

PENTECOST 2013

BANNERS FOR OUR BATTLES OF FAITH

Pentecost is traditionally a time for contemplation, listening and repentance. We hope and pray that the Lord will work with us and we will be transformed to be useful in worship, in our mutual fellowship and in our service and witness in the world. The DRC family is currently walking the way with the Confession of Belhar (Belhar) purposefully. It has therefore great value that we in this series all cooperate with each other to focus on the perspectives from this confession that was born in our family circle. The national United Ministry for Service and Witness of the DRC family was requested from several sides to compile this year's Pentecost Series with reference to Belhar. In the presentation reference is also made to affirming and enriching perspectives from the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) and the Belgic Confession (Belgica). In this context very important Biblical truths in the devotions of our eleven co-workers are underlined. We hold these truths as banners to remind ourselves and others of vital emphases from the gospel for the challenges to our faith today. From the Word and on the basis of our confessions we are taught that the church belongs not to us but to the Triune God who calls us from all the nations of the earth. We also learn that we as the body of Christ is visible, that we are truly reconciled with God and one another and so should live. In addition, we also learn that our Lord has a heart full of compassionate justice for those who suffer and are ostracized and oppressed in our world and that He expects us to be like and act like Him. Finally, we confess together again like the first Christians did that Jesus is Lord and that we will follow Him obediently.

During this year's Pentecost we will together ponder about these perspectives. We pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten us all as preachers and as members of the prayer meetings and enable us to accept these gospel truths and to live it with conviction, so that the world may believe.

We are very grateful to our sisters and brothers who worked together to prepare the Pentecostal Series this year. The UMSW's co-workers are D Xolile Simon, Christina Landman, T Eric Ngema, Colin Goeman, Pieter Grove, Andre van Niekerk, Victor Pillay, Gustav Claasen, Mary-Anne P Huffel, M Godfrey Betha and Nelis J van Rensburg.

The series was edited and finalised by other role players and it is widely available electronically on various electronic sites and newsletters of our church family, at CLF, Bible Media, Luisterseisoen, Communitas, Commission for Witness as well as at a number of church offices.

On behalf of the national United Ministry for Service and Witness of the DRC family,

Johan Botha, Eddie Orsmond, Donald Gantana

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1. The Triune God Creates us to be God's Church, God's Body, through the Word and the Spirit

Xolile Simon

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 1:1-14

Confessions

*Belhar (Introduction)

We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who through Word and Spirit gathers, protects and cares for the church from the beginning of the world and will do to the end.

*Belgica art 16

We believe that... God showed himself to be as he is: merciful and just... saving from... perdition those whom he, in his eternal and unchangeable counsel, has elected and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord by his pure goodness, without any consideration of their works.

*Belgica art 27

We believe and confess one single catholic or universal church-- a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers...

This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will last until the end...

*HC - Q&A 33

...Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God. We, however, are adopted children of God... by grace through Christ.

*HC - Q&A 34

Why do you call him "our Lord"? Because... with his precious blood-he has set us free from sin and from the tyranny of the devil, and has bought us, body and soul, to be his very own.

Meditation

Who are we?...

Who are we, the Church, to whom do we belong and for what purpose? God, gathered, collected, chose, adopted, redeemed, purchased us as God's property, testify our confessions. Ephesians 1:3 confesses we are a community (people) created by the triune God. We depend on God, the source of our gifts in every sphere and in the physical presence of Christ (compare our "being in Christ").

But why and how did the Triune God bless us as believers, as the body of God, of Christ, to the extent that we were? Ephesians answers that God has blessed us through the Word and the Holy Spirit for now and here, in order "that we should be holy and without blemish in his presence" (1:4 d). And also for the future, "so we will in awe of God praise...His amazing grace and glory" (1:6 a; 12a; 14c) in worship, life and witness. God's gifts motivate our personal commitment. But it also enable us to participate in God's interaction with the principalities and powers (Ephesians 6:10-18).

The Trinity is our source...

The triune God is the source of every spiritual blessing that we the body of Christ received. Both these blessings as well as the destructive principalities and powers of this world challenge us. They also present us with new opportunities to imagine a different reality, form the identities and deepen the loyalty of the church to the triune God in old and new contexts today. God is the source of the gifts, 'every spiritual blessing', beyond any space or time, including now being a holy and blameless people who are created to praise God. In personal devotion and participation in the encounters of God and Christ with the corrupt powers in the world, we as church is formed and renewed through the Word and Spirit. And so Ephesians 1 begins and ends with the *praise of the Triune God*, 'Blessed be the

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1:3a; 14a)! This is an expression of and a call to honour God for all the gracious gifts 'in Christ.

Set apart to witness...

Being set apart is a gift of God and a task (witness) of the body of Christ. God has worked in and through Jesus Christ in the past, present and future 'so that we would be holy and blameless in his [Christ's] presence' (1:4d). Being chosen and made holy 'before the foundation of the world' further clarifies what it means to be dependent on God and to be 'in Christ.' Being chosen and set-apart is also part of the 'spiritual benefits as well as being the basis for every spiritual benefit' of the Christian community. It is out of 'great personal interest' and love that God has chosen a particular group of individuals from amongst many other groups 'before the foundation of the world.' In the context of Ephesians 1, being set apart is a gift. Only after the election are the chosen community encouraged to 'be holy and blameless in his presence' (1:4d). God intends to make the church 'without spot or wrinkle' through Christ (5:27).

Being chosen is not about favouring some or disliking others. The character and acts of the believers did not influence the choice and action of God. We are only the receivers of the blessings. It is 'amazing that God would choose any [of us]. No wonder God is to be praised' (Hoehner). When 'confronted with this manifestation of amazing grace,' one stands in awe before God (Hendriksen). Praising God for the abundant grace is a reminder to us and others that we belong to God and are set apart to witness about the blessing we have received, set apart for worship for life and witness.

What did happen then? Jews and Greeks in Asia Minor and people from all nations have become part of the body of Christ as they heard and believed the Word. Those set apart and send into the world share their experience of salvation, of coming to faith, by participating in the witness of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some have heard, doubted or did not come to faith – having no faith in God. (Hendriksen) Those who have heard the 'word of the truth', and responded positively (in faith), they were 'sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit' and they look forward to the final fulfillment of the blessings of God 'in Christ' and through the Spirit. (1:13d) The Holy Spirit is the first deposit or installment of our inheritance (1:14a), a foretaste of what is in the present still to come in the future.

A new place in every place...

The body of Christ is blessed by the election of God and the reconciliation and renewal 'in Christ' amidst the powers in every sphere and place. The blessings precede and transcend 'the foundation of the world.' They transcend space and time. Blessings include events which God uses to bless the Christian communities. The imagery of 'every spiritual blessing' of God refers to the historical and personal event that God has blessed us with. Through personal devotion and a living faith (1:1-14) the body of Christ can experience the blessings of God.

But the body of Christ '... can recognise even in an indifferent or hostile environment the hidden powers of God....' (Schnackenburg) The principalities and powers (*oppressive and corrupt rulers and authorities within religions and social institutions; money, possessions and materialism perceived as temporary and eternal prosperity - blessings*); *commitments to religions, politics, languages, cultures or clans that lead to exclusive and oppressive practices*) above, beneath and around us seem to control events and structure human life. But they do not have the last say on who we are and on what we can become and do.

