

Meditation on the Confession of Belhar
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Reformation Sunday: November 6, 2022

Today, you may have noticed is something of a special Sunday, the day we call Scottish Heritage and Reformation Sunday, where we remember and honor the legacy of those church leaders centuries ago who in their faithfulness to God's call in their lives, exemplified bravery and boldness as they stood up against powerful people and institutions to proclaim the truth of the gospel, changing the church and the world in the process. Each year as we mark this occasion, finding strength in the saints of the past, we look to our future, seeking God's call on our lives, and what it means for us today to be the church reformed, always to be reforming according to the Word of God.

One of the central ways that we as a church draw on the wisdom and strength of our past and our traditions is through our use of the Book of Confession as a guide for our common life of faith. As we seek together to understand and be guided by scripture and God's work in our lives and throughout history, the Book of Confessions serves as a witness to God's faithfulness and action in the Church. Some of these confessions are unique to us as members of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, and others we hold in common with even our Catholic and Orthodox siblings, reminding us that there is indeed much more that binds us together as Christ's Church than separates us.

Many of our confessions were written in times of crisis or great transition for the church, where clarity and bold declaration of theological principles were needed to help the church be a critical witness to the gospel and God's truth in the world. One such confession is Belhar Confession. Written in the mid 1980s, Belhar was commissioned and compiled by

leaders in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, in response to the decades long apartheid policies in South Africa. Apartheid created laws that enforced legal segregation between White and Black South Africans, dictated who could freely move about the country and to whom the country's resources would be allocated. The church in South Africa was not immune to the prejudice and hatred that these policies were fueled by and fed back into society. As such, Belhar names the sins of disunity, separation, and racism as it calls for the church to work for unity, reconciliation, and justice.

I can think of few messages that our own community and culture needs to hear more than the importance of unity, in the Church and in our shared public lives. I hardly have to elaborate on the state of our country and the divisiveness of our politics, and the heartbreaking ways that the forces of tribalism and partisanship have fractured our society. And so I believe that one of the most important things that we can do and be in this world is to be a people of unity. This doesn't mean we are united because we all look the same, talk the same, vote the same, come from the same place, or even believe in the exactly the same ways, but instead our unity is found in Jesus Christ and in his gospel of reconciliation. Now while Belhar expresses that this unity is a gift, it also says that this is something we must actively work for and towards. It's not going to be easy and we will probably mess it up, as we stumble our way into living our identity as the Body of Christ, extending grace and love to one another along the way.

You see our chapel/sanctuary today decorated with various Scottish tartan, our way of acknowledging and celebrating the theological heritage of our Presbyterian tradition and its ties to the Church of Scotland. In Scotland one's tartan is a unique pattern of woven colored, usually

wool, threads, used in everything from kilts and skirts to bedding and banners. Over the past few centuries tartan has come to symbolize one's family or clan of origin. A tartan displays to the world who you are and to whom you belong. And while we can each claim and be proud of our Scottish roots, our heritage as a church, as the reformed church, encompasses much more than just one place or one people. As the church of Jesus Christ and the ideas of reformed theology have expanded to every part of the globe, so too has our heritage. So as we lift and celebrate each of our particularities, we also embrace a wider vision and expression of the church, and in doing so a tartan now can also be a Ghanaian Kente cloth, a Peruvian manta, an Indian Sari, a Japanese kimono, Indonesian Batik, or Mexican Embroidery. The unity of the church looks like each of us wearing and celebrating the identities that make us who we are, while also together creating a new tapestry – one where we are woven together by the bonds of the Holy Spirit, and the pattern we create, as the visible people of God, is the very face of Christ to the world.