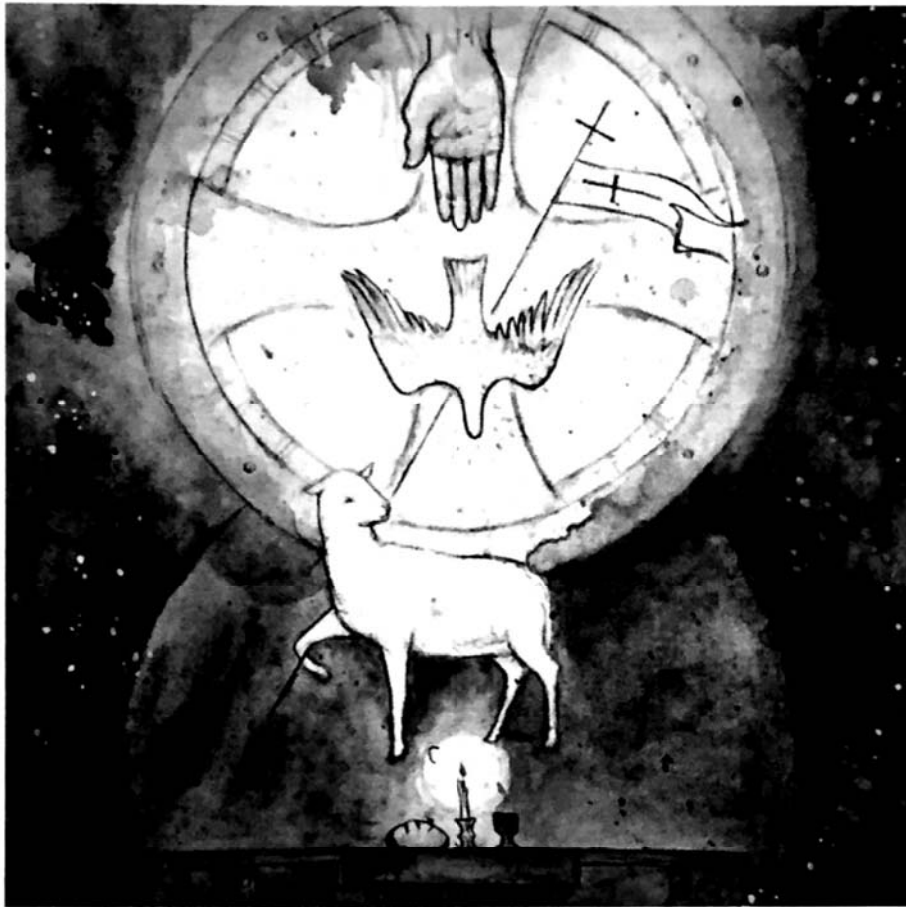


Aedan Peterson's depiction of the Nicene Creed



Optional Homework: Read both the Athanasian Creed and the Confession of Belhar and answer the questions below.

1. What was the historical context of the Confession of Belhar? What are some of its central images and themes? If you were to create a banner for Belhar, what four to five images would you use and why?
2. What is theologically sound about the Athanasian Creed? Why, then, might it have been rejected by the PC(USA) for inclusion in the Book of Confessions? What portions are theologically problematic?

## Introduction to the Course

- Why now? How are these topics connected?
- What is a confession? Creed? Catechism?
  - What are they and what are they not?
  - Distillations of the faith—the oldest and most fundamental confession is “\_\_\_\_\_”
  - Confession—From Latin meaning admit/speak+together
  - Creed—From Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe”
  - Catechism—From Greek “instruction by word of mouth,” from *katekhein*, “to instruct orally”
- Why were they written?
  - In response to a need (against heresy, establishment of orthodoxy, desire to teach the faith)
  - The earliest ones are short so that they could be more easily memorized (for those faithful who could not read) along with the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. This “helped to preserve and transmit the faith.”



In the PC (USA), the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order together make up our denomination’s constitution. The Book of Confessions, in particular, is a collection of documents that stretch back to the early church. These documents are presented in their final, unadulterated forms. While “there’s a remarkable consistency expressed over centuries in core beliefs, there’s also flexibility, adaptability, outright change.

