Sarai and began to create a people through whom the Savior would come, it was with the promise that they would be a blessing to all nations. Throughout the Old Testament, God's great mission of salvation was to reconcile all people and nations and to return them to God's rule of peace (*shalom*). Isaiah and the prophets proclaimed it. Israel was to be a light to all peoples (Isa. 42:1–10), and all one day would stream to God's holy mountain and sit together at the great feast (Isa. 2:1–4; 25). One day "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid" (Micah 4:3–4). Even those who had been cut off from temple worship because of their deformities or life conditions would be included (Isa. 56:4–7). Jesus quoted from this passage when he cleansed the temple (Mark 11:17) and affirmed: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isaiah 56:7). Jesus reaffirmed that God's vision throughout all the Scriptures was that the good news should be preached to all people (Luke 24:45–49; Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:9).

Third, Belhar focuses squarely on the church as the central locus of God's activity during this time while we await the full expression of Christ's reign. Belhar argues that the unity of the church is not based on political or even moral agreement but is theological and found in Christ. When the church was born in Acts 2, another step toward God's vision was accomplished as the gospel was preached to all those present in their own languages. The book of Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit calling, empowering, and sending all who follow Jesus (the church) across every ethnic and cultural barrier. When the churches faltered in their mission to live out the gospel as the reconciled and reconciling people of God, the apostles called them back to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:1–6) and to fulfill Jesus' great prayer that "they may all be one" (John 17:20–24). This unity was to be modeled on the very relationship between Jesus and the Father. Every barrier between people was broken down at the cross (Eph. 2:14). And in Revelation

we catch a glimpse of the fulfillment of God's cosmic vision as people from every nation are drawn into the worship of Christ for eternity (Rev. 5:9–10). The Bible closes with the healing of the nations (Rev. 21–22), when all things are reconciled in Christ and when all people attain the unity that God had planned from all eternity.

Belhar captures the scope and language of God's great plan for unity, borrowing liberally from the images and teachings found throughout the New Testament, especially from the book of Ephesians. It captures both the spirit and emphasis of the Bible on this great theme. While recognizing that individuals, people groups, and cultures bring differences of many kinds, including gifts to the body of Christ, the church is called to participate in God's plan to bring all things together in Christ. *If the unity of God's people is not visibly seen across all possible divisions and within all diversity, then the witness of God's people to the watching world is surely compromised.*

God's plan for the reconciliation and unity of all things in Christ is perhaps the greatest theme of the Scriptures and is to be the central focus of the mission of the church as well.

Fourth, Belhar recognizes that in this interim time, before the "age to come" is fully realized, the whole world lives under the shroud of sin. Alienation, deprivation, and oppression are the nature of things. However, God's people are not called to despair or hopelessness but to cooperation with God's work of reconciliation, compassion, and justice. In the final section of Belhar, the confession calls the church to respond to the voice of both the Old Testament prophets and the ministry of Jesus in caring for all who are under the burden of sin, especially those who are the most powerless within our cultures, including the weak, the sick, the hungry, the outcast, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the imprisoned. We, as the church, are called to follow Jesus, who consistently used his power to serve—to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, to stand with the victims of injustice, and to seek and to save the lost, even when it meant persecution at the hands of the authorities.

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."⁴ Nevertheless, "all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all."⁵ It is precisely because "all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves" that over the years the confessions of the church and the experience of the church worldwide have become such important resources in helping the church to journey forward faithfully and biblically in an ever-changing world. Belhar is a prime illustration of the process of careful Bible study, penetrating cultural reflection, and a call to deeper faithfulness.

But establishing that Belhar is faithful to the Scriptures still leaves open the question of whether it belongs in the *Book of Confessions*. When we add a confession, we do so because we are convinced that this word of exhortation does theological work that is significant and would not be done as well without it. While the themes of Belhar can be found in other confessions, what Belhar adds is the historical and social context of its affirmations and the power of its voice speaking into a critical and vulnerable time in South Africa, addressing the sin of racism in both church and culture. Similar to the Theological Declaration of Barmen,

which grew out of the life of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, Belhar was produced in a specific context where in retrospect it is evident that the church had wandered away from her calling to unity and reconciliation, not by devious intent, but rather by cultural blindness.

