

## Ephesians 2:11-22: **God's Collaborators**

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We stay in Ephesians for our second scripture reading, this time from chapter 2 (NRSV). Listen with me for God's word to us today.

<sup>11</sup>So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands — <sup>12</sup>remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

<sup>14</sup>For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup>He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup>and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup>So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup>for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup>So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup>in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

I had never heard such transformative preaching. My senior year of college one of our theology professors organized a group to go hear South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu preach in downtown Buffalo, NY.<sup>1</sup> On a rainy January day in 1989 we piled into cars and drove to a packed evensong service at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral.

While I had some international friends in high school and college, my understanding of world events and politics remained spotty. I was aware that musicians I admired had recently formed Artists Against Apartheid, using their music to protest brutal state-sponsored segregation in South Africa. I knew that apartheid dissenter Stephen Biko had been tortured to death by security police. I knew Nelson Mandela's name and that he had been imprisoned for life for trying to overthrow the white supremacist government. And we heard calls for economic sanctions to keep pressure on that South African government.

But listening to Anglican Archbishop Tutu preach the truth in love was like projecting the injustice of apartheid on a giant IMAX screen right in front of me. Suddenly that struggle against white supremacy wasn't a vague foreign problem on the other side of the world. It was a human problem. Sitting there in Western New York, we in that service realized apartheid was our problem too.

And on another level it was *my* problem. You might notice that your preacher today has a Dutch last name. My people are rightly known for farming and cakes and canal boats and flowers and Renaissance painters. Our history also includes fierce exploitation to build the European sugar

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<sup>1</sup> "Archbishop Desmond Tutu Visits Buffalo." Archived video report by WIVB-TV, 29 January 1989: <https://digital.buffalolib.org/document/2155>

trade. We colonized foreign lands, stole property, enslaved native peoples, especially Black Africans.

In 1652 Jan van Riebeeck established a Dutch East India Company trading post in Cape Town, on Africa's southern tip. Those Dutch settlers introduced slave labor, an injustice supported for a long time by the Dutch Reformed Church of those colonizers.

Over generations various church folk ministered intermittently to people of color in that part of the world, yet never as children of God equal with the dominant white church. In 1881 that Dutch Reformed Church "solved" this problem by establishing a separate denomination for Black churches, and another new denomination for believers of Indian descent.<sup>2</sup> These new churches could not own their own property and they remained under control of the white church. "This allowed the Dutch Reformed Church to enforce and enfranchise whiteness while preaching...the 'invisible and spiritual' unity of the church."<sup>3</sup>

Apartheid, which means separation, expanded from being church policy to becoming institutionalized by the South African government in 1948. In fact the head of the white supremacist National Party was a Dutch Reformed Church pastor.<sup>4</sup>

Ruthless segregation became the law in South Africa: no land ownership for most Black people, no racially mixed marriages, no free travel or voting rights for people of color, forced migration into racial ghettos, violent retribution for anyone resisting the law. The white Reformed Church promoted apartheid as the will of God, as part of the gospel. One prominent Black South African theologian called that heretical theology "the Christian national propaganda of the day" that everyone heard from pulpits and in schools and in media.<sup>5</sup> The white church and white state formed an unholy alliance of racism, akin to the way most German churches had supported Hitler.

In Buffalo in 1989 Desmond Tutu proclaimed that apartheid in his country was as evil as Nazism. My question then and now remains: how can Dutch Christians like me help make repair for such evil?

Tutu was not the only faith leader calling for justice. By the early 1960s the World Council of Churches had condemned apartheid as against the gospel. Lutherans soon did the same. In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches — that means Presbyterian-type churches like ours — suspended the membership of white South African denominations, saying clearly that preaching Christ's good news requires rejecting apartheid.

Leaders of the Black Reformed church in South Africa had been raising their strong voices, completing by 1986 the new Confession of Belhar, named for the village where it was first commissioned. Confessions arise out of particular struggles over politics and economics and society and theology. Every document in our PC(USA) Book of Confessions represents a biblical renewal of faith when the gospel itself was at stake.

