

A Study of
The Belhar Confession
and its
Accompanying Letter

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A Note About Using This Guide in Groups

The practice of apartheid began in the exclusionary practices of the church's worship in South Africa. You will learn how 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. *Because of those origins, the study materials at the end of each section are embedded in worship.*

You will be *called into worship* with texts relating to the subject. During the *Confession of Sin* you will have time to examine your own circumstances and discuss the injustices you see in your community or in your own life. There will be time for silent confession and the receiving God's gracious pardon. The *Hearing of the Word of God* will consist of readings from scripture and the Belhar Confession and discussions about those readings. During *the Response to the Word of God*, you will be able to talk about steps you and your congregation could take as you move toward a more just community and world. Your time will end with *The Sending*, as you pray that God's Holy Spirit will send you into the world as part of the One Church, bearing witness to God's justice, mercy and reconciling love.

This means that the study will be very participatory and leadership roles should be agreed upon before each study begins. As well, it will be fruitful if you read the Confession and its Accompanying Letter before each meeting.

Session One
Introduction: Setting the Stage

You can sense it when you're lying, open-eyed upon your beds,
O the iron and the weeping such as loving eyes afford,
When the tigerish divisions tear Christ's body into shreds,
O the iron and the weeping where the grapes of wrath are stored.
Through the worship, through the concert, through the phalanx of police,
Where merely to be coloured is disturbance of the peace,
And you begin to wonder if this sound will ever cease –
*O the iron, O the weeping, O inexorable Lord.*¹

This poem was written by a naturalized citizen of the United States who witnessed the tumultuous and painful times during the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. It speaks of the pain of being held in bondage and how that bondage tears at the very fabric of the church, which participated in that oppression. But imbedded in her descriptions of racism during that period, there is also a cry of hope that the day of the Lord will come. The Lord's arrival is inexorable. God relentlessly moves toward the restoration of righteousness. We hear the same cries of yearning and hope in the great gospel hymn, "Lift Every Voice and Sing":

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chast'ning rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn has died;
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet,
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered;
We have come, treading our path thro' the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last
*Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.*²

Whether in America, expressed in slavery, or in South Africa, expressed in the racial partitioning known as *apartheid*, racism causes agonizing cries from the heart, heard in poetry

¹ Elizabeth Sewell, *Five Mississippi Poems*, quoted in *God's Long Hot Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) *frontispiece*.

² James Weldon Johnson, text, 1921; J. Rosamond Johnson, music, 1921; in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990) no. 563, italics added for emphasis.

and in spirituals which echo the well-known lament of the psalmist, “How long, O Lord, how long?” It is one thing to suffer wrong in society, but it is egregiously painful when injustice invades the church or is perpetuated by the church. This is especially so in countries that have a strong Christian identity. South Africa is such a country, as is the United States. Acknowledging that identity, or at least that influence, means also to acknowledge a great responsibility to live into its ethical and moral dimensions.

Why is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Discussing the Belhar Confession? The Belhar Confession emerged out of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. In the nineteenth-century the Dutch Reformed Church decided to separate all non-white members into the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. Eventually, as Grand Apartheid was implemented in the middle of the twentieth century and separate homelands were established this Mission Church became three: The Dutch Reformed Mission Church (the *coloured* church), the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (the *black* church), and the Indian Reformed Church in South Africa (the *Indian* church).³ The Belhar Confession was originally a product of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church as it protested the sin of apartheid. Just a few years later it became the confession of the Uniting Reformed Church, the reunion of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. It is a product of a conversation between the Theological Declaration of Barmen and the unjust realities of South Africa.⁴ Clearly, Belhar is a specific act of confession that emerged out of a specific context – a context that is non-European and non-North American. Commenting on Karl Barth’s understanding of the act of confession, Dirk

³ In South Africa, the term *black* is sometimes used broadly to refer to all non-white persons (*black*, *coloured*, and *Indian*) and other times to refer more specifically to those of sub-Saharan ancestry. *Coloured* persons have ancestry from Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Holland, England, France, and sub-Saharan Africa—the term *brown* is used as well. *Indians* trace their ancestry to the Indian sub-continent. *White* refers to persons of Northern European ancestry, primarily Dutch, English, and French.

⁴ Comment noted in discussion at a meeting at the American Academy of Religion, November 21, 2005.

Smit, a South African theologian and one of the principal authors of the Belhar Confession, says:⁵

Confession is a commentary on scripture, representing insight given to the church and presupposing risk and danger. It is born out of compulsion. It is geographically, temporally and materially limited. It always arises in a definite antithesis and conflict. It says a definite Yes only because a definite No is implied, otherwise it is no confession. It is public speech, on the basis of solid theological preparation and is intended to be heard, tested, and evaluated by others. Since there is a “notorious connection, even a unity, between the heresies of every age and place,” it can be confidently expected that confessions written for another time and place, if they really express the Word of God, can again reveal and address conflicts at other times and in other places.⁶

We in the PCUSA understand this, having adopted a *Book of Confessions* with statements from several historical eras and cultural locations. Indeed, there are volumes of confessions made by many Reformed communities over space and time. The Reformed tradition believes in the ability of one generation to bear witness to another. Christians of other times and places have something to say to us. But the question does arise: Why Belhar? Why now?

One reason for the PCUSA to engage in a discussion of Belhar is that one of our Formula of Agreement partners, the Reformed Church in America (RCA), is doing so. In the 1990s, a delegation from the RCA visited the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA). The RCA asked what they could do to help with regard to the Belhar Confession, a confession then rejected by the white Dutch Reformed Church. The URCSA replied that they could take it, read it, study it and receive it. Consequently, the RCA has engaged in a study process and has provisionally accepted Belhar as a part of its Standards of Unity, which also include the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Confession and the Canons of Dordt. Unlike the PCUSA, the RCA

⁵ The two principal authors of The Belhar Confession were H. Russell Botman and Dirk Jacobus Smit.

⁶ 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.

has no 20th century confession in its Standards. It would strengthen our ecumenical partnership with the RCA to join them in this reflection.

A second reason to study Belhar would be around issues of the unity of the church. Belhar's great strength is its Christological foundation for the unity of the church. Racism in or by the church cannot stand when unity is understood in this way, but racism is not the only force that fragments the unity of the church. We are only too well aware of the centrifugal forces at work among us, threatening to cause us to fly apart. To give heed to the scriptural basis of the church's unity would be salutary for our life together.

But the precipitating and specific reason for asking the PCUSA to engage in a study of the Belhar Confession comes at the direction of the 216th General Assembly. In the *Report of the Task Force to Study Reparations, 216th General Assembly 2004*, the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns asked that church study the Belhar confession, affirming "that Jesus Christ calls us to repair wrongs done to one another and to work for personal and social reconciliation and renewal." The Assembly agreed and commended the Belhar to the church as a "resource for reflection, study, and response, as a means of deepening the commitment of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to dealing with racism and a means of strengthening its unity, bearing in mind that the Belhar Confession emerged from the context of racism in South Africa." Because of the enduring problem of racism in our culture, the 216th General Assembly has asked the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to consider how the Confession of Belhar can address us. The church yearns for the day of justice lived and hope fulfilled. It is to this end that we have committed ourselves to study of, reflection on, and response to the Belhar Confession.