Through his death and resurrection Christ has 'disarmed' them (Newbigin on Ephesians 6:10-18; Gombis on Ephesians 1:1-14). The death and resurrection of Christ have overcome the powers, which will ultimately be judged and totally destroyed. To be 'in Christ' is to be in 'a new place in every place' (Gombis). It is to retain our identity in Christ and regain our human dignity by relating to God and other individuals and groups amidst materialism, destruction of the environment, class and gender discrimination, nationalism, and xenophobia.

God's glory in each place and sphere...

Thus, we glorify God, the one to whom we belong. We are set-apart to be the glory of God in every place and space. For 'We no longer live with reference to ourselves, which is no glory at all'; also, no longer with reference to an earthly identity defined and structured by destructive principalities and powers (Gombis).

Rather, we witness by praising God in worship and life for we 'know wherein our true and perfect happiness consists, namely, in the life we hope for and which is hid from us yet, in order that we should not be tied to the world.' (Calvin 1652; 1973) We draw from our old and newer traditions, the hymns and catechisms, to start and end our narratives and witness by honouring the Triune God: 'Praise [blessed] be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' who blesses the church; to Christ who renews the church; to the Holy Spirit who seals, protects and gives hope to the church for now and the future. We praise God and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord over all earthly and heavenly spheres and spaces.

Prayer

We thank you Lord for growing unity within the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches. We pray for greater and deeper trust among the members of the body of Christ. We pray for real and authentic unity and community among the brothers and sisters of Christ as his church in this world. Amen

2. Christ makes us one

Christina Landman

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:11-22

Confessions

* Belhar art 1

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 (Eph 2:11-22);... 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;...(John 17:20-23)

* Belgica art 28

The Obligations of Church Members: We believe that since this holy assembly and congregation is the gathering of those who are saved and there is no salvation apart from it, no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition. But all people are obliged to join and unite with it, keeping the unity of the church by submitting to its instruction and discipline, by bending their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and by serving to build up one another, according to the gifts God has given them as members of each other in the same body. And to preserve this unity more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to God's Word, to separate themselves from those who do not belong to the church, in order to join this assembly wherever God has established it, even if civil authorities and royal decrees forbid and death and physical punishment result. And so, all who withdraw from the church or do not join it act contrary to God's ordinance.

Meditation

Perspective from God's side...

We begin with a story. One day God called together his angels. "The people on earth fight terribly," said God, "I have to give them peace."

"But where will you put peace for them to find?" asked an angel, "perhaps somewhere in the sky?" "No," said God, "the people should not find it only when they die; peace is for the earth."

"But where on earth would you put it? Where are people looking for peace? In the shebeens? Or in nice houses behind high walls and electric security?" asked another angel wryly.

"I will put peace in people's hearts," said God.

"But how will they get it there?" asked another angel skeptical. "When people look for something in themselves, they seek selfishly and with self-interest. What does peace anyway help if it just stay inside? "

"Then I will myself go and help people to find peace in themselves, and especially to share it with others," says God, "that they may be one".

"The believers will never be one," said the same angel.

"They do not need to become one, God said," they just need to be one. They are one already. I will go and teach them to live as one. "

"But how will they know you? You do not have a name," said the angels.

"I will call myself Jesus," God said, "and they will themselves add that I am the Christ that brings peace, because they will be one."

The walls between people...

When Paul writes the Ephesian letter, it's about 30 years after Jesus Christ lived, died and rose again. It is more or less the year 62AC. It's not a good year for Paul. He sits in jail in Rome.

Paul knows the Ephesians well. He often visited Ephesus on his missionary journeys. Once he worked there for three years.

While Paul is in prison in Rome, he worries about the believers in Ephesus. Rome is quite a distance from Ephesus. Ephesus is in today's Turkey. If you sail with a ship from Rome to the East, you will indeed visit Ephesus. Paul's letter would certainly have arrived there.

But what is so bad in Ephesus that Paul worry about it more than being in jail? The believers in Ephesus are divided. They divide themselves into groups - Jews and non-Jews, "pagans" and what more. The terms that Christians in Ephesians use to name each other is *paroikos*, which we may translate as "af-springer" and *ksenos*, that today will be a "foreigner" like in "*zenofobia*" and *parapedimos* which is something like an "illegal immigrant". While Christians like Paul himself were brutally persecuted the believers in Ephesus were fighting about who were the purest, the most important and the most upright. And that, says Paul with a sore heart, is what Christians do to each other, while we should rather call each other "citizens" of God's kingdom.

What does one write to people who build walls between them, to people who all believe in Christ but approach Him differently, and call each other names?

Let the unity grow...

Today, more than two thousand years later, people speak of "Diversity Management". It seems that people from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, genders and races, do not get on with each other as a matter of course. They do not find that peace in themselves.

Therefore businesses and organizations manage diversity according to three principles. If you now look at these three things, you hear what Paul long ago in Ephesians 2:11-22 told the believers about how to manage their diversity.

The first guideline. In a business it is not about the individuals but about the organisation. Members of this organisation are bound together by a vision, though they may differ as individuals. In reality all people differ from one another, though they belong to the same culture or race or gender.

Paul had told the Ephesians this when he taught the Ephesians about the unity that Christ is for us that surpasses all diversity. Verse 14 simply says: "Christ is our peace." Christ united different groups. This is the pure vision of what we today call "church".

Secondly, businesses say unity does not grow from itself. If one seeks peace only within yourself, you will not find it there. Being one is hard work. Unity is a verb. For this you need to recognize and respect the variety of people - and ultimately celebrate it! There are two things you should not do: do not just concentrate on the differences between people and do not just concentrate on the similarities between people.

That's what Paul also writes to the Ephesians (15vv): Christ has already broken down the wall between you. You can accept the diversity among you, without feeling threatened by one another. In Christ you are already one! Celebrate your one body in all its diversity.

A third thing that businesses and organizations say is that unification is a process. When the organisation has embedded its vision and ethos, a process starts. First diversity is *invited inside* (today we call it "affirmative action"). Then people should begin to appreciate diversity, and it should be *managed*. Ultimately diversity must be *lived* in an organisation alive! Otherwise, the process failed.

Paul explained it to the Ephesians: "Jesus Christ is our cornerstone" (v. 20). On this cornerstone the church is build, brick by brick, in its full diversity - as one spiritual home "where God dwells" (verse 22). In this way we live our diversity.

Banners for our path...

Walking on this path, we have three banners. On each of them we have Paul's words to the Ephesians: The first banner: "Christ is our peace." The second one reads: "With Christ we break down the walls between us." The third one simply says: "Jesus Christ is our cornerstone."

The simplicity of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is also the simple message of the Belhar Confession. The unity that Christ brings should be seen in the church. It is a command. Yes, unity is a verb. It is a process. But the cornerstone is there already.

With one another and in our diversity we should daily live visible unity and peace, together with God living among us.

Prayer

Dear Lord, You are our unity, our celebration, our peace. Walk before us, to guide us. Walk behind us, to pick us when we fall. Walk alongside us, that we can take each other's hands. But especially walk in us, that we may have peace. Amen

3. “The new united community in Christ cares for each other”

T Eric Ngema

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:1-31(21)

Confessions

* HC -Q&A 55

What do you understand by "the communion of saints"? Firstly, that believers, one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts. Second, that each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.

* Belhar art 1

We believe in one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family. ...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;...

Meditation

Each one is important...

The unity of the church in our Scripture reading is purported to be the culmination of the Holy Spirit's unifying intelligence. For the body - i.e. the Church - to function efficiently it needs all the body parts and they should be healthy and in good cooperation. Let us ponder this fundamental truth.

