

## Confession of Belhar

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? Members and leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa faced these questions under apartheid, a system of laws that separated people by race from 1948 to 1994.

Apartheid formed a racially stratified society. Those with the lightest skin tones were offered the greatest protection and opportunity. Non-“white” persons were separated into three categories; each skin tone step away from the “white” category represented a decrease in governmental protections and opportunities. Racial separation was established by law and enforced through violence. Nonwhite citizens lived with constant and intrusive police presence and interference in the daily functions of life. Those who protested risked punishment, imprisonment, and even death.

The roots of apartheid go back in South African culture and church for several centuries. The Dutch Reformed Church embodied racial separation when it formed three “mission” churches in the late nineteenth century, each categorized by its racial identity. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church was formed for people designated as “coloured” (biracial). The church's complicity with racial separation kept Christians from worshipping and coming to the Lord's Table together. The white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) created an elaborate biblical interpretation and ideology that supported racial separation and then the formal apartheid policies.

The Dutch Reformed Church's active participation and theological defense of apartheid moved the global church to name apartheid a *status confessionis*—a conviction that the Gospel was at stake and thus the faith needed to be proclaimed. Leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church wrestled with this situation theologically and practically. One outcome of their struggles was the emergence of the Confession of Belhar in the early 1980s.

The Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa traditionally had *Three Standards of Unity*: The Belgic Confession (1561), The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and The Canons of Dort (1618-1619). In their original European context, these documents asserted that Protestant Christians were not anarchists, but were good citizens, willing to obey the government of the land. These confessions from the 16th and 17th centuries were used in the 19th and 20th centuries in South Africa to justify obedience to an apartheid government.

The Confession of Belhar was written as a protest against a heretical theological stance by the white Dutch Reformed Church that used the Bible and the Confessions to justify the harsh and unjust system of Apartheid.

The Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA), the church that succeeded the Dutch Reformed Mission Church after apartheid, has offered the Confession of Belhar to the global Reformed family as a gift, believing that the themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice issue a call from God to the whole church toward holy action, transformation, and life.

In 2004, a task force studying the issue of reparations commended the Belhar Confession to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The 218th General Assembly in 2008, without discussion, approved the addition of Belhar to the Book of Confessions by a 76% positive vote. The General Assembly then submitted the proposal to the vote of the 173 presbyteries of the denomination. Belhar garnered a majority vote in the presbyteries but failed by just 8 presbyteries to achieve the necessary two-thirds needed for final adoption into the Book of Confessions.

The Special Committee on the Confession of Belhar continued to recommend that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) add Belhar as part of its Constitution because it believed the clarity of Belhar's witness to unity, reconciliation, and justice might help the PC(USA) speak and act with similar clarity at a time when it faces division, racism, and injustice.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved the Confession of Belhar as part of the Book of Confessions at the 222nd General Assembly (2016).