Our study will begin with a brief history of the Confession of Belhar and the struggles it addressed in its call to the church to live out the gospel it professed to believe. Knowing what others faced and how they responded will help us better understand what we face in the North

American context. Second, we will ask what it means for any church to engage in an act of confession. Third, we will explore the ways in which the Belhar Confession engages our own *Book of Confessions*. In what ways does it resonate? Where does it instruct? Finally, recognizing that confessing the faith is an act of worship, witnessed by God, the church and the world, we will look at the “liturgy” of the Belhar Confession. According to Belhar, how is the church *gathered* by the word of God? How does it *hear* and *respond to* the word of God? How is it then *sent* into God’s world? Throughout, we will examine how the Belhar Confession helps us to understand (1) the nature of the unity the church has been given, (2) how that unity provides a foundation for justice and (3) the mission on which it has been sent.

Session One
Introduction: Setting the Stage

Call to Worship

(Psalm 137:1-6, NRSV)

By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down
and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our harps.

For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

**Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.**

Opening Hymn

When Israel Was in Egypt’s Land
GO DOWN MOSES

PH 334

Opening Prayer

**Lord God, you are a redeeming God.
It is not your desire that any of your children should suffer.
You hear their cries and you come from heaven to save.
As we gather to remember your saving purposes for all who are oppressed,
give us minds, hearts and wills to hear your word to us, and then to live it.
We pray this in the name of Christ the Savior. Amen.**

Confession of Sin

If we say we have no sin, (1 John 1:8-9)
we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just
will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Discuss:

1. What do you remember or know of the Civil Rights Movement?
2. Describe a time when you witnessed or experienced racial injustice.
3. Where do you see racism in your community?

Silent Confession: During this time of silent reflection, confess before God the sins of which you are aware that lead to racial injustice or division in your

community.

Declaration of Forgiveness

Brothers and sisters, receive the good news of the gospel.

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

Hearing the Word *A contemplative reading of Ephesians 4:1-6*

1. Have someone read Ephesians 4:1-6 aloud, slowly and meditatively.
2. Allow a minute of silent reflection as people listen for a word or image to come to them.
3. Read the text again in the same manner, encouraging people to listen for a word from God.
4. After a minute of silence, ask people in the group to share what they heard from God's word.

Responding to the Word

Discuss:

1. In what ways do you think this passage from Ephesians speaks to issues of racism and injustice?
2. What does the unity of the church have to do with the promotion of social righteousness?
3. What might you be able to do to more fully understand the issues of racial justice in your community?

The Sending *A Responsive Reading of Article 4 of the Belhar Confession*

We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;

we believe 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;

we believe that God calls the church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;

we believe God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;

we believe that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly;

we believe that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering;

we believe that God wishes to teach the church

to do what is good and to seek the right;

**we believe 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;**

we believe 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.

(unison) We believe in the triune God, (Belhar Confession, Article 1)
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.

Assignment for Next Session

1. Read:

Section Two of the Study Guide:

“Apartheid and the Belhar Confession – It Happened in Church”

Belhar Confession and the Accompanying Letter

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

2. Think about this:

When the Apostle Paul writes about the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, he warns the Corinthians to be careful how they discern the body of the Lord. In the past, some have interpreted that with regard to the nature of the elements we receive in communion. Given your reading, what do you think it means to 'discern the body?'

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

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

Session Two Apartheid and the Belhar Confession: It Happened in Church

A Brief History⁷ Many of us have read Alan Paton novels such as *Too Late the Phalarope* and *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Many of us remember the extremely intense political debates over the issue of *apartheid* and our nation's response to it. Some among us may even have been arrested in demonstrations promoting racial justice in South Africa. But few of us North Americans know the history of South Africa, let alone the history of Christianity in South Africa. It is a complex history involving the Dutch and English colonial powers, "imported" workers from India, and many indigenous tribes. We can only scan that history as it pertains to our study of Belhar. Regardless of our level of knowledge, we do ask, as we do of each evil that presents itself, "How could such a thing happen?" In the case of apartheid, ***it happened in church.***

While the legal, governmentally enforced practices of apartheid were in force from 1948-1994, the fact of "separateness" began early in the colonization of South Africa. Over time, laws developed that pushed blacks and other "coloureds" to the margins, taking their lands and disenfranchising them.

As South Africa developed, there were two targets in the missionary enterprise. First, churches for *settlers* were established along the familiar lines of theologies and structures of the churches in their countries of origin. Second, missionary societies established churches among those whom they were converting to the Christian gospel. Thus, they were organized in rural areas, among mine workers and in tribal, rural areas. So, as missionaries went to different

⁷ Most of this is drawn from Smit, D.J., "The struggle against apartheid and its significance for Reformed faith today," *Reformed World* (Volume 55/4, December 2005) pp. 355-368. Professor Smit, of the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, was one of the authors of the *Belhar Confession*. For a detailed historical treatment, see *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, editors (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

geographical areas or to differing tribes and social classes, church structures divided along practical lines, creating economic, tribal and racial separations.

In 1829, “some rural Dutch churches specifically asked for separate facilities and services.⁸ Properly understanding a theology of the Lord’s Supper, the synod said no. There was to be no distinction among the baptized, *all* of whom are welcome at the *Lord’s Table*. By the mid-19th century, however, church officials reversed their earlier, clear decision. They allowed for the “weakness” of others (1 Corinthians 10:28) who did not understand or could not accept that the unity of the church meant very concretely *racial* unity. Thus, the church now permitted division – separation – along racial lines. But, ominously, what started as *permission* eventually became a legally enforced policy, not only in the church, but in society as well.

Misusing Abraham Kuyper’s doctrine of *sphere sovereignty*,⁹ the Dutch church developed theologies of apartheid that trumped their ecclesiology and their theology of the sacraments, as well as any biblical teaching on the unity of the church. Even though white Christians knew better, they shaped their theology and practices to justify what scripture could not support. Clifford Anderson, in reviewing Richard Elphick’s *Christianity in South Africa*, commented:

At times, sadness overcame as I learned of some church-member slave-holders who preferred that their slaves convert to Islam so they could sell them and separate the children from their parents. Baptized slaves posed a problem since covenant theology

⁸ *ibid*, page 356

⁹ *Sphere sovereignty* was a doctrine developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian, pastor, professor and politician. Kuyper was concerned that, with the death of the concept of the divine right of kings, the secular state would assume political power beyond its God-ordained boundaries. In order to avoid tyranny on the one hand and popular anarchy on the other, Kuyper made two proposals. He said that (1) there is no square inch of the created order over which Jesus Christ is not sovereign, but that (2) God had delegated authority to various spheres of human endeavor and that those spheres (such as education, family, arts, science and state) worked according to given principles. White Dutch Christians used this doctrine to treat race as a *sphere*, justifying the separation of apartheid.

was patterned in part after Israel as the people of God who should not enslave a fellow Israelite.¹⁰

Justifying racial separation as God's will for the self-development of each "people sphere," white Christians in South Africa depended on the government to enforce these separations. As well, they developed proof-texts to support their position, and eventually had a fully developed ideology that equated the church with the nation. Laws enforcing separation were seen not only as promoting God's will, but also as ethical demands that would protect the country from outside political threats, such as communism.