The compelling power of the Holy Spirit demands each member of the body to discern the significance of each part of the body of Christ. The Church as the true body of Christ cannot hide behind diversity and thus neglect the call to a visible display of this unity. This truth is particularly evident from the Belhar Confession's focus that we are a diversity in unity. Our world indeed recognises diversity. Some may emphasise that we are united in our diversity. However in 1 Cor 12:20 we are taught that Christ is like a single body, that we are individually members of his body and that these different and diverse parts of the one Christian body serves one another (12:25). Not to want to belong to the body and to justify such a position is contrary to the teaching of 1 Cor 12.

In fact we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink from one Spirit. Another translation says we were all drenched by the one Spirit (12:13). It follows logically that this one body of Christ is indeed harmed by any sign of division or separation, to the delight of the Enemy and the body's adversaries.

We ought to care for one another...

God's message to us is about the caring community of believers. The challenge to each of us in the body of Christ, the church at large, is “to look out not only for our own interest, but also for the interest of others (Phil 2:4). In 1Corinthians 12:21 we see that some members of the body are feeble and may appear unnecessary, even to be of no significance. However, the truth is that without them the body is incomplete. This is even more important for the believing community who shares the same confessions. The Holy Spirit and the love of Jesus Christ in us propel us to bear one another's burdens. The logic of 1 Cor 12:26 is clear. When one member in the body suffers the other members suffer too.

The members of the body need one another. The one Spirit never wants schisms in the one body, the church. Making room for selfishness and the serving of own interests are to serve the interest and to

adopt the strategy of the Enemy, the evil one. During the season of Pentecost we have to do soul searching and again prayerfully seek the truth of our call to care for one another.

Both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belhar Confession demand from us to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be part of the one body, the holy assembly, the church, and to be of benefit and a blessing to one another. As the HC (55) puts it "each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members".

Members of the church are called to comfort one another, and edify one another (1 Thess. 5:11). The body of Christ is faced with various and diverse challenges. In times of challenge the caring of the body through her members is visibly displayed. And this then is the public evidence and good news of our mutual love in action.

Caring for one another may demand sacrifices. For example there may not be recognition for your efforts. It demands endurance even if you lack the strength to go on, to love in spite of not being loved back. Sacrificial caring within the one body of Christ is not optional. It is our way of life.

The body have needs and a clear purpose...

The members of the body have needs. At times some in the church may appear to be self-sufficient and lose sight of the significance of the other members of the body. However, for the body to function efficiently, all its parts need to be healthy. We know when one leg is amputated the body's efficiency is compromised.

The church as body has a public function and purpose. There is a great need for this body to publicly fight the scourge of poverty; the need to jointly fight the spread of diseases; the need to fight moral degradation; the need to pray together for one another; the need to go to the world and make them disciples of Jesus.

To be able to be useful and effective in this role we need to recognise and admit to whom we belong. We are the creation and property of Christ and the Holy Spirit baptised us into one new being. Therefore to be able to stand upright and reach into the pain of society, to be able to serve the needy and to fight the scourge of poverty, to be that instrument in God's hands that can help to bring about a morally healthy society, to be able to disciple the nations of the world, we as Christ's body need to be healthy and all our parts need to function together in service of each other, of the needy and thus in honour of our only Lord.

Being the one, witnessing body...

Let us in conclusion again carefully listen to how the Belhar Confession puts the applicable truths from God's word into perspective about our unity as Christ's one, witnessing body:

"the 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 baptised 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 everything that may threaten or hinder this unity;..."

Let this confession become visible to all and let us remain truthful to this confession as the united body of Christ born of His Spirit. Let the Spirit move us to honour our Lord, let our hearts and minds

be transformed to become a living, clear banner of Christian unity, a remedy to many illnesses in our world today.

Prayer

We thank you Lord for growing unity within the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches. We pray for greater and deeper trust among the members of your body, o Christ. We pray for real and authentic unity, community and caring among us, your brothers and sisters as we care also for your people an creation around us. Amen

4. Confess and embody visible unity in the world - as our gift and our task

Colin Goeiman

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:1-16

Confessions

* Belgica art 29

... As for those who can belong to the church, we can recognize them by the distinguishing marks of Christians: namely by faith, and by their fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness, once they have received the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ. They love the true God and their neighbors, without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and its works.

* Belhar art 1

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;...

Meditation

The goal we strive for...

In Sionsgesang 292 there is a beautiful verse that reads: "Goal that I strive for, you are all Lord!" ("Doel waarna ek strewe, U is alles Heer!") These words were also Paul's from prison to the church of Ephesus. This is also the summary of Paul's message to the Ephesians in the first three chapters of his letter. Paul reminds them of the wonderful calling of God that also reached them on a particular day and had given them new life. He says: "You have once lived in the likeness of this world and you have let the prince of the invisible powers lead you" (Ephesians 2:2). *But then something wonderful happened to you:* "you have been saved by grace, through faith. And this is not your own doing, It is the gift of God – not because of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Therefore Ephesians, because this is your foundation, "Let your conduct be consistent with the calling you have received from God" (Ephesians 4:1).

It is important to live in this way, because the main reason for unbelief in the world is the weak witness of Christians. All too often those who preach love rather practice hate. All too often, those who confess unity, split on the most insignificant issues. Bertrand Russell, an atheist philosopher, once said that if Christians live what they believe, they will change the world. Mahatma Gandhi also said that he would very much like to be a Christian, but he was waiting to meet someone who actually live what Jesus taught. The major reason for disbelief in the world today is our weak witness.

To achieve the goal ...

In Ephesians 4:2 Paul continues to embroider the theme. Note the emphasis on humility. The 1953 Afrikaans translation of the Bible makes it stronger: "with all humility" (English: lowliness of mind). We should not think too much of ourselves. This does not mean that we should have a low self esteem. However humility helps us to see life as a gift of God. Everything that we have, all our abilities are gifts from God.

Paul emphasizes gentleness. This word is also in the Beatitudes. Gentleness is power and strength brought under control. This word is also used for the taming and teaching wild horses. Humility is the

quality of a strong person who masters him or herself, yet is a servant of others. Strong personalities are good, as long as they are under the control of the Spirit and are used to serve others.

Furthermore, we are recommend to be patient with each other. Relationships are never easy. To live a life worthy of our calling in Christ to life, means that in humbleness, gentleness and patience we should tolerate one another in love. Not with sarcasm but with love. Not sulkily and grumpy but in love. Colossians 3:14 states: "Above all you must love one another. It is the bond that binds you together in perfect unity." Love is the foundation.

Maintain the unity...

With this In mind, Paul takes us a step further. He does a call for unity in the church. Verse 3 said that we must strive seriously to preserve the unity of the Spirit. The verb translated as "serious pursuit" is very strong. This points to the urgent efforts of one's entire being - your will, reason, physical strength and attitude.

Make every effort to maintain (preserve) the unity that the Spirit forged between you through living in peace with each other. We should not try to create the unity. It has already been given to us! It is a gift. To accomplish unity is one of the most important tasks of the Holy Spirit. Under the guidance of the Spirit, we must protect it with everything we have in us. We make so much effort, we give large sums of money to secure church buildings. May we with the same effort preserve the gift of unity. Also our budgets should reflect this.

Why should the unity be maintained? According to our text the reason is clear. There is only one body and one Spirit, just as there is only one hope and one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. God is over us all. He uses every believer to do his work. He lives in everyone. He is not further from one than of others. He wants to fill everything eventually with his presence (4:10) and that we will be as a grown human being, so perfect and mature as He himself is (4:12). Therefore, it is important to maintain the unity.