For instance, in the Second Helvetic Confession from the 16th century, we read this: “We teach that baptism should not be administered in the Church by women or midwives.” By 1983, however, in “A Brief Statement of Faith,” which was included in the Book of [Confessions] when the northern and southern branches of American Presbyterianism reunited, we read this: “The same Spirit ... calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.”<sup>1</sup>

Whenever we study the confessions, we should always seek to be aware of the historical context out of which they emerged because that helps us understand the intent of the authors and what the original audience would have understood. Additionally, as we read and analyze, we should be aware of the following elements

- (1) The order in which topics are presented
- (2) The names/ images for God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit
- (3) The particular theological emphases
- (4) Anything that strikes you as strange or unfamiliar (names, words, or phrases)
- (5) The length of certain sections (could imply importance)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nconline.org/news/opinion/consistency-change-run-through-presbyterian-history>

Brief Outline of the Book of Confessions<sup>2</sup>

#	Confession	Date(s)	Location	Historical Context/ Issues/ Themes
1	Nicene Creed	325 381	Nicaea Constantinople	Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and sought to address disputes for sake of unification Nature of Christ-was the divinity of Christ created by God or the same as God? <i>Against Arius/Arian heresy that Christ was created</i>
2	Apostles' Creed	180 2nd/3rd c. 4th/5th c. 5th c. 8th c.	Rome Rome N.Africa Gaul	Against Marcion/ Marcionite heresy: Jesus was not OT Messiah Forgiveness of sins Holy, catholic church He descended into hell (finalized as we know it)
3	Scots Confession	1560	Scotland	Scottish Parliament declares Scotland a Protestant nation; commissions new confession of faith; John Knox; emphasizes God's providence and calls for trust and commitment in turbulent times
4	Heidelberg Catechism	1562-3	Germany	Tension between Reformed and Lutheran movements: nature of Christ's presence in Lord's Supper; creed states what both can affirm; based on Romans 7:24-25
5	Second Helvetic Confession	1561	Switzerland	Swiss-German Reformed Church Bullinger wrote it as part of his Last Will and Testament; used by Frederick (Governor) as defense; adopted by churches of Switzerland
6	Westminster Confession	1647 1647 1729 1903	England Scotland America (addendum)	English government called for settling issues of church governance and liturgy; Westminster Assembly convened; political and religious conflicts; civil war; adopted later by other countries
7	Shorter Catechism Larger Catechism	1649	England	Westminster Assembly (above)
8	Theological Declaration of Barmen	1934	Germany	Rise of Nazi Germany, WWII; equating national-ism, militarism, and patriotism (under Hitler) with Christianity; there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, who is Lord over every area of life
9	Confession of 1967	1967	USA UPC (USA)	Turbulent 1960s; concurrent with Vatican II; prompted by request to revise the Westminster Confession; themes of reconciliation and the Church's role in the world; addressed need to interpret Scripture
10	Confession of Belhar	1986	South Africa	Dutch Reformed Church complicit with racial separation (Apartheid) even keeping Christians from worshipping and sharing communion together; the Uniting Reformed Church of S. Africa wrote Belhar to promote unity, reconciliation, and justice.
11	Brief Statement of Faith	1983	USA	Reunion of northern and southern branches of Presbyterianism in USA to form PC(USA); articulates common identity in midst of diversity and disagreement; gender inclusiveness, care for God's creation; "In life and in death, we belong to God"

**Two** from the early church, **three** from the Reformation Era, **one** from the 17<sup>th</sup> c., and **four** from the 20<sup>th</sup> c.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from <http://firstpresbyterian.org/sites/default/files/other/Book-of-Confessions-Brief-Summary.pdf>

## 2. The Apostles' Creed

- Not written by the Apostles, Played no role in Easter Orthodoxy
- Heresiarch Marcion proposed that the God of the OT was so different from the NT that Jesus was not the Messiah as proclaimed by the prophets. He believed Jesus was a God of love and mercy in contrast to the "tyrannical God" of the Old Testament. Furthermore, Marcion wanted to reject the OT as scripture and even proposed limiting Christian Scripture to Luke's gospel (minus a few sections he judged to be too Jewish) and those letters of Paul that he regarded as anti-Jewish.
- Around A.D. 180, Roman Christians developed an early form of the Apostles' Creed to refute Marcion. They affirmed that the God of creation is the Father of Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, was buried and raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven, where he rules with the Father. They also affirmed belief in the Holy Spirit, the church, and the resurrection of the body. Candidates for membership in the church, having undergone a lengthy period of moral and doctrinal instruction, were asked at baptism to state what they believed. They responded in the words of this creed.
- What is theologically relevant? (Group Discussion)