This is a very broad description, but we can see the direction that the Dutch Reformed church in South Africa took as it dealt with racial discrimination. First, it said that the unity of the church meant that all were welcome at the table. Scripture and theology led them to that decision. Second, when racial pressures mounted, the church *allowed* for the establishment of separate churches and services. Third, what was allowed became what was required. Finally, the church created a theology of apartheid that not only required separation of the races; it said it was God's divine will for the entire country. At first, the Dutch Reformed church in South Africa believed that the unity of the church had to be expressed tangibly in worship and sacraments. Over time, they developed an anemic belief in the unity of the church as an invisible and spiritual reality only. They abandoned their original courageous stand in order to rationalize unjust doctrines and laws.

As disheartening as it is to see theology in service to sin, it is exactly because South African Christians claimed scripture as authority that they were eventually persuaded that—on the basis of scripture—a new way of living together was possible. Anderson goes on to say that "[T]he claims of justice that weigh so heavily in the scriptures worked their way into the

¹⁰ Clifford V. Anderson, book review in *Journal of Evangelical Theology* (volume 41, number 4, 1998) 7.

consciousness of the people who read the whole Bible and were awakened to their plight.”¹¹

According to Smit, there is a strong “spirituality of the Bible” among South African Christians. The writers of Belhar considered that as they approached their work. They did not see their job to teach a new theology to the church. Rather, they asked the church “Is this what you believe? If so, affirm it.” Their confession was always in terms of the Bible. It was why they said what they said.¹²

The history of the development of apartheid is complex and the history of its demise is equally complex. Uprising in the townships, the death of Steve Biko, and the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela were all part of a spiral of violence that led to strict enforcement on the part of the government. As well, there was intense international pressure on the government of South Africa to change. By 1990, F. W. de Klerk was in negotiations with Nelson Mandela (still imprisoned) to dismantle some of the structures of apartheid, but the change in the government cannot be understood without looking at the role of the churches. Smit says:

The international ecumenical movement played an increasing role in the anti-apartheid struggle. In 1970 the World Council of Churches established the Programme to Combat Racism. During these years, many Christian churches rejected apartheid as sin and its theological justification as heresy. The Lutheran World Federation (1977) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1982) declared a *status confessionis*. WARC said: “We declare with Black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid (‘separate development’) is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the Gospel and, in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy.”¹³

In addition to this international and ecumenical pressure, there were statements from various Christian groups and denominations challenging the church’s support of racial separation. In particular, the *Kairos Document* (1985) radically attacked both the state theology and any

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² From a personal phone conversation with Professor Smit on May 26, 2006.

¹³ Smit, *op. cit.* page 369. A *status confessionis* is declared when, “in view of a particular situation, a specific, essential aspect of the gospel must at the moment be vigorously called to mind. The declaration of *status confessionis* becomes necessary when the integrity of the proclamation of the gospel is at stake.” From the World Alliance of Reformed Churches website (<http://www.warc.ch/where/22gc/study/13.html>), accessed January 24, 2008.

church theology that proposed a cheap form of social harmony. *Kairos* was a call to action. It even declared that force could be used to resist apartheid in certain circumstances (cf. *Kairos*, paragraph 3.3, on Non-Violence).

It is in this context that the Dutch Reformed Mission Church spoke the words of the Belhar Confession in 1982 and adopted it in 1986. Other churches also made statements calling for an end to apartheid. There was some ferment, therefore, in how the various Christian communities thought about racial justice and the proper outcomes for South Africa. Should we focus on the perpetrators and seek retributive justice? Which should come first – justice or reconciliation? Should we focus on honoring the voices of the victims and seek restorative justice? All were agreed that justice should be sought, but what shape should it take? We ask these questions today, as we consider the legacy of racial segregation and the problem of ongoing discrimination in North America.

What Was at Stake Clearly, much was at stake in South Africa at the time of the release of the Belhar Confession. Chaos was threatening civil society. South Africa was a pariah in the international community and the Dutch Reformed Church was dis-fellowshipped by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The economy was affected by worldwide sanctions and oppression of blacks became repression.

But the framers of Belhar thought even more was at stake. To them, the very heart of the Reformed tradition was threatened in the following ways. First, the nature and use of scripture were threatened. If both sides used scripture to come to such opposing conclusions, how could scripture speak a word into the situation? The use of the Bible in South Africa recalls the words of Abraham Lincoln in his second inaugural speech: “Both read the same Bible. Both pray to the same God.” Besides that, given the results of the historical critical study of the Bible, how could texts from other and ancient worlds say something to this modern context? Second, if

apartheid is allowed to stand, how are we to understand the nature of the church? The unity of the church is given to it by Jesus Christ, who overcomes all differences. Can it be ignored as a visible reality or organized around other categories, such as race, class or shared agreements? Third, what is the non-negotiable content of the gospel and how is that truth to be *embodied* in the order and work of the church? *Belhar* sought to answer those questions, affirming the foundations of our Reformed heritage:

So that when major change happened and apartheid was overthrown, the explicit purpose with *Belhar* was not to write a new theological document informing believers what they should believe, but on the contrary, to find words to express what they already believed and on the basis of which they were already convinced that apartheid was sin and its theological justification false.... [The Reformed tradition] is a faith and tradition that must be continuously liberated from its own failures and idolatries, but also a tradition with an enormous liberating potential.¹⁴

Reflecting on the witness of the churches in South Africa, N. T. Wright, Anglican Bishop of Durham has said, “Nor must we forget that it was the church in South Africa which worked and prayed and suffered and struggled so that when major change happened and apartheid was overthrown and a new freedom came to that land, it came without the massive bloodshed we were all expecting.”¹⁵ Implicit in Wright’s statement is the understanding that the church’s protests against the false theologies of state and church were both in *content* and in *conduct* consistent with the gospel. *Belhar* asks us to answer the question, “What is the gospel?” But, it also asks us to answer the next question, “How will you live into that gospel?”

¹⁴ Smit, *op. cit.*, pages 366-367.

¹⁵ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006) 123.

Thanks be to God.

Hearing the Word

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Discuss:

1. What is the connection between the Lord's Supper and the unity of the church?
2. What do you think it means to discern the body of Christ?
3. What kinds of injustice resulted from the Corinthians' misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper?
4. According to Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper, what is the gospel that the Lord's Supper proclaims?

Have someone read the Accompanying Letter aloud.

1. In what ways and with what words did the authors of the Belhar Confession demonstrate their understanding of the unity of the church?
2. How did they see the relationship between unity in the church and justice, or lack of unity and injustice?