A few years ago at the Paralympic Games in Seattle, USA, 9 physically and mentally disabled athletes prepared for the 100 meters race. At the start one boy stumbled and fell. He started crying. The other 8 athletes stopped and turned around. A girl with Downs Syndrome, bent down, kissed the boy and said: "It is ok, it will shortly be over." Then all nine clasped each other and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood up. The applause continued for a full 10 minutes.

That race paints us a picture of how God's family should be. We all got hurt, we are all in one way or another handicapped, disabled. Yet God, in his infinite mercy and grace, make us part of his family through faith in Christ. And it is with this spiritual family that we go on a journey through life while we assist each other on the road.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, do help us through your Spirit to become increasingly faithful to your command to preserve the unity between us. Give us the necessary humility, gentleness, patience and love to do it. Amen

5. We are reconciled in Christ

Peter Grove

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Confessions

* Belgica art 21

We believe that Jesus Christ is a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek-- made such by an oath-- and that he presented himself in our name before his Father, to appease his wrath with full satisfaction by offering himself on the tree of the cross and pouring out his precious blood for the cleansing of our sins, as the prophets had predicted.... he suffered-- the "just for the unjust," in both his body and his soul (1 Pet 3:18);...

* HC - Q&A 29

Why is the Son of God called "Jesus," meaning "saviour"? Because he saves us from our sins salvation cannot be found in anyone else; it is futile to look for any salvation elsewhere.

* Belhar art 2

We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ;... 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 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...

Meditation

A Longing for reconciliation...

The theme for today's meditation leads us in one of the great and mysterious realities of the Spirit of Christ, in fact this is very appropriate for this time of the church year, but also for the circumstances in this torn world and for South Africa.

The world we live often sigh for profound reconciliation. This desire comes from tough circumstances of hostility, violence, prejudice, bitterness, discrimination and alienation. We see the dissension of people and societies in the raging violence in various parts of the world. Closer to South Africa we see violent persecution in Zimbabwe. South Africa struggles daily with the question of the nature of true reconciliation, because we come from a history of deep-rooted enmity.

Reconciliation is not only applicable where overt violence had occurred. Many communities and millions of people live with a veiled lack of reconciliation. People live with prejudices and distorted images of others. They look down on the poor and simple, or on women, or on other cultures, and the disabled. Irreconciliation lies in the desire of humans for lasciviousness, self-control and domination of other people and nature. There is a real element of idolatry in human's efforts to determine their own life.

The absence of visible relationships of reconciliation stems partly from the haughty efforts of people to improve their own human atonement. Many institutions, especially nations that come from a period of acute conflict, seek the path to reconciliation and try out their own insights to find solutions.

The Belhar Confession warns against such efforts and point out the deception and distortions that occur when we try to cultivate our own reconciliation. Belhar confesses among other things that when "the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity" and that such a teaching is based on nothing but ideology and false doctrine.

Thus we see that both the depth of the irreconciliation, the bitter and destructive fruit thereof and the nature of reconciliation need to be enlightened from a spiritual source to be able to understand it. Even Christian people often fail in this task and fall back into human definitions of reconciliation.

Reconciliation in Christ our friendship with God...

The Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 teaches that any true reconciliation is a work of God alone. The root of the irreconciliation does not in the first instance lie between people but between humans and God. We cannot talk of reconciliation between people on their own, without taking into account the relationship with God. Paul therefore traces the irreconciliation between people and God to our transgressions, sins and iniquities (vv. 19, 21). Irreconciliation and hostility always has to do with spiritual realities, namely the relationship of people with their Creator and Redeemer. With our sinful intention and our crimes we as humans immersed ourselves in alienation and had put ourselves under the domination and enslavement of sin.

Paul therefore does not speak of the atonement of Christ as a change in our emotional experience as humans or in the attitude or mindset of people. He speaks of a change in the relationship that exists between God and us humans, a shift in the location from where humans meet God.

This relational change (reconciliation) or place-shifting, means that believers have been brought over from the state and the power of sin, in which they were helplessly entangled, to a state and place of friendship with God. We as humans could never have worked this out for ourselves. Only God could free us humans from this enmity. This God worked for us through free grace in Christ. This brings about that humans now have a new status, as the justified before God.

The Apostle uses the term "reconciled" (Greek *katallassein*) that refers to an act by which peace is made between two enemies. This act was the work of a mediator without whom the enmity could not be lifted. Paul teaches that God has already acted by sending Jesus as the mediator and in an extremely expensive way, the way of the cross. He redeemed humans from their convictions and enmity against God. Paul teaches that God does not keep our transgressions against us, but He rather brought the price for our sins on Christ. Moreover, He counts the righteousness of Christ in our favour.

With a new order of life in our hearts...

The question that always underlies the world's reconciliation efforts is: "where will we see reconciliation?" Because the world denies the depth of the alienation, despite the terrors of history, it cannot understand reconciliation as a spiritual reality. However, Paul calls on his fellow believers to own for themselves as reality the reconciliation that God has worked. In addition he emphasized that the believers in Christ is also the ambassadors of God's reconciliation message.

It is impossible that Jesus' followers who know the reconciliation and forgiveness in Christ, will not be changed by this fact. God's Children see their own lives from the angle of undeserving justified humans. Moreover, we see our lives from the perspective of the Cross. The Spirit creates the realization of a new order of life in our hearts. This spiritual operation means that we no longer live under the domination of hatred and revenge with our neighbours. We are rather turned to our fellow humans, and especially towards the salvation of our former enemies. In addition, we plead with our fellow humans: be reconciled to God and to us and leave the fearful self-protection by which one slips further away from God and your fellow humans.

Prayer

Thank you Lord that we find complete comfort in Jesus' wounds. We thank you that we do not have to find any other way to reconcile us with God as only through this one sacrifice, brought once for all. Thank you Lord that we as believers are perfected forever by this sacrifice (Belgica Art 21). Give it to us that we henceforth will live from this perfection with you and with each other. Amen

6. As reconciled people we now look at each other with new eyes

André van Niekerk

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:11-16

Confessions

* Belhar art 2

We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ;...

* HC - Q&A 111

What does God require of you in this commandment? That I do whatever I can for my neighbor's good, that I treat others as I would like them to treat me, and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need.

Meditation

"Can people really change?..."

This question of journalists, made the German theologian Dorothee Sölle pale with dismay.

First you understand the journalists' cynical question. You know how difficult you change yourself. Even something relatively easy as changing an unhealthy eating habit or to stop smoking is a terrible struggle. How much more if you do change your attitude and relationship with people. As Paul expressed it: not any longer to judge people as before.

You also understand Sölle's dismay. If people cannot change, what then shall become of us? How will the earth survive the ecological crisis? How will our country with its ravines between people be healed? How will our children be able to forgive each other and live a reconciled life?

Therefore one wants to answer with Sölle that it might just be the most atheistic question is...

One rightly hesitates to talk with others about change, repentance and reconciliation. There are so many false cheap claims to change. On the other hand, we dare not remain silent about the fact that God, through the Holy Spirit changes lives. Many people's lives fall apart in our time. Are we really still the church of Christ if we no longer desires change and reconciliation, and perhaps secretly think by ourselves that it cannot?

The reconciliation measure ...

In earlier times the message of Christ spread rapidly and widely as believers lived Christ:

- * Christian Samaritans and Christian Jews were together in small congregations;
- * Jewish and Greek speakers regarded themselves as part of one body;
- * Men acted against the popular attitude and respected women and treated them as full human beings;
- * Children who are not experienced as burdensome but as precious;
- * Free men who did not look down, but regarded believing slaves as "brothers".

