

**United We Stand**  
**Ephesians 1: 3-14**  
**Jennie Clark**

Ephesians is a triumphant letter of hope written to assure the church of Jesus Christ of who we are and whose we are. It is a rallying call to a community of Jesus' followers to live faithfully and stand together in Christ. It is a powerful reminder of our unity in Christ, despite of our human differences.

In his opening words to the Ephesians, Paul offers a full-throated song of praise for God's amazing grace and love embodied in Jesus Christ. With abundant superlatives he casts a cosmic vision of God's plan in Christ, which in the fullness of time, gathers up divided people and systems of division into the unity of God's purpose and will. (v 10) This is a glorious vision of the *unity, reconciliation* and *restoration* God intends for the church and the world through the blood of Jesus and the forgiveness of our sin.

Our hearts swell as we bask in this glorious vision of being gathered up into Christ in the fullness of time. But, just as a dream fades away when we awaken to the morn, so Paul's cosmic vision of our unity seems to vanish as we reflect on the discouraging reality of our time.

We are a divided human family. Today we are fiercely divided by politics, race, ethnicity, religion, and enmity. As a widening polarization takes root in our nation, Paul's vision for unity seems difficult to imagine, yet alone to believe is attainable.

But before dismissing Paul's vision as unrealistically optimistic, let us remember that the world he lives in is equally polarized. Many of Paul's letters are written to churches facing conflict and division. Like us, they are wrestling with real tensions and prejudices: among Jews, Greek and Roman members, among free and enslaved members.

Yet, despite those very real divisions, Paul knows that his life belongs to Christ and is transformed by the gospel. Paul reminds the church that though our disagreements, and divisions seem intractable, we too are caught up in the good news of God's grace and love that transforms us as *united we stand* in Jesus Christ.

Christian author, Brian McLaren, describes this transformation saying:

*Jesus forms a movement of people who trust him and believe his message. They believe that they don't have to wait for this to happen, but rather that they can begin living in a new and better way now, a way of life Jesus conveys by the pregnant phrase kingdom of God.*

*Life for them now is about an interactive relationship—reconciled to God, reconciled to one another—and so they see their entire lives as an opportunity to make the beautiful music of*

*God's kingdom so that more and more people are drawn into it, and so that the world is changed by their growing influence.*<sup>1</sup>

Much of today's worship liturgy comes from the Confession of Belhar, born in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

In 1652 a Dutch settlement, including a Dutch Reformed Church, was planted at the southern tip of Africa. The settlement and church were shaped by a mindset and theology of white supremacy. By 1875 the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church forbade church members of mixed race or African descent, from coming with white members to the Lord's table. This led to the racial division of the church. A far cry from Paul's vision for our unity in Christ.

By 1982, dehumanizing policies of apartheid oppression and violence compelled leaders in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (mixed race), to come to the conclusion that "*the very heart of the gospel is so threatened, as to be at stake*. They proclaim: "*We make this confession... as a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand.*" Thus from the crucible of apartheid, the Confession of Belhar is drafted in defense of Christ's gospel, with its themes of *unity, reconciliation* and *justice* that echo Paul's message in Ephesians.<sup>2</sup>

The confession begins:

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

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

**We believe**

- that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another.
- 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.
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**We believe**

- that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged:
- that God calls the church to follow God in this.
- that the church, as the possession of God, must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged."

In 2016, the 222<sup>nd</sup> PC(USA) General Assembly overwhelmingly voted to add the Confession of Belhar to our Book of Confessions. The Special Committee that recommended Belhar to the GA, put their rationale for its adoption in writing saying:

*“The PC(USA) is again facing a critical time in its history. We are rent apart by division and schism, we have yet to directly confront and confess the racism that has been a significant force in our own history, and we have shown a failure of resolve to make courageous stands for justice. We believe that the confession of Belhar, a profound statement on unity, reconciliation and justice in the church, comes to us as a word from God for this particular time and place for the PC(USA).”<sup>3</sup>*