Responding to the Word

Discuss:

1. Describe an experience of unity and reconciliation you have had around the Lord's Table.
2. In your readings and discussion, what insight did you gain about the relationship of justice and worship?
3. If the Lord's Supper proclaims that we have been reconciled to God and one another, what is one way you can live into that gospel during the next week?

The Sending

A Responsive Reading from Article 2 of the Belhar Confession

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;**

We believe 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;

We believe 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;**

(unison) We believe in the triune God, (Belhar Confession, Article 1)
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.**

Assignment for Next Session

1. Read:

Session Three of the Study Guide:
“What Does It Mean for a Church to Confess?”
Belhar Confession and the Accompanying Letter
Read 1 Chronicles 16:8-13 and 1 John 1:1-3

2. Think about this:

What does it mean for us to confess our faith?

If our *Book of Confessions* is part of our constitution and is supposed to shape our life together, in what ways should we be engaging our confessions?

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

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

Session Three What Does It Mean for a Church to Confess?

In the “Historic Principles of Church Government” as recorded in *the Book of Order*, we read:

That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior’s rule, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” And that no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man’s opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise, it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it. (G-1.0304)

What we believe is supposed to make a difference in how we live. This is the “so what” question of faith.¹⁶ And the work required to discover and embrace the truth is the work of the whole church in every time and place. It is not a solitary effort, limited to an individual journey of faith or a particular culture. The voices of others help us to evaluate our own beliefs and behaviors. The voices we heed are scripture and the confessions that come to us from the “communion of the saints.” This “[C]hristian conversation across time and space is more than a casual exchange of opinion. The conversation is a consultation about the gospel, a discussion about the shape of our proclamation and the form of our mission.”¹⁷

For us, therefore, confessions are supposed to “constitute” us. They are the “stuff” of which we are made. That is why the *Book of Confessions* is Part I of our church’s constitution (Part II being the *Book of Order*). Confessions not only articulate beliefs, they are supposed to shape the life, worship and teaching of the church. Confessions are about what a church *does*, not about what it *has*, as if the church could be content with framing a precise statement of faith

¹⁶ Charles Wiley, “How Shall We Live?” in *Conversations with the Confessions*, Joseph Small, editor (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2005) 207ff.

¹⁷ Joseph Small, “The Church’s Conversation with the Confessions,” in *Conversations with the Confessions*, Joseph Small, editor (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2005) 7.

and leaving it at that. One of the concerns of the RCA in its reflections on Belhar is that they will study it, agree with its content, adopt it, celebrate it and then archive it, essentially forgetting it.¹⁸

Belhar, however, affirms that we are “agents of what God wants us to do in the world.” This echoes what our *Book of Order* says about our *Book of Confessions* in G-2.0100: “The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God’s grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in *the Book of Confessions*. In these confessional statements the church declares to its members and to the world *who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do.*”

Even so, confessions *are* verbal expressions – they say something that must be said in a specific time and place. They help us interpret the meaning of the gospel. Confessions also have several audiences. The first audience is God, as we declare what we believe in worship. The second audience is the Church. As we confess the faith before one another, we declare how we are to live before one another and even how we are to structure our corporate life together. The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa was very aware of this as they wrote their new *Church Order*. As they organized their life and work together, they kept the *Belhar Confession* before them. They wanted their polity to equip them to *be* and *do* what they believe. Finally, the world is also the audience for the confession of the church as it bears a public witness to truth.

The public nature of confession is a risky thing. When the church fails to live into its confession (and it inevitably will), it opens itself to ridicule. When it abandons its affirmation of faith, repentance is in order. How are we to become more fully shaped by our confessions? Even more, how are we to be transformed, becoming more and more conformed to the image of Jesus Christ?

¹⁸ Heard in discussion at a seminar on the Belhar Confession at the meeting of the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America, Chicago, IL, October 13, 2005.

Session Three What Does It Mean for a Church to Confess?

Call to Worship

Give thanks to the Lord and call upon God's name;
make known the deeds of the Lord among the peoples.

(Psalm 105:1-6, BCW)

**Sing to the Lord, sing praises,
and speak of all God's marvelous works.**

Glory in God's holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.

**Search for the Lord and the strength of the Lord;
continually seek the face of God.**

Remember the marvels God has done,
the wonders and the judgments of God's mouth.

**O offspring of Abraham, God's servant,
O children of Jacob, God's chosen.**

Opening Hymn

Lord, I Want to Be a Christian

PH 372

Opening Prayer

**God of the ages,
you call the church to keep watch in the world
and to discern the signs of the times.
Grant us the wisdom the Spirit bestows,
that with courage we may proclaim your prophetic word,
and complete the work you have set before us;
through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever. Amen.**

(The Book of Common Worship, page 373, number 3)

Confession of Sin

Remember that our Lord Jesus can sympathize with us in our weaknesses,
since in every respect he was tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Discuss:

St. Francis famously said, "Preach always and, if necessary, use words." As a confessional church, words are a big part of our witness.

What is the danger of deeds without words? Of words without deeds?

Silent Confession:

Lord God, I confess to you those times
I have failed to act according to the gospel
and those times I have failed to speak of your mighty acts...

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel.

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

Hearing the Word

*Read 1 John 1:1-3 and
the Accompanying Letter, paragraph 4*

Discuss:

1. Which is more difficult for you, to *speak* of God's unconditional love or to *give* God's unconditional love?
2. According to the Accompanying Letter, paragraph 4, what makes it hard to confess the truth of the gospel?
3. Why is confessing the gospel worth the effort?

Read Article 2 of the Belhar Confession aloud.

1. What truth is being confessed?
2. What falsehoods are being rejected?

Responding to the Word

1. Where in your community do you see the need to confess those truths and falsehood?
2. What forms might that kind of witness take?

The Sending

A Responsive Reading from Article 2 of the Belhar Confession

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;**

we believe 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;

**we believe that true faith in Jesus Christ
is the only condition for membership of this church.**

(unison) We believe in the triune God, (Belhar Confession, Article 1)
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.**

Assignment for Next Session

1. Read:

Section 4 of the Study Guide:

“The Belhar Confession and the *Book of Confessions*”

Belhar Confession and the Accompanying Letter

The Confession of 1967* and the *Theological Declaration of Barmen

Appendix 1: *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King Jr.

2. Think about this:

Where do you see similarities between Belhar and our Confessions?

Where do you see differences?

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

a. the nature of the unity the church has been given?

b. how that unity provides a foundation for justice?

c. the mission of the church?

Session Four The Belhar Confession and the *Book of Confessions*

It is instructive to read the Belhar Confession and the Accompanying Letter and then to go back to the *Book of Confessions*, looking particularly at statements regarding the church, sacraments and justice. *Belhar* is a good conversation partner with our confessions.

Belhar enriches the ecumenical creeds. We confess one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, but *Belhar* helps us develop those notes of the church¹⁹ in specific ways for the visible life of the church. The creeds do not have any description of the ministry of Jesus that models reconciliation or justice, but in affirming that Jesus is born of Mary and suffered under Pilate, the creeds hint at what *Belhar* claims. Naming Mary takes us to the *Magnificat*, reminding us of the great reversals that occur in the reign of God. Naming Pilate takes us to Christ's suffering and sacrificial love that demonstrates the cruciform shape of the Christian life.