In Paul's language: they do not judge people as before. As reconciled people they look with new eyes at each other. What brings this radical reversal in communities and in the lives of individuals? Paul who persecuted Christians, becomes a preacher of Christ. He provides both a heart and a head-answer to the question.

Paul's heart answer is ...

"The love of Christ compels me".

Paul, the scribe on a particular day discovered God in a totally new way - after the experience of God's light and Christ's voice on the Damascus Road. It changed him radically. When he met Jesus he understood both God and himself differently. The love of Christ compels him. He can no longer see people as before. He looks at them with the eyes of Christ.

If you are forced to respecting a different culture, can you do it half-heartedly? It's like a compulsion of a civil religion became part of our life. We must die to it, even if congregations may shrink because of this. The inner urge of Jesus Christ must revive our hearts.

During a Stellenbosch mission week in the eventful years 70 Willie Jonker emphasized with a remarkable pathos that the love of Christ does not force but urges. The realization that God loves you grabs you in the heart, so that you now no longer live for yourself and your group's interests, but for Christ and his interests.

It's like the creative urge that overwhelms an artist:

- * The artist cannot explain it to him or herself...
- * The artist spares no time or effort ...
- * This could be the beginning of a new art genre or mix of genres.
- * There is criticism and rejection. If the artworks do not sell, inner doubt starts.
- * Yet the artist continues to write, paint and create from the heart.

So the love of God works in us. This makes Paul to live a life of sacrifice amidst hatred and hardships and small successes. But he never again judged Christ and others as before.

Paul also has a head-answer ...

The Spirit of God does not work with all of us in the same way. Not each one has a Damascus experience. However, the Spirit works with us all through a process of detachment from the old and brings us into the field (sphere) of Christ's power.

Paul explains that they also previously judged people and even Christ, according to the "sarx", literally the flesh, or as it is translated "human benchmarks". 'Sarx' or flesh, with Paul often means more than just an external assessment. "Flesh" stands for the old dispensation in which Adam is the head, determining your human nature. In opposition to the spirit of the flesh is that of the Spirit with Christ, the new man, as head of the family.

It's like two warring force fields. By faith in Christ we , while in struggle we become freer of the dispensation of the flesh. The new dispensation of the Spirit makes one to look at Christ and other people differently.

In the force field of the Spirit one lives from the reconciliation that Christ brought. The Old Testament already records the longing for a time of God's shalom - the comprehensive harmony between God and people, between people mutually and between people and nature. This reconciliation is already present but still incomplete. According to 2 Peter 3:13, we expect this new heaven and earth. So we work along to achieve it.

Last night's meditation dealt with reconciliation. Reconciliation is actually realised through a process of death and resurrection. Our death is part of Christ's death, and our resurrection also of his resurrection. That is why the Christian life is one of self-denial – the undressing of old customs and to dress oneself with Christ. I die of old standards, but arise in a new life with Christ:

- * A life in which the Spirit, let me see God's image in others;
- * A life in which the Spirit takes me along to promote my neighbor's interests (HC 111);
- * A Life in the Spirit's power field.

Prayer

Spirit of Christ make us all excited about your new, reconciled community. Work in each of us the desire to behold and treat others as you claim from us. Give in myself respect for other's culture and circumstances. And touch my heart when I am responsible for a fellow human's pay slip. Amen

7. “Confess and embody real reconciliation everywhere”

Victor Pillay

Scripture Reading: Acts 1:8; Colossians 3:1-4

Confessions

* HC - Q&A 43

What further advantage do we receive from Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross?

Through Christ's death our old selves are crucified, put to death, and buried with him, so that the evil desires of the flesh may no longer rule us, but that instead we may dedicate ourselves as an offering of gratitude to him.

* Belgica art 20

We believe that God, who is perfectly merciful and just, sent His Son to assume that nature in which the disobedience was committed, to make satisfaction in the same, ... and to bear the punishment of sin by His most bitter passion and death God therefore manifested His Justice against His Son when He laid our iniquities upon Him,... giving His Son unto death for us, and raising Him for our justification, that through Him we might obtain immortality and life eternal.

* Belhar art 2

We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ;... 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;...

Meditation

Colossians 3 emphasises both our human identity and conduct. Our identity determines the nature of our conduct. The interplay of identity and conduct in the first 6 verses is based on the believer's position in Christ. This state of one's position will certainly help to reflect on Colossians 3 with our focus today on “*Confessing and Embodying Real Reconciliation Everywhere*”.

Our Christian position in Christ will determine how we respond to our context, the people, the church, the ministry and God's Kingdom at large. In all of this there is an important spiritual dimension. In the season of Pentecost the focal point is on the work of God's Holy Spirit in and through us to be the witnesses God wants us to be (Acts 1:8). In Col 3:1-4 Paul emphasises some very important aspects.

We have risen with Christ (3:1a)...

Colossians 3:1 exhorts us: “if we have risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is”. Through Christ's resurrection our lives are raised with Him. Therefore our spiritual position is identified with His spiritual location. And this creates in us a new spiritual potential. Not only is Christ the risen Lord, but we were raised with Him. Therefore we walk in this newness of life. The pattern, life and living, the witness, the ministry, our relationships and interaction with people in and outside of the Christian Church is now taken to this new location. Thus, this new place, location demands a new style of behaviour from us. If God's Holy Spirit of Pentecost is operative in our lives, both Christians and the Church of Christ should act accordingly. The Spirit and God's Word compel us to confess and embody real reconciliation everywhere.

We need to understand that the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives brings about practical application. The Spirit's work fundamentally determines our honesty and integrity in terms of what and how we confess. Both our world and the church needs an exalted form of confessing, one that is God driven and Spirit directed. There is so much we have to deal and cope with in the pain and suffering of people in and outside the church. Pentecost will bring that most meaningful response to the needs of

people if we really get to understand clearly that our spiritual position is identified with the Lord's spiritual location.

Let us look deeper into this wonderful revelation.

2. *We are seated with Christ (Col 3:1b, 2)*

Paul teaches that Jesus Christ is now seated at the right hand of God in a finished redemption. This is a position of *completeness*. All has been attended to. The comparison of this complete position is described in Hebrews 10:11-14. When the Old Testament high priest made the offerings on the cover of the ark there was no throne for him to sit on. But, when our Lord Jesus made His complete offering upon the altar of sacrifice, He went to sit on the right hand of God the Father. The Holy Spirit must help us to understand and respond faithfully to the completed work of Christ.

The reality and significance of this complete work of Christ is our point of orientation. In this light my and your prayer should be: *"Oh! Lord, help me to live from the real reconciliation that you worked. Lord, as you completed the reconciliation between humanity and God, may this pass on to me in my reconciling with you and all those around me. This, Oh Lord must help me to embody true reconciliation."*

God's Holy Spirit, supports and empowers us to live real reconciliation so that we may be witnesses in the true sense of this word. This means that we will confess our wrongs to each other and will embody a Godly and Spiritual reconciliation with God and with each other, in such a way that the world can observe and believe.

3. *We are dead with Christ (Col 3:3a)*

This is our real position. We are dead with Christ. We can explain it in the following way. We actually die twice. On the one hand we die in the crucifixion of Christ, and on the other hand in the death of self-crucifixion. Christ's death is to justify us before the Father, and the death of our sanctification is a daily process of the dying of our sinful nature.