- "Jesus descended into hell, or Hades or Sheol, to liberate all the righteous ones who had lived for justice and died from injustice before he himself had lived and died a similar destiny... It seems rather that [the tradition of the harrowing of hell] was early and leaving as the New Testament was being written rather than late and arriving after its creation... First, the harrowing of hell is an intensely Jewish Christian tradition and indeed one of its most important elements, but the future did not lie with that stream of tradition. Second, the harrowing of hell is also intensely mythological... Third, the harrowing of hell could not fit easily into *any* sequence as the ending of a gospel narrative. How could Jesus arise at the head of the martyred and righteous ones and then appear to his disciples to give them their apostolic mandate? Such a corporate resurrection would have demanded a concomitant and immediate corporate ascension. Clearly, then, the gospel ending could have had *either* a harrowing of hell for a corporate resurrection and ascension *or* a risen apparition for apostolic commissioning, but not both."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Borg and Crossan, "The Last Week," 174-183.

### The Apostles' Creed

I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth,  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;  
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried;  
he descended into hell;  
the third day he rose again from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven,  
and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Ghost;  
the holy \*catholic Church;  
the communion of saints;  
the forgiveness of sins;  
the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

\*that is, the true Christian church of all times and all places

### Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.  
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the  
Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius  
Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the  
living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

This creed is called the **Apostles' Creed** not because it was produced by the apostles themselves but because it contains a brief summary of their teachings. It sets forth their doctrine "in sublime simplicity, in unsurpassable brevity, in beautiful order, and with liturgical solemnity." In its present form it is dated no later than the fourth century. More than any other Christian creed, it may justly be called an ecumenical symbol of faith.

**The Nicene Creed** (AKA the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed), is a statement of the orthodox faith of the early Christian church in opposition to certain heresies, especially Arianism. These heresies, which disturbed the church during the fourth century, concerned the doctrine of the Trinity and of the person of Christ. Both the Greek (Eastern) and the Latin (Western) church held this creed in honor, though with one important difference: the Western church insisted on the inclusion of the phrase "and the Son" (known as the "filioque") in the article on the procession of the Holy Spirit; this phrase still is repudiated by the Eastern Orthodox church. In its present form this creed goes back partially to the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) with additions by the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381). It was accepted in its present form at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, but the "filioque" phrase was not added until 589. However, the creed is in substance an accurate and majestic formulation of the Nicene faith.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and  
glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

## 1. The Nicene Creed: The Most Ecumenical of the Creeds

- Historical background: In AD 312, Constantine won control of the Roman Empire in the battle of Milvian Bridge. Attributing his victory to the intervention of Jesus Christ, he elevated Christianity to a favored status in the empire. “One God, one Lord, one faith, one church, one empire, one emperor became his motto.” However, Constantine “soon discovered that “one faith and one church” were fractured by theological disputes, especially conflicting understandings of the nature of Christ.
- The heresiarch Arius, who was a priest of the church in Alexandria, asserted that the divine Christ was *created* by God before the beginning of time. Therefore, the divinity of Christ was *similar* to the divinity of God, but not of the same *essence*. Alexander and Athanasius affirmed the divinity of Christ, the Son, is of the same substance as the divinity of God, the Father. To hold otherwise, they said, was to open the possibility of polytheism, and to imply that knowledge of God in Christ was not final knowledge of God.
- In order to promote church unity, Constantine convened a council in 325 AD.
- Theological Distinctives:
  - Homoousiou-Of the *same ousion* (substance)
  - Filioque clause:

*And from the son.* For most Protestants and for Roman Catholics, another phrase is added here. The Spirit is said to proceed not only from the Father, but also from the Son. In Latin, the phrase “and from the Son” is expressed with the term *filioque*. The inclusion of this provision in the Creed has been hotly contested in the history of Christian theology and is tied up in the Great Schism of 1054 that continues to separate Eastern and Western Christians. It is interesting to note that this inclusion entered the Creed as part of the effort to combat a new outbreak of Arianism in Spain in the early Middle Ages. Since these Arians denigrated the divinity of the Son, Spanish monks elevated the status of the Son by claiming that the Spirit proceeds through the Father and the Son. In the East, this addition was not accepted for many reasons, some theological, some ecclesiological. On the theological level, it appears to alter the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father is no longer the fount of divinity but shares that role with the Son. There is also a basic ecclesiological problem. By including this change, an alteration was made in an ecumenical creed without an ecumenical council. Bishops representing the entire Christian world assembled at Nicaea and Constantinople to craft this creed, and to change it without a similar assemblage was considered problematic in the East. These are not only hotly contested matters; they are also very complicated and cannot be treated with any greater attention here.<sup>4</sup>

Jurgen Moltmann proposes that, if we were to change the controversial clause, it could better read as, “The Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father of the Son, and receives his form from the Father and the Son.”<sup>5</sup> “If, then, God as Father breathes out the Holy Spirit, then the Spirit proceeds *from the Father of the Son*. His procession therefore presupposes, firstly, the generation of the Son; secondly, the existence of the Son; and thirdly, the mutual relationship of the Father and the Son. The Son is the logical presupposition and the actual condition for the procession of the Spirit from the Father; but he is not the Spirit’s origin, as the Father is. The procession of the Spirit from the Father must therefore be essentially distinguished from the generation of the Son through the Father, and yet it is connected with that generation relationally.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Parnenios, “The Creed,” 12.