The Reformation confessions speak a great deal about the nature of the church and sacraments, affirming the oneness of the church. The baptized are joined to Christ and all are welcome at his table. Nevertheless, to put it perhaps too simply, the question before them was how to explain a fragmented church and still affirm its unity. They believed that the full, undisrupted unity of the church was in the *invisible* church. Here we see a crack in the door, opening the way toward disregarding the visible unity of the church.

Even so, the beginning of *Belhar* draws heavily from the *Heidelberg Catechism's* Question 54: "I believe that, from the beginning of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by His Spirit and by His Word, gathers, protects and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life." In doing this, it seems as if the authors of *Belhar* are not only honoring their confessional heritage, they are saying that they

¹⁹ The *notae ecclesiae*, the notes of the church come from the Nicene Creed. "We believe in *one, holy catholic and apostolic* church."

are not making a new confession but calling the church to believe what it already confesses.

The *Barmen Declaration* is the model for *Belhar* in its use of an accompanying letter or explanation and the affirmation-rejection pattern of confession. *Barmen* and *Belhar* draw on the theology of Karl Barth, especially his theology of the word, incarnation and witness. Both the *Confession of 1967* and *Belhar* have strong Christological emphases and both speak strongly of the church. *Belhar*, however, speaks more to the unity of the church, not just as a mark of the church, but as essential to the realization of the reconciliation the church proclaims. As well, *Belhar* addresses a specific issue in its context. The *Confession of 1967* addresses a wide range of pressing problems in the North American context of the 1960s. These issues included war, confusion over sexuality, and technology, as well as racism. The *Brief Statement of Faith* in its narrative shape calls the church to the ministries of justice and reconciliation, but *Belhar* can strengthen the *Brief Statement* with its affirmations concerning the church, its unity and its corporate witness.

As we in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) move forward in our study of the *Belhar Confession*, we need to ask ourselves several questions. How can *Belhar* help us approach issues of justice in our own context? How can *Belhar* help us converse with our own *Book of Confessions* in a way that helps them to be more constitutive of our life and mission together? Are we willing to learn not only from the content but also from the conduct of *Belhar*? Where do we have something to say to *Belhar*? These confessional statements bear witness to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. No one confession is complete. All need the witness of the others in order to more fully know and obey the will of the One whose name above all names we confess.

Sesson Four
The Belhar Confession and the *Book of Confessions*

Call to Worship

In life and in death we belong to God. (Brief Statement of Faith 1-6)

**Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

Opening Hymn

When We Are Living
SOMOS DEL SEÑOR

PH 400

Opening Prayer

**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. Amen.**
(Book of Common Worship, page 30)

Confession of Sin

We rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. (Brief Statement of Faith 33-40)

**Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.**

We deserve God's condemnation.

Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.

Discuss: When things are not right in the church, in faith or in practice, there is an impulse to write new statements. We want a *new* policy or a *new* confession. But have we lived up to what we have already written? Having read *The Confession of 1967* and the *Barmen Declaration*, where do you think we have failed our confessions?

Silent Confession: In this moment of silence, confess your own failures, asking God to renew your will to do what you believe.

Declaration of Forgiveness

With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Brief Statement of Faith)

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hearing the Word

Read Acts 15:1-38

Discuss: The early church was faced with something like racial distinction as the gospel spread from Jew to Gentile. Conflict arose concerning the authentic expression of the faith. Describe the ministry of reconciliation of the Jerusalem Council.

1. What was the issue?
2. How was the conflict resolved?
3. Describe the attitudes of the various groups and people in this account.

Responding to the Word

Our *Book of Confessions* is our interpretation of and response to the Word of God. Martin Luther King Jr. and the authors of the *Belhar Confession* understood that the gospel made certain claims for justice. Both were subject to injustices perpetrated by other Christians. Both were also convinced of the reconciling power of the gospel. Based on your reading of *The Barmen Declaration*, *The Confession of 1967*, *The Accompanying Letter*, the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and Acts: 15:1-38, discuss:

1. How do the authors of *Barmen* make their case to the church? What are its similarities and differences with *Belhar*?
2. How do the authors of the letters express the gospel toward those in the church with whom they are in conflict?
3. How do you think *The Confession of 1967* addresses the issues that Dr. King raises in his letter? Where do you think the church fulfilled its confession? Where do you think it failed?
4. In what ways do you think that the *Belhar Confession* might enhance our own confessions and the work of the church toward racial reconciliation?

The Sending

A Responsive Reading from the Brief Statement of Faith

In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,

(Brief Statement of Faith 65-75)

to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,

to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
**to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.**

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
**we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

(unison) We believe in the triune God, (Belhar Confession, Article 1)
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.**

Assignment for Next Session

1. Read:

**Section Five of the Study Guide: “The ‘Liturgy’ of Belhar
and What That Means for the Unity of the Church”**

Read the entire Belhar Confession and the Accompanying Letter

Read Appendix 2: A Story of Worship and Justice in One Congregation

Read a recent copy of your congregation’s worship bulletin

2. Think about this:

What does our worship call you to *proclaim*?

What is it calling you to *do*?

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

a. the nature of the unity the church has been given?

b. how that unity provides a foundation for justice?

c. the mission of the church?

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

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. Amen*²⁰

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,”²¹ and finally to *The Sending*, where we are “sent forth with God’s blessing to serve.”²²

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 creating and

²⁰ *The Book of Common Worship*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993) page 30

²¹ *ibid*, page 33

²² *ibid*, page 33

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!²³

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.”²⁴

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

²³ “The Litany for Pentecost,” *The Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993) page 340.

²⁴ *ibid.*, page 341.

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 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.²⁵ 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,

²⁵ 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.

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.²⁶ The Word of God *does* what it says. When God says, “Let 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.²⁷

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

²⁶ “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).

²⁷ 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.

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 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**.²⁸

²⁸ 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.

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 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 sign 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.²⁹

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

²⁹ *Book of Common Worship, op. cit.*, page 42

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 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.”³⁰

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?

³⁰ *Book of Common Worship, op. cit.* page 44.

Silent Confession: When and how have you failed to “stand where the Lord stands”? 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.

Declaration of Forgiveness

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.

(Isaiah 35)

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

Hearing the Word *Read Isaiah 58 (See Choral Reading in Appendix Four)*

Discuss:

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?

Responding to the Word

Discuss: 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?