This challenges our witness today. We are brought to understand the justification price paid by Christ for us was to be and to become completely free. And we are now challenged to daily carry the cross of sanctification in our lives. In dying to our natures and to "put to death what is earthly in us namely: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desires, covetousness which is idolatry, anger, wrath, malice, slander and foul talk, lying – as we did before but no longer do – since we had put off the old nature with its practices (4:5-9) – we can now live reconciliation with God and one another as people clothed in the new nature, renewed in the knowledge of our (re)creator (Christ), together with all other people – because Christ is all, and in all (4:10-11). In what better way can we be witnesses of the *gospel*, *good news* message of salvation in Christ than to in this way live out our confession and the Christ initiated reconciliation?

4. *We appear with Christ (Col 3:4)*

This is the present and future of our position. Having understood and experienced the fundamental nature of our justification, we can live reconciliation now and everywhere, and we can look forward to our future position – with Him in glory. In this process, the Holy Spirit of Pentecost empowers and equips us to be trustworthy witnesses to His Gospel message.

May we be true to Christ's calling! Let us remind each other that we who had been justified and reconciled by our Lord have the joyous promise and future prospect of appearing with Him in glory! Let us be genuine in our confessing of Christ's Lordship everywhere, in all situations and relations, and practically embrace and embody the reconciliation that He worked for and among us.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for your work of reconciliation through the cross. Help me with all my sisters and brothers to take our reconciliation with you serious. Help us all to live out the reconciliation that you worked among us as your brothers and sisters. Make us the example of your gospel for all else to see, to experience and to desire. Amen

8. Our Lord cares

Gustav Claassen

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:46-56

Confessions

* Belgica art 1

We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God -- eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and the overflowing source of all good.

* Belgica art 13

We believe that this good God, after he created all things, did not abandon them to chance or fortune but leads and governs them according to his holy will, in such a way that nothing happens in this world without his orderly arrangement.

* HC - Q&A 125

What does the fourth request mean? Give us today our daily bread means, do take care of all our physical needs so that we come to know that you are the only source of everything good and that neither our work and worry nor your gifts can do us any good without your blessing. And so help us to give up our trust in creatures and to put trust in you alone.

* Belhar art 3

We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoners and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the strangers, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; ...

Meditation

The gospel of justice makes her to sing...

Luke is referred to as "the gospel of the poor". Luke emphasizes the contrast between rich and poor. He writes to a society of mixed classes. The first readers of the Gospel were from the affluent middle class, while Jesus' followers came from the lower classes of society. In his gospel, Luke shows that Jesus' coming has radical implications for poor and rich! In this regard, our text is an introduction to the whole gospel. An appropriate theme for our Scripture text is thus: "God has compassion for the fate of the poor".

In church tradition Luke 1:46-56 is known as the Magnificat or the praise of Mary. Magnificat is the word with which the Latin translation of the passage begins: *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, "My soul magnifies the Lord." The Magnificat as an introduction is a beautiful praise song at the beginning of this description of the gospel.

There are wonderful moments in this song. Mary praises the Lord for what he did to her. That God is concerned with her as one of the "little ones" (poor) in the society, motivates and encourages her to sing God's praise. She experienced God as the compassionate God who cares. In verse 48 Mary refers to herself as part of the literally poor (Greek, tapeinoi). Humiliation Mary's humble state indicates her physical condition of poverty, simplicity and vanity. Luke does not spiritualize the word "poor".

In the second part Mary sings about the transformation that Jesus will bring about and that will spread further. Rulers will be torn down from their thrones by God and the poor shall be exalted (vv. 51-53).

Rich will be stripped (verse 53) and the poor will be cared for. God's Son will reverse the entire social order. Her praise moves from the individual to the socio-political arena, while the object of God's mercy moves from Mary to "his servant Israel", to the "seed of Abraham" (verses 54-55), and to all who glorify Him (verse 50). In this way the little ones to whom justice is done, form part of a chain of justice that spread over the earth.

God brings the characteristics of heaven to earth...

When God looks at the little ones and cares for them, he sees a world filled with injustice. The proud, the rulers and the rich refer to those who in status as well as in attitude are the opposite of the poor. The proud is hostile to God and therefore also hostile to people. God is praised because God is the One who, through his great deeds, reverse worldly relations of rich versus poor, needy versus self-sufficiency and the humiliated versus the powerful. Mary does not sing because Jesus will send people to heaven. She sings because God will show something of heaven here and will turn the socio-political world to align with His righteousness.

Generations of believers experience this mercy of God. For so is God! Essentially God is compassion. You only really understand something of the gospel when you understand something of God's compassionate love. A.H. van Ruler writes somewhere: "There is one thing of infinite consolation: that somewhere there really is a Heart and that the universe therefore is not cold and dumb." In God's redemptive work is not only about individual renewal, but also about social change that is brought about. When God ushers in God's dominion, thrones and moneybags are shaken.

This is not unqualified about people who have power or wealth, but about those who assert themselves at the expense of the poor and the little ones. These are people who abuse God's gifts for personal gain. It is also not about a special category of salvation for the poor. At this point the gospel is literally brought to earth. It's about bread, clothing, food and work.

Our challenge is to be like God...

With this text from Luke, we cannot just stare at the sky. We need to see that what is on hand is poverty, unemployment and to combat social injustice.

In South Africa there are places where 41% of the children are only 90% of their notional length and only 80% of their expected body weight, as a result of malnutrition. There are communities where 13.5% of children die before their fifth birthday. Apart from the statistics on AIDS, tuberculosis still represents 61% of notifiable diseases. Many more bad statistics emphasize the incredible gap between rich and poor and its consequences in our society.

There were times that people were thought to be heretical if they had pointed to the social implications of Jesus' message. Texts like Luke and others were conveniently spiritualized. For a long time this has numbed the church for the socio-political implications of the gospel. We have eagerly preached the gospel of the cross but avoided the gospel of bread.

In this regard, the words of David Bosch is a clarion call: "When someone's personal piety stands between him and his fellow human, when his religious devotion closes him for his neighbour, when the workings of the Holy Spirit is limited to the site of the personal ethics, when Christianity is only defined in terms of sacred acts on set times, when Bible pronouncements that has to do with people's concrete necessities, are spiritualized, when salvation to man's personal relationship to God is limited, when a person minus all his or her relations is saved when structural and institutionalized sin to be exposed, our with an unbiblical bias and a false Christianity."

Our challenge is to think and act in these matters as God does...

Prayer

Father, forgive those who hate, alienation and removal brings between peoples, races and social classes.

Father, forgive the greed of people and nations that drives them to just want to take for themselves what belongs to others.

Father, forgive the greed which exploits workers and deplete the earth's resources without conscience.

Father, forgive our indifference to the fate of the unemployed, homeless and refugees.

Father, forgive the pride in our hearts that makes us trust ourselves, and forget You. Amen.

(Prayer on the altar of New Coventry Cathedral Center of Atonement).

9. Our Lord restores justice

Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel

Scripture Reading: Luke 6:20-26

Confessions

* Belgica art 22

Our justification by faith: We believe that for us to acquire the true knowledge of this great mystery the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a true faith that embraces Jesus Christ, with all his merits, and makes him its own, and no longer looks for anything apart from him.

...Jesus Christ is our righteousness in making available to us all his merits and all the holy works he has done for us and in our place...

* HC - Q&A 122

What is the first petition? Hallowed be your name means, Help us to really know you, to bless, worship, and praise you for all your works and for all that shines forth from them: your almighty power, wisdom, kindness, justice, mercy, and truth. And it means, Help us to direct all our living-- what we think, say, and do-- so that your name will never be blasphemed because of us but always honoured and praised.

