

“What Does God Require of Us?”
Confession of Belhar, 1982
Isaiah 42:1-7; James 2:8-9;
Galatians 3:27-29; Luke 6:20-26

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In a galaxy long, long ago and far, far away. It's not quite that, but it feels a little bit that way when I think about South Africa. It feels like it's almost a galaxy away, but it's not really. We had a couple of people from the church visit there this summer. I actually went there 30 years ago.

As far away as it feels, and as it goes back in history there is a way in which South Africa itself is an experiment. We might call it an experiment that kind of went wrong, but it was an experiment. It was a way in which people tried to make something of a particular place. In the process I think they went off track.

It started in 1652 when the Dutch decided they needed an outpost at the very southern tip of Africa. In doing so, they decided that they would set up a settlement and start growing some vineyards so that they could supply wine to their sailing ships to prevent scurvy as they sailed around the world. But as you might know, there were two cultures that were very, very different coming together in the same geographical area. The newcomers didn't want to have anything to do with the people who were already there.

The settlement developed. It kept going. They created a colony there, but by 1795, the Dutch were no longer the great sea power of the world. The British had conquered and taken over South Africa. In the process of European settlement, the Europeans weren't that interested in the folks that were already there, but they did want some help with their farms and vineyards. They actually brought slaves in to help with the development of that area.

It's a study, in many ways, of a group of people meeting together and doing what is sometimes called “othering.” You identify a person or a group as “the other.” They are different; they're not part of our group. It's often a way of devaluing that other group. In some ways, South Africa is a study in 300 years of “othering” between the European settlers and the folks who had already been there. It's a way of saying “the other” just doesn't fit into my identity or my social group, and devaluing who they are.

The interesting thing is that it wasn't until 1948 that it became entrenched in the law of the land. Apartheid is the Afrikaners' word. Afrikaners are the Dutch settlers that got moved inward and became their own little group. Their language changed so much over 300 years that they have their own language, called Afrikaans. These folks were the ones whose ideology wanted the races to be separate. And that separation, in their language, was called apartheid. In 1948, the Afrikaner group came to power. Although they weren't the majority of the people there, they put in place this ideology of racial division and made it harder and harder for the black, non-European population to have

any movement in the country. They were pushed into particular places in an attempt to isolate the different groups. It became more and more difficult to do.

During that time there was a young pastor named Desmond Tutu, who said, “If you keep doing this, it’s going to end up in violence.” That, indeed, is what happened. By the 1970s there is violence. There is a massacre at Sharpville. There is a protest in a town called Soweto, that was formed and the racially non-Europeans were forced to live there. There was an uprising there because the possibilities for them were limited. The police came in and put down the uprising with force and over 500 people died.

As that happened, the government that was enforcing apartheid, this ideology of racial division, became more and more violent. It became more and more a police state. Stephen Biko was a young South African who was working on consciousness-raising. He was arrested and beaten to death, and it became a world-wide symbol of what was happening there, of the violence that was occurring.

During that time, as these uprisings were happening, there was a group at a theological seminary in Cape Town. In the fall of 1978, one of the professors challenged them: “You know why you are politically and sociologically against what’s happening. What is your theological perspective?” They studied scripture and they found that God came to reconcile the world to himself—everyone. When Jesus gives the injunction to his disciples at the end of his life, he doesn’t say, “Go and make your race disciples.” He says, “Go to all nations of the world and make disciples of them.” They saw in that that apartheid was anti-evangelical. They saw in Jesus’ ministry that it wasn’t about division, but about reconciliation. They saw in Jesus’ ministry an embracing of all peoples. Out of that came this Confession of Belhar that begins to speak about what that means.

There was a young theologian named Allan Boesak who took this confession to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa was part of that organization—1.7 million members—and it had supported apartheid. They said it was God-inspired. But when Allan Boesak went to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and gave his presentation, they said no, the Dutch Reformed Church was wrong. They voted to say that apartheid was actually a heresy, and suspended membership of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa. To add insult to injury, the other thing they did was to vote Allan Boesak in as president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

At the same time there was a fellow who had a pastor’s heart, who was incredibly capable, who was caring for his people, going back and forth between seminaries and parishes, who was beginning to recognize that to care for the people of his parish he had to speak out about what was going on. His name was Desmond Tutu. He began to speak out and became an international voice for the people who were oppressed by apartheid. There began to be sanctions against him and all kinds of things happened worldwide.

It was the faith of these people who began to speak out about what they saw as the truth of the Gospel. It is the World Alliance of Reformed Churches that said apartheid is heresy. It's those kinds of things that are encased in this Confession we call the Confession of Belhar.

When Desmond Tutu became director of the Council of Churches of South Africa, they made the Confession of Belhar their confession. It was a voice into the struggle to overcome apartheid. Desmond Tutu said, "The reason we struggle for a resolution to get rid of apartheid is for the liberation of both sides." It's easy to see the native black African was being oppressed, but in doing that, the white European population was boxing themselves in as well. He called for liberation that comes through the Gospel for all people.