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<sup>2</sup> Kim, Jin S. "History of the Belhar Confession: The Dutch Reformed Church and Apartheid Theology." New Church Rising blog post:

<https://jinskim.wordpress.com/lessons-from-south-africa/the-belhar-confession/history-of-the-belhar-confession/>

<sup>3</sup> "Introduction to The Confession of Belhar." *Book of Confessions: Study Edition, Revised*. Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2017. p. 385.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 384.

<sup>5</sup> Boesak, Allan. Lecture on the Confession of Belhar at Central Presbyterian Church, Denver CO, 3 April 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIM2yjUW1WY>

So from a world of violently enforced racial segregation, the Confession of Belhar spoke anew that the Trinitarian God calls the church to unity, reconciliation, and justice, and that God empowers us to live out that good news. Belhar also directly rejected any theology “which explicitly or implicitly maintains that [racial] descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church.”<sup>6</sup>

The Confession of Belhar makes at least 39 direct references to scripture. By its third sentence, the authors quote both Ephesians 4 about God’s gift of unity, as we heard Linda read, and Ephesians 2 about Christ’s work of reconciliation. With that history of apartheid in mind, hear again these verses:

2:15 [Christ] has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,<sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

In the early church context, “abolishing the law” meant that gentile believers in Jesus would not also be obligated to follow the Jewish law. That still left delicate questions about Israel’s status as God’s original chosen people, and how faithful Jews and faithful Christians might treat each other going forward. What’s clear from this scripture and others, though, is that the coming *together* of Jews and gentiles in Christ’s new covenant is God’s will. And that Jesus’ self-sacrificial death reveals the mysterious good news that God’s nonviolence puts to death human hostility.

There’s also political language in our Ephesians text. The author reminds gentiles that once they were “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise.” Now, through Christ’s universal reconciliation the writer says “you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.” The gentile readers of Ephesians have been transformed from undocumented immigrants into a new reality of being citizens and members with their Jewish siblings, all made one in Christ.

You can see why Christians of color in South Africa took heart from these verses. This scripture proclaims that even rigid political sorting, even racist hostility supported by bad theology — even those divisions can be broken down through Christ the Prince of Peace. Aliens can become full citizens. But such reconciliation is not automatic or forced. Living into Christ’s peace is a choice God constantly offers. The Confession of Belhar affirms that “unity is both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ...a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain.”

Back in 1989 Archbishop Tutu preached the truth about apartheid, and he called a sanctuary of Western New Yorkers to join the struggle because we are all children of God of one family. Tutu invited us into prayerful hope and engagement, saying “God enlists you to be God’s collaborators in bringing about justice.”

Friends, Tutu’s invitation still rings. In our churches here and in our country now, who gets labeled “alien” and “stranger”? Which children of God does our society try to keep separated and powerless? As followers of Jesus in the United States in late 2024, can we confess with Belhar that “separation, enmity, and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered”?

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 397.

This congregation's commitment to Jesus Christ includes building hope and justice for recent immigrants, for gender minorities, for people of all ages and abilities, and of course for racial equity and inclusivity. That hopeful mission is bolstered by biblical promises like in Ephesians. It's made clear in confessions like Belhar. And our mission is sustained by shared stewardship like we're committing to today. Your pledges and gifts make it possible for us all to be God's collaborators in bringing about justice. We're not here to perpetuate ourselves. We're here to show Christ's reconciliation in living color.

When Tutu visited Buffalo a reporter asked him, "Will you see an end to apartheid in your lifetime?" He answered, "I believe so, yes!"<sup>7</sup> A few years later, praise God, he did. It wasn't easy, but the church repented. And the government changed.

Whatever walls of hostility keep us separated from our neighbors, they are not God's will and they are not permanent. So I invite us to rise in body or spirit, and take your bulletin, as we affirm our faith together in these hopeful words from Christ's church in South Africa:

**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.**

**We believe 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.**

**We believe 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.**

**We believe 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;  
that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness;  
pray together; together serve God in this world;  
and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity.<sup>8</sup>**

In the name of God uniting,  
Jesus Christ reconciling,  
and the Holy Spirit binding us in love.

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<sup>7</sup> "Archbishop Desmond Tutu Visits Buffalo." Archived video report by WIVB-TV, 29 January 1989:  
<https://digital.buffalolib.org/document/2155>

<sup>8</sup> Excerpts from Confession of Belhar, section 10.3. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part I: Book of Confessions*. Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2016. pp. 301-2.