* HC - Q&A 123

What is the second petition? Your kingdom come means, Rule us by your Word and Spirit in such a way that more and more we submit to you. Keep your church strong, and add to it. Destroy the devil's work; destroy every force which revolts against you and every conspiracy against your Word. Do this until your kingdom is so complete and perfect that in it you are all in all.

* Belhar art 3

We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; that God frees the prisoners and restores sight to the blind; that God supports the downtrodden, protects the strangers, 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 people of God to do what is good and to seek the right; ...the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged;...

Meditation

The heavenly servant brings justice to the nations ...

The good news is that God sent Christ to proclaim salvation to his church and creation proclaims to make his blessings known to us.

Our confessions emphasise that through this, God wants to bring the good for people and justice and true peace amongst people (Belgica, HC, Belhar). They emphasise that in Jesus God works out our righteousness and that goodness, justice, mercy and truth shines in his empire, where He will be everything in everybody (HC). They also emphasise that God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged (Belhar).

The scripture that we together reflect on comes from Luke's version of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This also helps us to bring Christ's teachings to ourselves and to relate it to our context.

It is striking that in Luke 6 blessings are contrasted with misery. For example, Jesus says: "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God belongs to you." (6:20); "But woe awaits you who are rich because you already got your share of enjoying life" (6:24). Somewhere else Luke emphasizes precisely that it was Jesus' mission to preach the Good News to the poor (4:18, referring to Isaiah 6). The English word for "blessed" in Luke 6 is the Greek *makarios*. It was understood to mean the happy, carefree state of the gods and this generally included the happiness of the rich.

In the series of contradictions in Luke 6 Jesus shows his special compassionate love and blessing for the poor, the destitute, the hungry and for those who hurt. Like other prophets before him (cf. Isaiah 3:10-11, Ecclesiastes 10:16-17) He also challenges the pre-conceptions of his day regarding wealth and poverty and also people's thinking about blessings and woes.

Our Scripture (Luke 6:20-26) contains four pairs of pronouncements by Jesus:

The first pair (verses 20 and 24) contrasts the rich and the poor.

The second pair (verse 21a and 25b) contrasts the hungry and those with full stomachs.

The third pair (verses 21b and 25b) contrasts those who mourn with those who laugh.

The fourth pair (verses 22-23 and verse 26) contrasts those who are being hated because of Jesus and those who are well spoken of.

Let's look a little closer to our Lord Jesus' the teaching to his disciples.

Prevailing perspectives had been turned on their heads ...

Jesus used the sharp contrasts to make an important point to them. He contrasted the blessing of the poor against the hopeless future of the rich. The complacency of the rich He compared with the dependence of the poor. The poor are forced to put their trust in God, because they have no wealth to trust in. The poor also liked to listen to Jesus' words and followed him, but the rich religious institutions of the day rejected his teachings. The former, who were on the short end of the stick in society he called children of the Kingdom. During his ministry on earth, Jesus himself identified with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, those without houses, the prisoners, the sick.

In the second contrast, Jesus spoke of actual hunger a person can feel in your own body. And He contrasted this hunger and poverty with a full stomach where there is no sharing with the hungry, and with financial prosperity that people seek and develop at the expense of others. The people to whom Jesus had spoken knew what hunger and poverty were. They were his disciples who left everything to follow Him.

Jesus thirdly contrasted weeping with laughing. This is not just about the usual sadness that each of us experience in the course of life. In both the Old and New Testament there are the righteous people who mourns the injustices they see around them. God ordered the prophet Ezekiel: "Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and make a sign on the foreheads of all those who sigh and moan about all the horrible things which happen in the city" (Ezekiel 9:4). Those who share God's broken heart for this world will laugh in the future and will share in God's "wedding feast for the Lamb (Revelation 19:6-9).

Live and let live, with God's heart ...

In the fourth contrast Jesus did put the speaking well of people against the hating of each other. This judgment differs markedly from the first three. In the fourth pair the contrast is not between the now and the one day to come, but it focused in the present on the attitude and mindset of love or hatred between people. Jesus referred to the fate of the prophets who were hated by their opponents, because they announced the will of God, in contrast to life in their day. Jesus' followers can expect the same resistance as his preaching on justice brought on him.

The great danger is people may talk well about you and me because we do not focus on God's justice and therefore let them get away with injustice.

The lesson from these contradictions for us all is that the value system that determines the attitudes and actions in God's kingdom, is based on love and faithfulness to God and not on the popular opinions, attitudes, lifestyles and, injustice within our society.

The Belhar Confession helps us to correctly focus our responsibility for those who suffer injustice. The confession says "We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this... the church, belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged."

Prayer

Lord, teach us to follow in your footsteps and to make your justice our own worldview and lifestyle. Teach us how to bring the good news of peace to the oppressed and how to give bread to the hungry. Give us grace to assist our neighbours in any form of suffering and need, like you would do it yourself. Amen

10. “Confess and embody compassionate justice”

Godfrey Betha

Scripture Reading: James 1:19-27

Confessions

* Belgica art 29

As for those who can belong to the church, we can recognize them by the distinguishing marks of Christians: namely by faith, and by their fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness, once they have received the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ. They love the true God and their neighbors, without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and its works.

* HC - Q&A 86

Why then must we still do good?

...we do good ..., so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us, and so that he may be praised through us. And we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbours may be won over to Christ.

* Belhar art 3

We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; ...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.

Meditation

The book of James may well be the earliest of the New Testament letters – probably written in the year A.D. 48. James, the brother of Jesus became one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. His letter addresses Christians everywhere, to teach them the practice of Christianity. James is saying that we have to be willing to listen to what God says to us and then modify our behaviour to conform our will to God’s will. In order to do that, we have to do three things: *Hear* God’s Word; *Accept* God’s Word; and then *do* God’s Word.

Hear The Word.

When James wrote verse 19: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry”, he wasn’t just talking about our willingness to speak and not listen to others. He was talking about our willingness to speak and not listen to God. You can’t miss it from the context (read verse 19-21). The only “Word planted in you, which can save you” is the Word of God. We need to be more interested in hearing what God has to say to us than telling Him what we think! We need to hear the Word of God. It seems that people are much more interested in talking to God than listening to Him.

However it’s not enough just to hear the Word. You have to move beyond hearing, claims James.

Accept The Word...

The more we allow sin to control our lives, the less we are willing to expose ourselves to God’s Word because we don’t want to be chastened. We don’t want to be convicted. It’s not pleasant to be confronted with the fact that we are not living up to our potential, so we avoid the subject all together and find ways to miss worship, to bypass Bible reading and to be busy when Bible study is going on. It is by an act of the will that we choose not to accept the Word of God into our life.

It is also by an act of the will that we position ourselves to accept God’s Word into our life (verse 21).

James says we must get rid of some things before God's Word will grow and flourish in our hearts. We have to rid ourselves of "moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent."

Now James dives into the conclusion of his discussion by urging us to do more than just hear God's Word or simply accepting God's Word. He says: "Just Do It!"

Do the Word...

James, an elder in the church in Jerusalem, no doubt sees people coming to worship who hear the Word, and even accept the Word, but continue to live the way they want. He says in verse 22: "Don't deceive yourselves; there is no value in just listening to the Word. Don't think there is some value in simply accepting the Word as true. You must act upon it." We are motivated to change by looking into the mirror of God's Word (read verses 23-25).

