

A Providential Coincidence

Scripture

Micah 6:6–8; Ephesians 4:1–6

Main Idea

At a time when the need to overcome racism is more urgent than ever, it is providential that the church is focusing on both the Confession of 1967 and the Confession of Belhar, which give us powerful theological tools to work for unity, justice, and reconciliation in our church and society.

Teaching Points

The session invites participants to consider:

1. That while the Confession of 1967 is primarily focused on the world and the Confession of Belhar is focused on the church, both seek a world and a church free of racism and injustice and shaped by a spirit of unity and reconciliation;
2. Circumstances such as divisions and growing diversity in the PC(USA) and rampant injustice and racism in society, which suggest these confessions are meant “for just such a time as this”;
3. How these confessions might work on a personal and spiritual level to shape our faith and witness.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Christ candle and lighter

Newsprint and markers

Bare wall or bulletin board and tape or pushpins to create a “We Believe” graffiti wall

Paper, scissors, old magazines and newspapers, pens, pencils, and/or markers

Leader Prep

Read Section 1 and highlight important points.

For Gather, set the Christ candle (a white pillar candle) on a table in the center of your meeting space. Enlist participants to take turns lighting the candle and reading the opening Scripture.

For Head, familiarize yourself with the introduction to Section 1 and “An Important Anniversary and a New Beginning” (pp. 6–7). Read the Confession of 1967 and the Confession of Belhar (appendices, pp. 73–98), highlighting words and passages that indicate C-67’s focus on the world and Belhar’s focus on the church.

For Heart, familiarize yourself with “For Just Such a Time as This” (pp. 7–9). Post a sheet of newsprint where it is visible to all. Have Bibles available for all participants, and newsprint and markers for the small groups. Think about the first Question for Reflection (p. 11) so you can help others engage with the question if needed.

For Hands, familiarize yourself with “A Personal Postscript” (pp. 9–10). Be prepared to share experiences that have shaped your own faith and to help participants engage with the second Question for Reflection (p. 11) as needed. Write “We Believe” in large letters on a sheet of paper and post it on the bare wall or bulletin board to begin a graffiti wall. Also, post the words “Unity,” “Justice,” and “Reconciliation.” Have available paper, pens, markers, old magazines, and other supplies for participants to use throughout the study to confess their faith in words and images.

For Depart, enlist a participant to read the closing Scripture. Choose a selection from section 11.2 of the Confession of Belhar to read together as an affirmation of the unity expressed in Ephesians 4:1–6.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Invite participants to introduce themselves and to share briefly anything they know or have heard about these two confessions and what they hope to gain from this study.
- Light the Christ candle.
- Read Micah 6:6–8.
- Pray together the Prayer of St. Francis (p. 12). Suggest that participants pray this prayer daily in the coming week, as suggested in the Spiritual Practice (p. 11).

Head

- Note the dates of both confessions. Ask participants who were alive in 1967 and/or 1986: *What significant events do you recall from those years—in the world and in your own life?* Allow a few minutes for sharing some of these memories.
- Review together the context of the two confessions, as described in the Introduction and “An Important Anniversary and a New Beginning” (pp. 6–7). Note the role each confession will play at the 2016 General Assembly of the PC(USA).
- Call attention to the author’s statement: “One confession is primarily focused on the world (C-67). The other is focused on the church (Belhar).” Have participants find the texts of the confessions (pp. 73–98) and spend a few minutes highlighting words and passages that indicate the focus of each. Suggest they pay particular attention to Parts II and III of C-67 and the Accompanying Letter to Belhar. Invite any who wish to share findings with the group.

Heart

- Have participants find Esther 4:14 in their Bibles. Ask a volunteer to read aloud the first paragraph of “For Just Such a Time as This” (p. 7), in which this verse is quoted. Ask: *Knowing what you know about the two confessions, do you agree with the author that they are meant “for just such a time as this”?* Invite participants to list current examples of racism and injustice from their own experience and those mentioned by the author. Write these on a sheet of newsprint.
- Form several small groups. Give them Bibles, newsprint, and markers. Ask each group to choose one of the examples of racism or injustice listed earlier that resonates personally with them or seems particularly urgent. Ask: *What do you find most distressing about this situation? Where are there signs of hope? How does our Christian faith call us to respond?* Have them search the two confessions and their Bibles for passages that could speak to the situation, listing these on newsprint.
- Invite a person from each group to report highlights of their discussion.

Hands

- Ask: *What is similar and what is different in relation to the church and race in the United States and South Africa? What can we learn from each other that will help us put our faith into action?*
- Look at the experiences the author shares in “A Personal Postscript.” Ask: *What experiences in your own lives have shaped your faith, especially in relation to the issues of social justice addressed in these confessions?* Have participants form groups of two or three to share their experiences.
- Call attention to the “We Believe” graffiti wall you have begun, explaining that this will be a way to use words and images to confess their faith. Invite them to add quotes from the confessions, the Bible, and their own discussions that have been meaningful during this session. Suggest that throughout the next five sessions they add expressions of faith related to the themes of unity, justice, and reconciliation.

Depart

- Read Ephesians 4:1–6.
- Say together all or part of the “We believe” affirmations in section 11.2 of the Confession of Belhar.
- Pray a closing prayer, asking God to use the Confession of 1967 and the Confession of Belhar to shape the life and faith of each person in the group.
- Extinguish the Christ candle.