Assignment for Next Session

1. Read:

Session Six of the Study Guide: “The Belhar Confession, the Unity We Seek, and the Mission of the Church”

Belhar Confession and the Accompanying Letter

The Nicene Creed

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:

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

Session Six Belhar, the Unity We Seek, and the Mission of the Church

While the impetus for studying the Belhar Confession in the PC(USA) is racism, Belhar's strength is that it speaks to more than one form of injustice. By focusing on the unity of the church, it gives us theological grounding for the ministry of reconciliation amidst all the sins and disputes that divide the church. It is important to understand the claim for unity that Belhar makes. George Hunsberger has said that "each proposal for the unity of the church presents a *contending* vision, each of which divides."³¹

Contending throughout history, the church has variously said that its unity is in its moral vision or ethic, in its doctrine or in mission. Some think that our ability to suppress our differences is a measure of our collegiality. But Belhar, in the strong biblical unfolding of its theology, clearly states that unity is God's gift to us and that we are to maintain it for the sake of our witness to Christ, who overcomes all our division and hostility. In the third century, Cyprian proposed that our hostilities and divisions thwart our unity because "Christ is not looked to."³² Belhar positively states that our unity is only in Christ, not in comfortable social gatherings. We are one because Christ has made us so and has conquered our divisions and hostilities. Belhar strengthens our way forward as we understand that the unity of the church comes from the reconciling power of Christ, not from heroic human effort. Thus Belhar instructs us about the church in its mission and in its unity.

The Church's Mission *The church does not exist for itself.* Karl Barth writes: "The Christian community does not exist for itself; it exists for the Gospel. It has accepted the primary fact that in Jesus Christ God has put matters right, securing once and for all his own glory as

³¹ Professor of Congregational Mission, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI, in personal conversation, April 25, 2006.

³² Cyprian, *Treatise I*. "On the Unity of the Church," Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume V (Ernest Wallis, translator).

Creator but also the glory of his creature.”³³ And, it “must only be a community of the Gospel, content to be no more.”³⁴ We do not gather to indulge ourselves or to improve the world according to our own criteria – intentions which breed divisions. Our community of the Gospel exists only because God in Christ has transferred us from darkness into light (1 Peter 2:10). That life-giving act impels each of us and all of us together to bear witness to Jesus Christ. Our witness to this is the purpose and work of the church. All of the church’s other activities, plans, gifts and graces are subordinate and preparatory to this one thing. This is what our Savior has told us to do. When we ignore that voice, the work of the church becomes filled with busy-ness and distraction – in the words of Barth, “ant-heaps!”³⁵

The Church’s Unity Is its Mission The unity of the church is not an inert attribute of the church. Ecclesial unity, as it is developed in Belhar and referenced in this paper marks the church for its identity and its life together. As the *notae ecclesiae* (“notes of the church”)³⁶ affirm, the church that is one lives in and moves into the world *as* one. That world is fractured by racism, war and mortally competing ideologies. That church is fractured over ways in which justice should be done, ordination and sexuality, the nature of scripture, and its posture towards the world. Congregations are fractured by leadership decisions, worship styles, budget allocations and the color of the new carpet.

In these contexts, the world is dying for peace and needs to be introduced to the One who did indeed die to bring peace. On the cross, Christ absorbed all the sin of the world (1 Peter 2:24) and tore down the “wall of hostility which divides us” (Ephesians 2:14). If those who actually know and believe this truth cannot live by what has been given them, why should the world listen

³³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.4, page 506

³⁴ *Ibid*, page 508

³⁵ *Ibid*, page 557

³⁶ See footnote 19.

to the words of the church? Anybody can separate from those with whom they differ. Anybody can fight over disagreements. To the world, the church, in its fragmentation and feuding, appears like any other political or economic party, setting and imposing its own agenda.

Belhar strongly draws on Ephesians 4:3, which exhorts the church to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Unity is not yet another project to engage the energies of the church. Our energies should be spent maintaining the unity that has already been given to us by God. In doing so, we bear witness to the world that we need not despair because we cannot make life on this planet or in the church right. We bear witness to a redemptive hope that is outside ourselves and beyond our control in Jesus Christ. We do so, as Lesslie Newbigin says in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, by becoming congregations that are “hermeneutics of the Gospel.” This means that in our corporate life – in our worship, fellowship, preaching and ministries of mercy – we interpret in tangible ways what it means that Christ binds us together across our differences.

Why Belhar? Why now? The black and coloured churches suffered great indignity and oppression because the white church, in its theological and sacramental distortions, not only was complicit, but often was an active participant in establishing the repressive system of apartheid. The Uniting Reformed Church, however, has graciously given us a gift by pointing to our oneness in Christ. They not only spoke the confession, they lived it. As they offered this confession they spoke “the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). They properly saw the white church as their oppressor, needing correction. They did not (and they were quite strong on this point) see the white church members as their enemies. They saw them and related to them as brothers and sisters in Christ.³⁷ This is a strong understanding of unity that bears gospel hope to the world. It also should allay fears of those who think that unity requires them to give up their

³⁷ Eunice McGarahan, “Why Belhar? Why Now?,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, February 13, 2006.

convictions or ignore their differences. It is because of Christ's omnipotency in binding the church as one that the task of admonition could proceed without fear of destroying the church. In essence, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church said to the Dutch Reformed Church, "You are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We believe in the same Lord and look to the same scriptures. You are wrong, but in Christ, let us together make it right."

Their witness was incarnational – full of grace and truth (John 1:14) – and it was coherent in word and deed. The origins, development and witness of the Belhar Confession and its Accompanying Letter are significant moments for the church. We cannot see unity as that which exists only in the invisible church, something that is reserved only for heaven. That is a gross reduction of the work of Christ and the church's calling. We do not have the luxury of indulging the fantasy that unity is the frosting on the cake, *i.e.* what happens when we get everything else right. The unity of the church is our common calling in Jesus Christ. To quibble with that is to engage in all sorts of idolatry. The Belhar Confession reminds us that we have been called to Jesus Christ and bound to him in our baptism. We are all nourished together around the Lord's Table. There is no other program or option for unity as God's people are sent as witnesses into God's world. As we go, how will God's grace and truth go with us?

Session Six
Belhar, the Unity We Seek, and the Mission of the church

Call to Worship

(from Micah 6:1-8)

Hear what the LORD says:
Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.

**Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD,
and you enduring foundations of the earth;
for God has a controversy with the people:**

“O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;
and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.”

**With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?**

God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you

**but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?**

Opening Hymn

O for a World
AZMON

PH 386

Opening Prayer

**Holy God, one in grace, one glory, one in love—
you call us to love and serve you as one people,
united in heart, mind, spirit, and strength.
Help us to love one another, living in unity and peace,
working together in your Spirit for the good of all;
through Jesus Christ, our reconciler and redeemer.**

Confession of Sin

Put away from you all bitterness
and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander,
together with all malice;
be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another,
as God in Christ has forgiven you.

(Ephesians 4:31-32)

Let us confess our sins against God and one another,
confident in God's abundant mercy.

Discuss:

1. What are the obstacles to unity today in the church and in the world?
2. Where have we lost sight of the true mission of the church, squandering our time, treasure, and talents on busy-ness, distraction, and “ant-heaps”?

Silent Confession: Consider your own sources of resistance to Christian unity, and your own failures to contribute to the church’s true mission. Pray for a meaningful part in the mission of God and the sharing of the Gospel.

Declaration of Forgiveness

You were dead through the trespasses and sins (from Ephesians 2:1-8)
in which you once lived.