<sup>5</sup> Moltmann, “Theological Proposals,” 171.

<sup>6</sup> Moltmann, “The Trinity and the Kingdom.”

### 3. The Scots Confession

The Scots Confession was written at a turning point in the history of the Scottish nation. When the Queen Regent Mary of Guise died in her sleep in 1560, the Protestant nobility of Scotland was able to secure English recognition of Scottish sovereignty in the Treaty of Edinburgh. To the Scots, this favorable conclusion to the civil war with Mary's French-supported forces represented a providential deliverance. The Scottish Parliament, having declared Scotland a Protestant nation, asked the clergy to frame a confession of faith. Six ministers, including John Knox, completed their work in four days. In 1560, the document was ratified by Parliament as "doctrine grounded upon the infallible Word of God." The Scots Confession sets forth three marks of the true and faithful church: "the true preaching of the Word of God," "the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus," and "ecclesiastical discipline ... whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished." "Cleave, serve, worship, trust" are key words in this document. As a call to action in a turbulent time, the Scots Confession reflects a spirit of trust and a commitment to the God whose miraculous deliverance the Scots had experienced firsthand.

#### 1. God

"We confess and acknowledge one God alone, to whom alone we must cleave, whom alone we must serve, whom only we must worship, and in whom alone we put our trust. Who is eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, invisible; one in substance and yet distinct in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."

#### 2. The Creation of Man

#### 3. Original Sin

#### 4. The Revelation of the Promise

#### 5. The Continuance, Increase, and Preservation of the Kirk

#### 6. The Incarnation of Christ Jesus

#### 7. Why the Mediator Had to be True God and True Man

#### 8. Election

#### 9. Christ's Death, Passion, and Burial

#### 10. The Resurrection

#### 11. The Ascension

"We do not doubt but that the selfsame body which was born of the virgin, was crucified, dead, and buried, and which did rise again, did ascend into the heavens, for the accomplishment of all things, where in our name and for our comfort he has received all power in heaven and earth, where he sits at the right hand of the Father, having received his kingdom, the only advocate and mediator for us."

#### 12. Faith in the Holy Ghost

#### 13. The Cause of Good Works

#### 14. The Works Which Are Counted Good Before God

#### 15. The Perfection of the Law and the Imperfection of Man

#### 16. The Kirk

#### 17. The Immortality of Souls

#### 18. The Notes by Which the True Kirk Shall be Determined from the False, and Who Shall Be Judge of Doctrine

#### 19. The Authority of the Scriptures

#### 20. General Councils, Their Power, Authority, and the Cause of Their Summoning

#### 21. The Sacraments

#### 22. The Right Administration of the Sacraments

#### 23. To Whom Sacraments Appertain

#### 24. The Civil Magistrate

#### 25. The Gifts Freely Given to the Kirk

### Athanasian Creed

Whoever desires to be saved should  
above all hold to the catholic faith.  
Anyone who does not keep it whole and  
unbroken will doubtless perish eternally.  
Now this is the catholic faith:

This creed is named after **Athanasius** (A.D. 293-373), the champion of orthodoxy against Arian attacks on the doctrine of the trinity. Although Athanasius did not write this creed and it is improperly named after him, the name persists because until the seventeenth century it was commonly ascribed to him. It is not from Greek (Eastern), but from Latin (Western) origin, and is not recognized by the Eastern Orthodox Church today. Apart from the opening and closing sentences, this creed consists of two parts, the first setting forth the orthodox doctrine of the trinity, and the second dealing chiefly with the incarnation and the two-natures doctrine.

