

“Reformed and Always Being Reformed”

Pastor Jess Scholten

FOUNDATIONS of Faith

Fall 2025 Sermon Series

Sunday, October 12, 2025

“Reformed and Always *Being Reformed*” | Romans 12:1-2; Jeremiah 22:3-9 | Pastor Jess Scholten

“The process helped me be more intentional about my neighborhood – to take note.”

“Dwelling in the Word (a specific process for listening to Scripture) gave us language about how God was acting in the world.”

“I got to hear a big story about how God was moving.”

These are just a few of the quotes and discussion from Thursday when the Awaken Dane group got together. We were reflecting on what is sticking with us from when nine of us from Covenant experienced gathering once a month with churches across Madison to share stories over a meal and find ways to more meaningfully connect with our neighbors.

What we realized on a new level is that paying better attention means we’re alert to where God is already at work in the world. Which is kind of the point of Awaken Dane. It’s titled after the story in the first book of the Bible – Genesis – where Jacob has a dream about the angels ascending and descending – Jacob’s Ladder – and God speaks to him promises about his future. Upon waking up, Jacob proclaims: “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” He is filled with wonder about this and proclaims: ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’” (Genesis 28:16)

Jesus echoes this in his teachings, saying again and again – keep alert – keep awake. Why? Because the kingdom of heaven is right here. Right now. Which means that at any moment, in any place, God is already at work. Are we paying attention?

This is our call in the passage from Romans – to keep renewing our minds, our awareness, so that we can discern – figure out, as the CEB says – God’s work and be part of God’s transformation... in our lives, in our neighborhood, in our country, in our world – in God’s world, so deeply loved by God.

Isn’t that the crux of the Christian life? To pray, listen, read Scripture, study, and pay attention together... so that we know the will of God more clearly? I don’t know that we ever get it exactly right – but to have a clearer sense of God’s Spirit, and then to move and act and live in that direction. It’s like on this end is our immature instincts, like a child always trying to get our own way. And on this end here is the growth of faith that produces love and joy and peace. Maturing in faith is when this over here – our protective instincts of the false self which seek after

attention, power, and control – starts to more closely aligning with this over here – God’s will for goodness and grace. Discernment is when our decisions more closely align with God’s actions, bridging this chasm.

That is what is happening in the church throughout the ages as we learn and grow and seek after God. Right now, we’re in this season for Sunday worship and small groups and adult education of being reminded of our Foundations – key Scripture passages as well as taking a closer look at the Book of Confessions – the 12 Creeds and Confessions or teaching tools that have developed over the last two thousand years.

Our focus for today is the Confession of Belhar. Now I have a little quiz for you for today on the Confessions.

Which is the most recently added creed in the *Book of Confessions*? The Confession of Belhar. Good job!

Officially, it was just 2016. And while the Belhar Confession was written in the 80s, being adopted by the PCUSA all happened in the last decade. The 2014 General Assembly, which is our big Presbyterian meeting every two years, voted to adopt it as a confession. In the Presbyterian form of government, it’s not top down or determined church by church. Instead, the GA recommends it, then it goes back to the presbyteries to approve before changes are officially adopted. By June of 2016, 84% of presbyteries approved adding the Confession of Belhar.

Okay, question #2: Which is the only confession adopted from the Global South? The Confession of Belhar. You’re so good at this.

Last question. Which confession directly addresses the injustice and racism of Apartheid without using the word “apartheid”? The Confession of Belhar. YES! You’re onto me!

Apartheid was a systemic segregation that ruled most of the second half of the last century in South Africa. The word itself is an Afrikaans word meaning separateness – apart-hood. And while this was government supported and instilled, it began over three hundred years ago because of the church. Yes, **because of**. Because Christians are not always getting it right, and sometimes we get things very, very, very wrong.

This is the age-old problem of the people of God. It’s why the prophets of the Old Testament try over and over and over again to get the people of God to realign themselves with the Almighty – we don’t always get things right as the people of God. So, God sent us prophets – people who would preach sermons and cast visions and do way weirder things to attract the attention of God’s people on behalf of God... so the people can discern – figure out – a better way to be faithful.

Our second passage this morning is from just such a prophet. Jeremiah speaks to what it is God's word tells the people to do, and what it is that they must reject. Hear the word of the Lord from Jeremiah 22:3-9:

"Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. ⁴For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses—they, their servants, and their people. ⁵But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation. ⁶For thus says the Lord concerning the house of the king of Judah:

You are like Gilead to me,/ like the summit of Lebanon,
but I swear that I will make you a desert,/ uninhabited cities.

