

THE BELHAR CONFESSION
(English Translation)

September 1986

1. **We believe** in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who by the Word and the Spirit of God gathers, protects and cares for the Church—has done so since the beginning of the world and will do so to the end.
2. **We believe** in one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called out of the whole human race.

We believe

- that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in this Church as the fellowship of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;
- that the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ is therefore both a gift and a command; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a power which binds together but at the same time a reality which must be 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 human beings and human groups is a sin which Christ has already conquered, and that anything which may threaten this unity has no place in Christ's Church and must be resisted;
- that this unity of the people of God must become visible and be given effect in a variety of ways: in our loving one another; in experiencing, pursuing and practising fellowship with one another, in owing it to one another to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to benefit and bless one another; in sharing one faith and one calling, in being of one soul and one mind, in having one God and Father, in being steeped in one Spirit, being baptized with one baptism and confessing one Name, in partaking of one bread and drinking from one cup, in being obedient to one Lord, in devoting ourselves to one cause and sharing one hope, in together coming to know the height, breadth and depth of the love of Christ, in together being built up to the stature of Christ, to be the new humanity, knowing and bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ, needing one another and building one another up, admonishing and comforting one another, suffering with one another for justice' sake, praying together, serving God together in this world and fighting together against all that may hinder or threaten this unity;
- that this unity can take shape only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds and convictions, as well as the diversity of languages and cultures, are by virtue of our reconciliation in Christ opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God; and
- that true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership in this Church.

Therefore we reject any doctrine

- which absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this absolutizing hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the Church or even leads to the constitution of separate Churches;
- which purports that this spiritual unity is truly maintained in the bond of peace while believers who confess the same faith are estranged from one another on account of diversity and a lack of reconciliation;
- which denies that to refuse to pursue this visible unity as a priceless gift is sin;
- which, explicitly or implicitly, purports that descent or any other human or social factor needs to be considered in deciding who may be accepted as members 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 its members are peacemakers, and that the Church is a witness, by word and deed, to the new heaven and the new earth in which justice dwells;
- that by the life-giving Word and Spirit God has conquered the powers of sin and death and therefore also of alienation and hatred, bitterness and enmity; that by the life-giving Word and Spirit God will enable the Church to live in a new obedience which can open up new possibilities of life also in society and the world;
- that this message is deprived of its credibility, and its beneficial effect is obstructed, when it is proclaimed in a land which claims to be Christian but in which the enforced separation of people from one another on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity between them;
- that any teaching which tries to use the gospel to legitimate such forced separation, which is unwilling to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, and which out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief denies the reconciling power of the gospel in advance is an ideology and false doctrine.
- **Therefore we reject** any doctrine which in the name of the gospel or of the will of God sanctions the forced separation of people in such a situation on the grounds of race and colour and thereby hinders in advance the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ and robs it of its power.

4. **We believe**

- that God's own revelation has revealed God as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace between people; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and those who suffer injustice and calls the Church to imitate this; that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees those in prison and makes the blind see; that God succours the downtrodden, protects strangers, helps orphans and widows and thwarts the path of the ungodly; that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their affliction; that God seeks to teach the People of God to do what is good and to seek the right;
- that the Church must therefore stand by people who in any way suffer or are in need, which among other things means that the Church will witness and take up the fight against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
- that as God's possession the Church must stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with those who suffer injustice; and that the Church as made up of those who follow Christ must witness against all the

powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and rule over others to their disadvantage.

Therefore we reject any ideology that legitimates forms of injustice and any doctrine that is unwilling to oppose such an ideology on the basis of the gospel.

5. **We believe** that the Church is called to confess and to do all these things in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, even if the authorities and human laws prohibit them and even if punishment and suffering be the consequence.

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be honour and glory for ever and ever.

THE ACCOMPANYING LETTER

With its adoption of the draft Confession of Belhar already in 1982 the Synod of what was then the NG Sendingkerk (Dutch Reformed Mission Church) approved an accompanying letter to be always read along with the Confession. The text of this is as follows.