Your reflection in the mirror challenges you to think about who you are. James says that kind of introspection should come when you look in God's Word. However, we don't go beyond the surface because we don't want to see the imperfection. But an amazing thing happens when we look intently into the mirror of God's Word, hear it, accept it, and choose to do the Word. A transformation occurs. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul wrote: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

What do you see in the mirror today?

In verses 26-27 James points out what life looks like when God transforms you. When you allow God's Word to affect you, it will cause you to seek purity in your own life and it will drive you to find ways to help others, especially those who can't help themselves.

The more like God you become, the less self-absorbed you will be. The more you listen to Him, the more you will be captivated by God and be sensitive for the needs of others. When you love others by serving them in times of need, something of God's image becomes transparent in your life.

Perspective from our past...

The Belhar Confession revives our old memories lest we forget them. These memories and scars we carry in our souls keep reminding some of us that we were "oppressed" and warns us not to oppress others. All of us are also reminded in the Belhar Confession never to use our memories to retaliate, or to ground our grudges or use them to promote our selfish agendas and subjugate the aspirations of others. We are constantly reminded to be vigilant against any ideology that feeds on racial prejudices. We are called to *see in others* the image of the liberating God who seeks to liberate others through us.

Both the Belgica (49) and Belhar remind us that God's kingdom is founded on the conviction that the God, in whom we trust, is not indifferent to human history. He is immediately and imminently interested and is able, through His grace, wisdom and power, to intervene and transform our world. He has demonstrated this through Christ's incarnation.

The Belhar Confession keeps reminding us to live attentively, intelligently, reasonably, responsibly - under the dictates of the reign of God and guard against falling into the distortion and deformation of other people. It calls us to be *united* in order to unite with others. Belhar energizes us to pray to the Lord of Hosts to purge all disunity, strives and tensions that may arise among ourselves.

It takes us along the path of rethinking ways of being a Christian Church by constantly taking up a place before the Cross of Jesus of Nazareth. It is at the Cross where we grasp the enormity of the human suffering and oppression of the poor, exploited and marginalized of our society. We are constantly reminded to confess and repent of our ethnicity, sexism, cultural superiority, and marginalization of others. We are called upon to beg forgiveness from those whom we have offended and commit ourselves to emancipate those who are oppressed and denied access to the wealth of our

country regardless of who does that. We are cautioned never to embrace tendencies that lead to utopia or romantic schemes. We are reminded to recognize ourselves and one another in our past, our hopes and to grapple with our collective efforts and struggle creatively for a common future which can be celebrated together.

Prayer

Lord, your Word and Holy Spirit compel us to hear, accept and do what you command us regarding justice in church and society. We pray that you will make us useful and truly obedient to be your transformation agents of your gospel in church and society, today. Amen

11. We confess courageously in the footsteps of Jesus our leader and example

Pentecost Feast: Jesus is Lord

Nelis J van Rensburg

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 1 Peter 3:15-18 (15)

Confessions

* HC - Q&A 1

What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

* Belhar (Conclusion)

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 honour and the glory forever and ever.

Meditation

Jesus, in the center of Pentecost...

Jesus is Lord! This is what the oldest confession of the church sounds like. He, Jesus reigns over all. On the day of Pentecost, Peter ended his sermon as follows: "All Israel must now certainly know: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

Confessions about Jesus are eminent Pentecostal events. The New Testament tells us that the early church sang this confession about Jesus everywhere: "In the name of Jesus everyone in heaven and on earth and under the earth, the knee shall bow and every tongue will confess: Jesus Christ is Lord!" (Philippians 2:10,11). "He is the head of the body, the church. He is the origin. He is the First, the One who rose from the dead, so that He may have the first place in the universe (Col. 1:18). "Jesus Christ is Lord," sings the church at Pentecost.

These words were the words for which the earliest followers of this Lord had to die at the stake. When the Emperor demanded to be called lord, the only one, they called Jesus the Lord. This is the confession repeatedly echoed in the church through the ages. "Jesus is Lord!" When the Confessio Belgica in the night of 2 November 1561 was thrown over the gate of the castle at Tournai, with an accompanying letter, these words were printed on the cover: "Jesus is Lord!" And in 1986, in the hour of crisis, when our country under the rule of a divisive ideology was losing hope, the church at Belhar confessed: "Jesus is Lord." Yes, this confession of our time concludes: "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 may be the consequence. Jesus is Lord... Alongside these concluding words of this confession there are Scripture texts like 1 Pet 3:15. "In your hearts, only have reverence for Christ the Lord."

In self-denial and perseverance we follow Christ...

The confession that Jesus is the Lord, announces both a factual reality and calls us to follow the Lord. John Calvin discusses the Christian life under the heading, "following Christ," and the first step he describes is self-denial. If you confess that He is Lord, you deny your own dominion over everything in your life. Then you confess that you are willing to follow him, even though there is no apparent

advantage for you to do so, even if you have to pay a price. This gospel sounds unwelcome in our ears, this gospel of the Lord that reigns but reveals his glory in his own self-sacrifice on the cross. This is where it gets difficult to follow him. To believe that self-sacrifice leads to elevation even when there is no sign of possible benefit. Sören Kierkegaard, in his famous *Fear and Trembling*, movingly writes about Abraham who had to sacrifice Isaac. He compares Abraham with Argamemnon who sacrificed his daughter to Zeus for the sake of victory over the enemy. However, Abraham's struggle is not just about the pain of a father who must sacrifice his son. It's also about the plight of a contested faith that cannot see any good coming from what it has to do. It's the plight of a believer who wants to evade the seemingly mindless obedience to God.

The obedience of the Christians to whom the letter of 1 Peter was written became an irritation to the Gentiles in Asia Minor. They testified with their life and behaviour about God's infinite love and respect for all people. For this they were persecuted and despised. Therefore 1 Peter encourages them to persevere in their pursuit of Jesus - correct behaviour towards servants and the state, faithfulness to each other in marriage, protest against injustice, selfless love, sharing with others. This is the living testimony for which they undoubtedly will suffer for Christ's sake.

Also 1 Peter falls back on the songs from the early church with the sounds and tones of the song of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53: "He found a grave with the wicked; he was with sinners in his death, though he committed no crime and though he never was false. It was the will of the Lord to bruise him, to let him suffer this pain." This is the DNA of our faith, that Jesus, the crucified and risen one is Lord, that we belong to Him who preserves us and that we live for him (HC 1) and follow him in his suffering, just because He is God.

Obedient to Him, even if it may cost us...

This confession that Jesus is the Lord, has radical implications for our lives today, in South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and everywhere else. It cries out against those that may abuse their power of knowledge or money or positions. It pleads with people who do not fulfil their obligations to adhere to the sick and the poor and the suffering. It makes an appeal to people who utilize their abundance only for personal gain. This is a clear warning for people who observed wrongs but walk past them. Yes, this is the confession and the basic attitude that the Holy Spirit gives believers over against those who live a life of complacency. This does not answer violence with counter-violence, power claims with talks about numbers, humiliation with disrespect or threats with swearing.

No, it testifies that we, with the fine distinction that the Holy Spirit works in us, serve Jesus. He is the Lord. We will daily seek his will. We will pursue justice for all people. We will live conciliatory lives. We will not differentiate between people. We will love one another and stick together and serve each other, even though it costs us much more than we budgeted for. With our churches and our homes and our relationships and with our respect for all people we will witness about this alternative life, in every place and at every opportunity, until every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Prayer

Lord, we confess, though it may be with stammering and trembling, you are our only Lord! Teach us how to faithfully live this confession in our broken world, so that your will be done, your name be hallowed and your kingdom come. Amen.