But God, who is generous in mercy, out of great love for us
made us alive together with Christ, and raised us up with him.

By grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

Thanks be to God!

Hearing the Word *Read Ephesians 2:12-22 and 4:1-7, 11-16*

Discuss:

1. We read a portion of Ephesians 4 in the first session of this study. How do you hear or understand this scripture differently now, in light of our study of the Belhar Confession and the legacy of racism in the United States?
2. Where are the “dividing walls of hostility” (Eph. 2:14) in your life; in your community; in our world?
3. Where do you see people “building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12) today?
4. What gifts have you been given for building up the body of Christ?

Responding to the Word

Discuss:

1. Have you heard the language of “unity” used in oppressive or coercive ways? (Recall, for instance, “A Call for Unity,” the statement of the white clergy to which Martin Luther King responded in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”) How do we discern between the unity that God calls us to and an oppressive uniformity that seeks to hide or ignore injustice?
2. Why does the church exist? What is its God-given purpose? How do we know when we are living into that purpose?
3. What does it mean to have an “incarnational witness” (see the final paragraph of section six of the study guide)? What are the visible, tangible signs of

unity and reconciliation? How does God's Word become flesh in the mission of the church?

The Sending *A Responsive Reading from Articles 1 and 5 of the Belhar Confession*

We believe in the triune God, (Belhar Confession, Article 1)
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.**

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.

Amen.

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Confession of Belhar **September 1986**

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.

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 (USA).

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.

Appendix One

Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This response to a published statement by eight fellow clergymen from Alabama (Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter, Bishop Joseph A. Durick, Rabbi Hilton L. Grafman, Bishop Paul Hardin, Bishop Holan B. Harmon, the Reverend George M. Murray, the Reverend Edward V. Ramage and the Reverend Earl Stallings) was composed under somewhat constricting circumstance. Begun on the margins of the newspaper in which the statement appeared while I was in jail, the letter was continued on scraps of writing paper supplied by a friendly Negro trusty, and concluded on a pad my attorneys were eventually permitted to leave me. Although the text remains in substance unaltered, I have indulged in the author's prerogative of polishing it for publication.

April 16, 1963

MY DEAR FELLOW CLERGYMEN:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action. We have gone through all these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good-faith negotiation.

Then, last September, came the opportunity to talk with leaders of Birmingham's economic community. In the course of the negotiations, certain promises were made by the merchants—for example, to remove the stores humiliating racial signs. On the basis of these promises, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to a moratorium on all demonstrations. As the weeks and months went by, we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. A few signs, briefly removed, returned; the others remained.

As in so many past experiences, our hopes had been blasted, and the shadow of deep disappointment settled upon us. We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification. We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?" We decided to schedule our direct-action program for the Easter season, realizing that except for Christmas, this is the main shopping period of the year. Knowing that a strong economic withdrawal program would be the by-product of direct action, we felt that this would be the best time to bring pressure to bear on the merchants for the needed change.

Then it occurred to us that Birmingham's mayoralty election was coming up in March, and we speedily decided to postpone action until after election day. When we discovered that the Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor, had piled up enough votes to be in the run-off we decided again to postpone action until the day after the run-off so that the demonstrations could not be used to cloud the issues. Like many others, we waited to see Mr. Connor defeated, and to this end we endured postponement after postponement. Having aided in this community need, we felt that our direct-action program could be delayed no longer.

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely. Some have asked: "Why didn't you give the new city administration time to act?" The only answer that I can give to this query is that the new Birmingham administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one, before it will act. We are sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Albert Boutwell as mayor will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is a much more gentle person than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to maintenance of the status quo. I have hope that Mr. Boutwell will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this without pressure from devotees of civil rights. My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign

that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you no longer fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness" then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may wonder: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An

unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and awful. Paul Tillich said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.

Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal. Let me give another explanation. A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.

I hope you are able to see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law. Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality

today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws.

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fan in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with an its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical inquiries precipitated the act by the misguided populace in which they made him drink hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because his unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see that, as the federal courts

have consistently affirmed, it is wrong to urge an individual to cease his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest may precipitate violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time in relation to the struggle for freedom. I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely rational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist. I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation, the largest and best-known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. Nourished by the Negro's frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination, this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible "devil."

I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the "do-nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle. If this philosophy had not emerged, by now many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood. And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as "rabble-

rousers" and "outside agitators" those of us who employ nonviolent direct action, and if they refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black-nationalist ideologies a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare.

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. If one recognizes this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand why public demonstrations are taking place. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides—and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history. So I have not said to my people: "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist.

But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ..." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this need. Perhaps I was too optimistic; perhaps I expected too much. I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action. I

am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers in the South have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still too few in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some—such as Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden, James McBride Dabbs, Ann Braden and Sarah Patton Boyle—have written about our struggle in eloquent and prophetic terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They have languished in filthy, roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of policemen who view them as "dirty nigger lovers." Unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, they have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful "action" antidotes to combat the disease of segregation.

Let me take note of my other major disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some significant stands on this issue. I commend you, Reverend Stallings, for your Christian stand on this past Sunday, in welcoming Negroes to your worship service on a non-segregated basis. I commend the Catholic leaders of this state for integrating Spring Hill College several years ago.

But despite these notable exceptions, I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leader; an too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.

In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched

many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious-education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great-grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.

There was a time when the church was very powerful in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators" But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often even vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

Perhaps I have once again been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual

church, the church within the church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone down the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been dismissed from their churches, have lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.

I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are at present misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation—and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

Before closing I feel impelled to mention one other point in your statement that has troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence." I doubt that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen if you were to observe their ugly and inhumane treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you were to watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you were to see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you were to observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I cannot join you in your praise of the Birmingham police department.

It is true that the police have exercised a degree of discipline in handing the demonstrators. In this sense they have conducted themselves rather "nonviolently" in public. But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the past few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Perhaps Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather nonviolent in public, as was Chief

Pritchett in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of racial injustice. As T. S. Eliot has said: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason."

I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering, and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: "My feet is tired, but my soul is at rest." They will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience' sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written so long a letter. I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Appendix Two

A Story of Worship and Justice in One Congregation

It was noticeably and strangely quiet. In a church whose liturgy was consistent, traditional and lively, things were not as they usually were for the eleven o'clock service. Instead of the choir processing in with the first hymn of adoration, the pastor came down the center aisle, accompanied by a tall man. They arrived at the chancel, faced the congregation and the pastor introduced F. W. de Klerk, president of the Republic of South Africa. President de Klerk then presented a copy of the Bible in Afrikaans to the pastor, with gratitude, saying, "*Your church taught us that over this Book and on our knees we must change*". That was the entire public appearance. No media representatives were present, even though the Washington, D.C. studio for NBC is adjacent to the church. President de Klerk left. Major news networks announced later in the day that he had arrived that afternoon at Andrews Air Force Base. What circumstances led to this event, just prior to the release of Nelson Mandela? Well, for the church's part, it all started in worship.