So the Confession of Belhar was written in 1982 in a suburb of Johannesburg. We don't know who the authors were. My sense is they did that to keep it anonymous so that it wasn't about any one person. The interesting thing is that they were writing it in the context of apartheid, but they never mentioned apartheid directly because they realized that apartheid was just an example of human sin. It's an example of human sin that's been encased in structure and system, but it's human sin. So when they were writing it, they looked to the Barmen Confession for direction. They used some of the same language as the Confession of 1967. It's really about unity, reconciliation, and justice bringing peace.

I would like to read to you how they begin those overarching themes. Each statement comes with a reference to a Bible verse. The first one comes from Matthew 28:19-20, where it says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The statement says: *We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family... that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ.*

We've heard over and over again how Jesus tells us to love one another as he has loved us, or to love our neighbor as ourselves. In fact, if we go back and take a look, right afterwards he tells the Good Samaritan story, which is a great example of "othering." The Jews have "othered" the Samaritans, saying they are terrible people; almost not people. Jesus makes the Samaritan the hero of the story, the one who shows God's grace and love. In Christ, there is unity of all people, and that's the first thing the Confession of Belhar looks at.

Then, there's a statement based on that passage from 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 which we read earlier: *"We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ. In Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."*

The third thing they say follows Isaiah 42:1-7: *“We believe that God has revealed God’s self as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people.”* In the Isaiah passage, it’s about God saying, “I’m not going to extinguish the smoldering wick, but I am going to bring about justice.” It’s the sense of the way God wants to bring justice into the lives of all people.

Jesus, in Matthew 23:23, says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, and hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It’s that recognition that justice is an important element.

So it’s the unity, reconciliation, and justice that they recognize as core to the Gospel. God coming to forgive our sins is not simply saying you’re OK now. It’s saying you’re OK as we move together into this new life. It’s a new life through the unity, reconciliation, and justice of God. God’s willingness to come and invite us into that is a way of saying to live in unity, reconciliation, and justice.

What does *justice* mean? I went back to scripture to see what the word *justice* is about. It’s about judgment. What it suggests is making good judgments. Justice is good judgments. It’s the ability to make a judgment that recognizes God’s will. It’s the ability to make a judgment that recognizes that we love one another even as he has loves us. It’s the ability to make a judgment to say, “I love my neighbor even as I love myself.” It’s the ability to make a good judgment. When our life together has created an ideology that is full of not-good judgment, then it’s not good judgment. That’s what it was identifying—an ideology that had become structural and systematic, a not-good judgment; an injustice.

We are called to make the good judgment, to follow Christ and not some other ideology, not some way of making ourselves better than others. We are called to reconciliation instead. It’s just the opposite of “othering.” “Othering” is to make someone not as good, to devalue. Reconciliation is to favor someone, to care for them, to love them, to want a relationship that’s good and healthy.

Finally, there’s the idea of unity. We can only be disciples of Christ as we recognize that we are together and that in following Christ we are of like mind, or in unity. The word for that means *to have an inward outlook that affects our outward behavior*. It means to share an inward outlook based on Christ that leads us to an outward behavior.

I think we do share that outlook, and I think the outlook is pretty clear about what Christ invites us to share: to love one another as I have loved you; to love your neighbor as yourself; to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul. The core of that outlook is pretty clear and he invites us to be there together. That means we don’t leave anybody out. That means when we see the social and structural ways in which we can engage, we try to find a different way rather than accepting the social and structural ways around us.

The interesting thing about this confession is that it's a confession in both meanings of the word. It is a confession of sin. It's a recognition of the heresy of apartheid, the heresy of separation, the heresy of not loving our neighbor, whoever that neighbor might be. And, it's a confession of what God wants for us. It's a confession of God's grace. It's a confession of God coming to all of us and inviting us to be a family together. It's God inviting us to live into the world in a way that makes the world a better place. It's God inviting us to confess and recognize in our structure and our society's ways there are things that are not God's will. To recognize that we can confess and try again, and we can look again to see where Jesus would lead us. To see what it means to truly love our neighbor no matter what the color of their skin, their socio-economic status, or whatever we use to "other" somebody else.

This confession suggests that when we follow Christ it means something for the walk we take through life, the journey we're going to choose. There may be times where we are out of step with the society around us, or we're out of step with some of those who argue differently. But it invites us to keep our eyes on Jesus, and to follow him, and to know him, and to know what it means to "love one another even as I have loved you" and to "love our neighbors as ourselves" and to recognize the ideologies in our lives that become new gods to us. He invites us to some self-reflection that is often hard, but gives us a vision of being a people who can care for one another, who can make a society where everyone is included and there is no partiality. It invites us to follow Jesus and to be a people that includes all people.

One of the concluding statements in this confession is "*Jesus is Lord.*" I believe when Christ is at the center, when Jesus is Lord, we have a way of testing our lives, of testing the structures, of testing our society, of testing the world around us. We have a Lord who shows us the way. This confession tested their times and said it was wanting. It tested their times and said this is a heresy, and charted a new way. It invites us to see how we might need to do the same in our own lives, in our world, in our time and in some of the same issues. It invites us to recognize the heresy of racism, the heresy of "othering" and to love one another even as Jesus has loved us. Love each other and love our neighbors as ourselves because we have been loved by God. What a gift and a calling. Amen.