⁷I will prepare destroyers against you,/ all with their weapons;
they shall cut down your choicest cedars/ and cast them into the fire.

⁸And many nations will pass by this city, and all of them will say one to another, "Why has the Lord dealt in this way with that great city?" ⁹And they will answer, "Because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord their God and worshiped other gods and served them."

Thanks be to God for this word for us today.

I appreciate how Jeremiah names what is good: (paraphrased) Act with justice, help deliver the oppressed, and do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow... don't shed innocent blood in this place." And if they do not reject injustice, Jeremiah tells the people that to God, their house shall be a desolation, because they will have put other gods before the Lord God.

The Confession of Belhar – a four-page document with almost 40 Scripture references – has five main sections that follow this pattern of looking at Scripture and refuting what goes against it. The five sections include:

- the Triune God as the Source of the Church,
- Unity,
- Reconciliation,
- Justice, and
- the Church's call to act according to faith, regardless of consequences.

Like our Jeremiah passage with the Scriptural reminders of God's purpose and the rejecting of making other gods a bigger priority than the Lord God, the Belhar has a similar format.

In each of the five sections, there are distinct passages of Scripture which shine light on God's actions in the world and our call to live out those actions. That's the version that's available this morning. For instance, section three begins: "We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ."

That same section lists several other ways we as the church are called to reconciliation, and then moves on to declare the rejection of that which does not support Scripture: “Therefore, we reject any doctrine which, in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.”

The people of God – the very people who they themselves were oppressors and the very people who they themselves were living in forced oppression – realized the fruit their brokenness had born. Dutch Reformed people in the 17th Century colonized southern Africa with forced slave labor in order to build up their wealth and power. They did so in the name of Christ, and then eventually decided it was so difficult to all worship in unity at the table of God and face their own ungodly actions that they literally segregated the Lord’s table... until they segregated by churches and denominations and schools until the government itself upheld the practices already brought by Christians into full blown Apartheid.

Apartheid – the division of people by race – dehumanizes everyone. Nobody wins in this. Certainly, God’s beloved Black and Indigenous people who were treated as if they did not belong were dehumanized. But those in power end up broken in other ways – upholding those in leadership through inhumane practices and violence. Racism dehumanizes everyone.

Of course, students and activists took to the streets. In 1960, 69 people were killed by police during a protest of pass laws, which is when – finally - the church – the very people called to love, reconciliation, justice – to care for the oppressed – realized how unjust Apartheid was. Finally, apartheid was named as a heresy.

Dutch Reformed denominations upholding segregation were no longer allowed to participate in the uniting Reformed Church organizations or even the World Council of Churches. But it wasn’t until after 1976, when just outside of Johannesburg where thousands of people, mostly students, showed up to protest, that the real work of reconciliation began, because it took a death toll of over 700 during that protest for the church to move to further action.

Soon after, leaders of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church – the church created by colonists separating out Black people from White – gathered in Belhar, South Africa, near Cape Town, for their annual meeting. At that synod gathering, they appointed a task force to create a statement of God’s work in the church for unity, reconciliation, and justice. And the Confession of Belhar was drafted.

And so, the church confessed their own sin and became a prophetic voice, calling God’s people back to Scripture and rejecting that which does not uphold faithful living.

So, today’s question is: where is the church not living out a faithful witness of Scripture? I have some ideas, but what I know for sure is that where love is, God is, because God is love. And where hatred and segregation and revenge and cruelty are, the powers of evil are certainly at work. And I hope God will lead us to take a stand in those areas and reject that which is ungodly.

I don't know what answers to give you, but I know we must pray and discern and pay attention, because God is at work, and God's call for justice and righteousness and protection of the alien, widows, and orphans still stands. Do we stand with God to keep innocent blood from being shed?

Thanks be to God for the witness of those before us who bear witness to sin, confession, and reconciliation. The Confession of Belhar aided and continues to aid in the restoration and reunification of the church and community in South Africa and gave language to the work of reconciliation, because people were willing to name sin, cast a vision that aligns with Scripture, and reject lifting any person, system, nation, or object above God.

Do we reject idolatries of power and dollar and White Supremacy? Will our discernment lead us to act on behalf of others? May it be so. Amen.