1. We are aware that in the life of the Church there can be moments of such seriousness that the Church feels the necessity of confessing its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. We are aware that such an act of confession should not be made lightly but only when it is judged that the heart of the gospel itself is at stake and under threat. In our judgement the church situation and the political situation within our land and particularly within the NGK family at present demands such a decision. We therefore make this confession not as a contribution to theological discussion or as a new summary of the whole content of our faith but as a cry from the heart, as a compulsion that is laid upon us for the sake of the gospel in the light of the situation in which we stand. We confess together with many our guilt that we have not always witnessed clearly enough about this and as a result are co-responsible that what is experienced and confessed as sin or should have been experienced and confessed as sin in time grew to take the form of ideologies that though contrary to Scripture were taken for granted and that the impression was created for many that the gospel was not truly at stake. We make this confession because we judge that all kinds of theological arguments contributed to emphasizing aspects of the truth so one-sidedly that it changed into a lie.

2. We are aware that the only authority behind such a confession and the only ground on which it can be confessed is Holy Scripture as the Word of God. Fully aware of the risk connected with such an act, we nevertheless judge that we have no other choice. We are also aware that no other motives or convictions, however valid they may be, give us the right to engage in an act of confession. It must be an act of the Church for the sake of the purity and credibility of the Church and its message alone. To the extent that it is possible we hereby declare before people in general that our only motive is our fear that the truth and the power of the gospel itself is under threat in the present situation. We do not wish to serve the interest of any group or promote any factions or particular theologies or to implement any ulterior motive. At the same time we know that only he before whom everything is open and laid bare can judge how genuine our deepest motives are. We declare this confession not from his throne or out of the heights but before his throne and before the people. We therefore plead that this confession not be used by anyone with all kinds of ulterior motives and that it will also not be opposed on the basis of such motives. Our desire is not to lay any false stumbling blocks in the way but to point to the genuine stumbling block, the Rock that is Jesus Christ.

3. We declare this confession not against specific people or groups of people or a Church or Churches. We declare it against a false doctrine, against an ideological distortion that threatens the gospel itself in our Church and our land. We yearn that no one will identify himself or herself with this untenable doctrine and that everyone who is wholly or partly blinded by it will turn away from it. We are completely aware of the seductive nature of such a false doctrine and know that many who have been conditioned by it have learned to a greater or lesser extent to believe the half truth instead of the whole. We therefore do not doubt the Christian faith, uprightness, honesty, integrity, good motives and in many regards praiseworthy behaviour of many such people. But just because we know the power of the deceit, we are aware that not the earnestness, uprightness and intensity of our convictions but only the truth in the Son sets us free. Our Church and our land greatly need this freedom. We there speak in a pleading and not an accusatory way. We plead for reconciliation, the genuine reconciliation that follows conversion, and the change in attitudes and structures. We are aware that an act of confession is a two-sided sword, that none of us can cast the first stone or does not have a plank in his or her own eye. We know that the attitudes and behaviour that oppose the gospel are present with all of us and will remain so. Therefore this confession is nothing other than a call for continual self-examination, striving and readiness for conversion in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in a broken world. It is not intended as an act of self-justification and intolerance, so that while we preach to others we ourselves may perhaps be rejected.

4. Our prayer is that this act of confession will not put stumbling-blocks in the way and so cause or promote false divisions, but will be reconciling and unifying. We are aware that such an act of confession and a process of reconciliation necessarily brings with it much pain. It requires the pain of conversion, repentance and confession of guilt. It requires the pain of the renewal of life, of life-change, both in the individual and in the community. It places us on a path, the end of which we cannot predict or manipulate to our own ends. On this path we shall inevitably experience intense growing pains while we wrestle to overcome the alienation, the bitterness, the failure to be reconciled and the fear. We shall have to learn anew to know ourselves as well as one another. We are completely aware that this confession calls for the breaking down of thought patterns and church and community structures that have grown over many years. We confess, however, that because

of the gospel no other way is possible. Our prayer is that our brothers and sisters throughout the whole NGK family but also outside it will wish to make this new beginning with us, so that together we can be set free and together go this way of reconciliation and righteousness. Our prayer is that this sorrow will be a sorrow that works salvation. We believe that it is possible in the power of our Lord and through his Spirit. We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ can and will bring hope, freedom, healing and true peace to our land.