As advocates for Belhar, we believe that our own cultural and ecclesial moment also needs such a word of faith to deal with the disgrace of racial/ethnic injustice in our country. The question is whether Belhar provides the diagnoses, challenge, and correctives that we need. It is on this point that our denomination's debate needs to turn. The biblical basis of this confession is clear.

1. From C. S. Lewis's introduction to a translation of St. Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*, by Sister Penelope Lawson, of the Anglican Community of St. Mary the Virgin in Wantage, England. It was originally published with a byline that reads only "Translated and edited by A Religious of C.S.M.V." Centenary Press, 1944.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Kwame Bediako, "Scripture as Hermeneutic of Culture and Tradition," *Africa Bible Commentary*, 2nd edition, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), pp. 3-4.

4. Westminster Confession of Faith, ch. 1, sec. VI.

5. Westminster Confession of Faith, ch. 1, sec. VII.

The Confession of Belhar

Revelation 21:6–7

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.

Matthew 28:19–20

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

Ephesians 2:13–22

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;

Ephesians 4:11–16;
Psalm 133

- 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;

John 17:20–23

- 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 13:34

Colossians 3:12–16

Philippians 2:1–5

1 Corinthians 1:10–13

Ephesians 4:1–6;

1 Corinthians 10:16–17

Ephesians 3:18–20

Galatians 6:2

2 Corinthians 1:3–4

1 Corinthians 12:24b–28;

Ephesians 3:14–20

- 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

1 Corinthians 12:4–11;
Romans 12:3–8

Galatians 3:27–29

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.

2 Corinthians 5:17–21

Matthew 5:9, 13–16;
2 Peter 3:13;
Revelation 21:1–5

Romans 6:12–14;
Colossians 1:11–14

James 2:8–9

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 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;
- 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 of 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

Isaiah 42:1–7

Luke 6:20–26

Luke 4:16–19

Luke 7:22

Psalm 146

James 1:27

Micah 6:8

Amos 5:14–15,
23–24

Psalm 82:1–5;
Leviticus 19:15

- 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.

Acts 5:29–32;
1 Peter 3:15–18

- 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.

This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the confession as it was adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986. In 1994 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). This inclusive language text was prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Section numbers are OGA suggestions based on the document's five original sections and the numbering from the *Book of Confessions*.

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.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with C. S. Lewis that each age is characterized by a certain blindness that is dangerous to both church and culture? How does the Confession of Belhar seek to cure that blindness?
2. What insight did you find in Kwame Bediako's observation that the Bible is more than a record of history and religion in that "it records God's dealings with his people and with their culture, and is itself the fruit of that engagement"? As God continues to deal with church and culture, what is the fruit of that ongoing engagement, and how does the Confession of Belhar call us to participate in that engagement?
3. What do we mean when we say that all humanity is created in the image of God? Do you see that reflected in the life and ministry of your church?
4. Unity is a central theme of the Confession of Belhar, yet the church often is characterized by disunity and separation. In what ways is the call to unity a challenge for our church? In what ways is it a blessing?
5. Discuss the key sentence: "God's plan for the reconciliation and unity of all things in Christ is perhaps the greatest theme of the Scriptures and is to be the central focus of the mission of the church as well." How has that plan already been accomplished by God, and in what way do we participate in this plan through our mission and ministry?
6. The authors quote the Westminster Confession of Faith: "all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all." Do you agree? How do our confessions help make the message of Scripture plain, and how would the addition of the Confession of Belhar aid this understanding?
7. Do you agree with the conclusion of the authors that "the biblical basis of this confession is clear"?
8. What would the Confession of Belhar add to our *Book of Confessions*? Do you think that it is an important word for the church today?



21162-13-006