

# Hope from the Confession of Belhar

Matthew 23:1-12

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

All Saints Days Sunday/November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Matt Matthews

*Matthew 23:1-12*      *1Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father — the one in heaven. 10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

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In our text today, Jesus tells his followers to follow what the Jewish leaders teach, but do not follow what they do, because these teachers do not do what they teach.

Jesus would, surely, say the same about Presbyterian teachers today. (Or, Roman Catholic, or Methodist, or whatever...) Their teaching is okay. But they themselves don’t follow what they say, so don’t you follow them.

In other words, live the justice your teachers talk about. Walk the walk. Jesus reminds his followers that he—Jesus—sets the perfect example. I’m am your rabbi. God is your parent. And this is what discipleship will look like: The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Serve and love one another.

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The Confession of Belhar, written in September 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa during the days of Apartheid, is meant to shine a light on Jesus.

The South African Church, they believed, and the South African people were mired in darkness. The nation, her people, and the church had gone astray by conforming to and justifying the oppressive laws of Apartheid—a system of laws that separated people by race. These laws had roots that went back centuries, and the modern laws of Apartheid ruled the land since 1948. It appeared those laws might rule forever.

But the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa said no. Enough is enough. They asked, who is our Lord? And what does our Lord lead us to believe? And when our unity as the body of Christ is threatened, how are we called to be reconciled to one another? Should laws designed to rank and separate people by the color of their skin be allowed to stand?

The Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa was part of the larger Dutch Reformed Church. This “Mission” church was designed as what they called a “coloured” (or biracial) church. It was this Mission church that believed the church had a voice. They believed the church must use its voice. And their voice came out in a Bible-based, thoughtful *roar* called the Confession of Belhar. The document helped dismantle a system of racist laws that some feared would last forever. Thank God they did not.

The Confession of Belhar was added to the Confession of the Presbyterian Church USA in 2016. Our church's 222<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly hoped Belhar's themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice might help the PCUSA speak and act with similar clarity at a time when it faces division, racism, and injustice.

While this document originates from a specific context (Apartheid) in a specific place (South Africa) from a specific people (Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa), it speaks powerfully about injustice everywhere—in Cuba, in Russia, in the Middle East, in the Congo and South Sudan, in Champaign and Urbana and Rantoul and Chicago and Detroit and the streets of Fifth Avenue and Agua Prieta and on the roads and in the places and among tribes and peoples everywhere.

What do we believe? What do we reject? Who is our Lord?

Our sermon today is a reading of the Confession of Belhar. We give thanks to the brave saints who risked much to write this document. We give thanks for all the saints around the world who are challenged and encouraged by these words. May we be so challenged, encouraged, and inspired.

*Prayer: Holy God, help us to see your son, Jesus. Help us to follow him. Help us to live the justice he talked about. Help us to live the justice he lived. Reconcile us to each other. And guide our steps. AMEN.*

NOTE: The Confession of Belhar I post below does NOT include the ample scriptural references; this is a problem of formatting. Go here to download a PDF of the Confession with the biblical references, or find a current copy of *The Book of Confessions*.

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/belhar-confession/>

## CONFESSION OF BELHAR

September 1986<sup>[1]</sup>

**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.

**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;
- (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 spir- itual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convic- tions, as well as the various languages and cul- tures, 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;

#### **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;
- (We reject any doctrine) 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;
- (We reject any doctrine) which denies that a refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;
- (We reject any doctrine) which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.

#### **We believe**

- that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ;
- (We believe) 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;
- (We believe) that God's life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and there- fore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitter- ness 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;

- (We believe) 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;
- (We believe) 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.

### **We believe**

- that God has revealed God's self 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 God in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;
- (We believe) that 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;
- (We believe) 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.

**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.

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<sup>[i]</sup> This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the confession as it was adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986. In 1994 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united to form the Unit- ing Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). This inclusive language text was prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).