The pastor at that time at the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., Dr. Louis H. Evans, Jr., spent much of his ministry helping church members deepen their faith in all areas of their personal lives. As well, he was committed to equipping the laity for the various ministries to which they might give themselves. His ministry expressed a warm, thoroughgoing evangelical faith. He took great care with worship, working with the pastoral and music staff to see that worship had integrity, *i.e.*, that from beginning to end, the text for the day shaped all the parts of worship. The church grew and people felt that they were growing in their faith. But Dr.

Evans had also been studying Isaiah 1-5 very closely. The text had an intense impact on him as he "realized that you can't separate worship and justice issues. If you do, it makes God sick."

In the meantime, a number of diplomatic personnel from the South African embassy had begun to attend National Church because it was Reformed and in the neighborhood. While they were worshipping there, Dr. Evans began preaching against racism using Ephesians 2 as his text, especially verses 11-22 which speak about "those who are far off have been brought near" and that Christ has "broken down the dividing wall of hostility." He was preaching this text in order to address problems of racism in the United States. The third ranking member of the South African embassy said to Dr. Evans, "If what you are saying is true, then South Africa is *wrong*." This diplomat and his wife began to study the bible and engage with American Christians, talking about this. He was posted back to South Africa, but later returned as ambassador. In addition, other South African couples began similar revelatory journeys about worship, justice and the comprehensiveness of the Christian life. President de Klerk "had picked up on this when he came to the United States to speak with the ambassador about Mandela."

At the same time, the international political stage was filled with protests and sanctions against South Africa for its policy of apartheid. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches dis-fellowshipped the Reformed Church of South Africa. The United States government eventually declared the South African diplomatic staff *personae non gratae*. This meant that there could be no official public contact between any nation's personnel and the South African staff. Church worship was considered one of those public events. The South Africans attending National Church were personally supportive of the sanctions and the *persona non grata* policy because they had come to realize that private faith and public justice could not be separated.

No claim is made here that what happened in the life of this one church turned the tide. This was just one small stream that flowed into the torrent of pressure being exerted on a country to dismantle an evil policy. One might even say, "What took you so long to get around to understanding that justice is required of those whose allegiance is to God alone?" But they did get there and they got there in worship. Dr. Evans then linked his Ephesians preaching to Exodus, especially chapter three in which God tells Moses, "I hear, see and know the suffering of my people and I will come down *and* I want *you* to do something about it." The members of the church began to realize that their professions were strategic placements for working for justice, but they wanted the church as church to be involved. As a result, there are task forces of the session that work on several issues, including the Middle East, the Balkans, the environment and the inner city of the District. Partnerships have been set up in each location and various ministries, strategies and programs have been worked out in those partnerships. Educational, research and relief missionaries have gone out from the congregation.

What is interesting is that it doesn't appear that Dr. Evans' preaching about personal piety and individual service was of no use. It seems that it was essential to the effectiveness of his later preaching on justice issues. For if the congregation was to be moved to action, persons in the congregation had to understand that God, and no other, was calling them to this and they had to understand that obedience was the only response. J.J.M. Roberts says:

True worship is in part a response to such knowledge of God. One praises God or approaches God in prayer because one knows and believes the tradition of what God has done in the past. But worship itself can, in the best of circumstances, give the worshiper a clearer knowledge of God, which in turn gives the worshiper a clearer understanding of him- or herself and a clearer vision of what God demands of the worshiper. It is no accident that Isaiah's awesome vision of God as exalted king, a vision that began and certainly gave direction to Isaiah's prophetic ministry, occurred in the temple in the

context of sacrificial worship. (Isa. 6:1-13)...A communal knowledge of God unappropriated by the individual is not a saving knowledge. Each individual must appropriate this knowledge of God...Such appropriated knowledge of God is one of the ideals of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:34; cf John 17:3) and to be more valued than wisdom, strength or riches (Jer. 9:22-23).

Caution and Conclusion

Worship, even worship done "in Spirit and in truth," cannot manufacture an ethical community. That is clearly expressed in the *Directory for Worship*:

The church in its worship and ministry is a sign of the reign of God, which is both a present reality and a promise of the future. The church's worship and service do not make the Kingdom of God come. In an age hostile to the reign of God, the church worships and serves, with confidence that God's rule has been established and with firm hope in the ultimate manifestation of the triumph of God.

In the present age the church's ministries of evangelism and caring for creation, of compassion and reconciliation are signs of God's reign and offer hope in the midst of life-denying situations. That hope is not dependent on the success of the church's ministries or the effectiveness of its worship, but is sustained by the power of God present with the church as it ministers and worships.

Having given such a caution, however, it is clear that worship is important as it 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) so that we may do, *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).

Appendix Three

A Few Movies About Racism

Amazing Grace (US, 2007)
American History X (US, 1998)
Amistad (US, 1997)
Black Like Me (US, 1964)
Crash (US, 2005)
Cry Freedom (UK, 1987)
Cry, the Beloved Country (UK, 1951)
Cry, the Beloved Country (South Africa/US, 1995)
Driving Miss Daisy (US, 1989)
Finding Forrester (US, 2000)
Ghosts of Mississippi (US, 1996)
Glory (US, 1989)
In the Heat of the Night (US, 1967)
Lean on Me (US, 1989)
Mississippi Burning (US, 1988)
Places in the Heart (US, 1984)
The Power of One (US 1992)
A Raisin in the Sun (US, 1961)
Remember the Titans (US 2000)
Rosewood (US, 1997)
Schindler's List (US, 1993)
A Soldier's Story (US, 1984)
Stand and Deliver (US, 1988)
To Kill a Mockingbird (US, 1962)
Tuskegee Airmen (TV) (US, 1995)

At some point before, during or after your study, you may want to have an extended time together in order to view a movie and discuss the issues raised by it. Some of these movies are raw, due to their subject matter and you will have to make decisions about appropriate films and venues. Showing a movie prior to beginning of your study might help to set the stage and raise questions that you will want to address in your time together. Some general questions that might help your post-viewing discussion might be:

What was most disturbing for you?

Do you currently see any of the attitudes portrayed in the movie?

Where did you see hope or justice prevail?

Appendix Four
A Choral Reading of Isaiah 58
(adapted from the NRSV)

- A: Shout out, do not hold back!
- B: Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
- C: Tell my people the wrong they have done.
- A: Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
- B: as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
- C: they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.
- ALL: "Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"**
- A: Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
- B: Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
- C: Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
- A: Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?
- B: Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
- C: Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?
- A: Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
- B: to undo the thongs of the yoke,
- C: to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?
- ALL: Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?**

(continued on next page)

- A: Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will spring up quickly;
- B: your liberator shall go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be all around you.
- C: Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and God will say,

ALL: here I am.

- A: If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
- B: if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
- C: then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
- A: The LORD will guide you continually,
satisfying your needs in parched places
and making your bones strong;
- B: you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.
- C: Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;

**ALL: you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.**

- A: If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
- B: if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
- C: if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;

**ALL: then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you stand in honor on the earth;
I will feed you as I fed your ancestors,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.**