*“The Lord whom we confess has a purpose and a plan for the cosmos into which we have all been born by God’s providence. We learn from Scripture of “... the mystery of God’s will ... set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to [unite] all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:9-10)”<sup>4</sup>*

*“(Therefore) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) confesses its commitment to God and to the biblical principles of unity, justice, and reconciliation because in times like these in which we live, we need to remind ourselves and others of our discipleship to Christ and to follow God’s mission in the world.”<sup>5</sup>*

This weekend, in Charlottesville, VA., a statue of Robert E. Lee was finally taken down, as was a nearby statue of Stonewall Jackson. Zyahna Bryant, who started a petition in 2016 to remove Lee’s statue commented to a reporter following the statue’s removal saying: *“It feels good. It’s been a long time coming. But the statue coming down is the tip of the iceberg. There are larger systems that need to be dismantled.”<sup>6</sup>*

If you look on Westminster’s website, you will see that we accepted the PC(USA) invitation to become a Matthew 25 church. Matthew 25:31-46 calls us to become a movement of people, who take Jesus and take his message to heart.

United with other Presbyterians for a common and holy purpose:

We commit to the work of dismantling structural racism: breaking down systems, practices and thinking underlying discrimination, prejudice and oppression of people of color.

We commit to the work of eradicating systemic poverty. Putting our faith into action we: strive to change laws, policies and structures that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor.

Committed to this holy work, we are reminded of the hard work in front of us by what we see

- “in the faces of First Nation peoples still living in poverty on reservations;
- in young African American men who are incarcerated disproportionately to their percentage of the population;

- in the “legal limbo” status of immigrants, and in native born Latinos who are subject to question in virtually every quarter of the nation;”<sup>7</sup>
- in aggressive policing that puts people of color at risk in the public square;
- in the creation of new voting restrictions specifically targeted to disenfranchise communities of color;
- in increasing incidents of violence against Asian Americans

We have a steep hill to climb in dismantling unjust systems, for we must first recognize and own the white church’s complicity in creating and sustaining these systems.

In, *How to Fight Racism*, Jemar Tisby invites the white church to a gospel movement. He invites us to link arms with sisters and brothers of color in practicing courageous Christianity saying: “*Racial justice comes from the struggle of a small but committed group of people who choose courageously to stand against racism rather than compromise with it. Courageous Christianity dares to love through action and to risk everything for the sake of justice.*”<sup>8</sup>

Paul reminds the church that we are a new community, caught up in the gospel of Jesus Christ. God has blessed us in Christ and chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. (Ephesians 1:3-4)

In Christ we receive our unity and purpose. We are called to stand where God stands with the destitute, the oppressed, and the wronged. And as we stand where God stands, so God stands with us, reconciling us to one another, as “*we live from love, not fear. With openness, not prejudice. For service, not supremacy. Through redemption, not resentment.*”<sup>9</sup>

Confessing . . .

“Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honor and the glory for ever and ever.”<sup>10</sup>

1. Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* (Thomas Nelson: 2006), 83
2. Accompanying Letter to the confession of Belhar , p. 399, *The Book of Confessions Study Edition Revised*, Westminster John Knox Pres.
3. Accompanying Letter to the confession of Belhar , p. 401, *The Book of Confessions Study Edition Revised*, Westminster John Knox Pres.
4. 4Accompanying Letter to the confession of Belhar , p. 402, *The Book of Confessions Study Edition Revised*, Westminster John Knox Pres.

5. Accompanying Letter to the confession of Belhar , p. 408, The Book of Confessions Study Edition Revised, Westminster John Knox Pres
6. The New York Times, July 9, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/09/us/charlottesville-confederate-monuments-lee.html>
7. Accompanying Letter to the confession of Belhar , p. 408, The Book of Confessions Study Edition Revised, Westminster John Knox Pres
8. Jemar Tisby, How to Fight Racism, p. 10. Zondervan Reflective , copyright 2021.
9. Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* (Jericho Books: 2014), 217–218
10. The Confession of Belhar, section 10.9