That we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity,  
neither blending their persons  
nor dividing their essence.  
For the person of the Father is a distinct person,  
the person of the Son is another,  
and that of the Holy Spirit still another.  
But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one,  
their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.  
What quality the Father has, the Son has,  
and the Holy Spirit has.  
The Father is uncreated,  
the Son is uncreated,  
the Holy Spirit is uncreated.  
The Father is immeasurable,  
the Son is immeasurable,  
the Holy Spirit is immeasurable.  
The Father is eternal,  
the Son is eternal,  
the Holy Spirit is eternal.  
And yet there are not three eternal beings;  
there is but one eternal being.  
So too there are not three uncreated  
or immeasurable beings;  
there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being.  
Similarly, the Father is almighty,  
the Son is almighty,  
the Holy Spirit is almighty.  
Yet there are not three almighty beings;  
there is but one almighty being.  
Thus the Father is God,  
the Son is God,  
the Holy Spirit is God.  
Yet there are not three gods;  
there is but one God.  
Thus the Father is Lord,  
the Son is Lord,  
the Holy Spirit is Lord.  
Yet there are not three lords;  
there is but one Lord.  
Just as Christian truth compels us  
to confess each person individually  
as both God and Lord,  
so catholic religion forbids us  
to say that there are three gods or lords.  
The Father was neither made nor created  
nor begotten from anyone.  
The Son was neither made nor created;  
he was begotten from the Father alone.  
The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten;  
he proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Accordingly there is one Father, not three fathers;  
there is one Son, not three sons;  
there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits.  
Nothing in this trinity is before or after,  
nothing is greater or smaller;  
in their entirety the three persons  
are coeternal and coequal with each other.  
So in everything, as was said earlier,  
we must worship their trinity in their unity  
and their unity in their trinity.  
Anyone then who desires to be saved  
should think thus about the trinity.  
But it is necessary for eternal salvation  
that one also believe in the incarnation  
of our Lord Jesus Christ faithfully.  
Now this is the true faith:  
That we believe and confess  
that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son,  
is both God and human, equally.  
He is God from the essence of the Father,  
begotten before time;  
and he is human from the essence of his mother,  
born in time;  
completely God, completely human,  
with a rational soul and human flesh;  
equal to the Father as regards divinity,  
less than the Father as regards humanity.  
Although he is God and human,  
yet Christ is not two, but one.  
He is one, however,  
not by his divinity being turned into flesh,  
but by God's taking humanity to himself.  
He is one,  
certainly not by the blending of his essence,  
but by the unity of his person.  
For just as one human is both rational soul and flesh,  
so too the one Christ is both God and human.  
He suffered for our salvation;  
he descended to hell;  
he arose from the dead;  
he ascended to heaven;  
he is seated at the Father's right hand;  
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.  
At his coming all people will arise bodily  
and give an accounting of their own deeds.  
Those who have done good will enter eternal life,  
and those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.  
This is the catholic faith:  
one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully.  
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**CONFESSION OF BELHAR**

[TEXT]

## 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 1948–1994.

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. Non-white 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 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.

The Special Committee on the Confession of Belhar recommended 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).

CONFESSION OF BELHAR

September 1986<sup>1</sup>

- 10.1**  
Revelation 21:6–7      **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.
- 10.2**  
Matthew 28:19–20      **We believe** in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family.
- 10.3**  
Ephesians 2:13–20      **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      • that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways;
- Colossians 3:12–16      \* in that we love one another;
- Philippians 2:1–5      \* that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another;
- 1 Corinthians 1:10–13      \* that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another;

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<sup>1</sup> 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.).

### 10.3-4

### BOOK OF CONFESSIONS

- 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
- 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Romans 12:3-8
- Galatians 3:27-29
- \* 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;

### 10.4

#### 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.

**10.5**

**We believe**

2 Corinthians  
5:17-21

- that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ;

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

- 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 peace-maker, that the church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells;

Romans 6:12-14,  
Colossians 1:11-14

- 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;

James 2:8-9

- 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.

**10.6**

**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.

**10.7****We believe**

- Isaiah 42:1-7
  - that God has revealed God's self as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
- Luke 6:20-26
  - 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
- Luke 4:16-19
  - that God calls the church to follow God in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
- Luke 7:22
  - that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;
- Psalms 146
  - that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;
- James 1:27
  - that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;
- Micah 6:8
  - that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right;
- Amos 5:14-15, 23-24
  - 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;
- Psalms 82:1-5
  - that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged;
- Leviticus 19:15
  - 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.

**10.8****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.

**10.9**  
 Acts 5:29–32;  
 1 Peter 3:15–18

**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 to the Confession of Belhar<sup>2</sup>**

*This letter was a statement made upon the adoption of the Confession of Belhar by the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa*

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

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<sup>2</sup> While not of constitutional character, the following letter accompanies the Confession of Belhar to explain the context of the confession.

## BOOK OF CONFESSIONS

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.