

The confession of Belhar and its relevance from a South African perspective

Rev. Dr Llewellyn LM MacMaster, Moderator of the Cape Regional Synod of the
Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA)
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Introduction

The Belhar Confession has been adopted by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa (DRMC) in 1986, and although things have changed quite a lot since then, I believe that the challenges we are facing today accentuate the importance and relevance of the Belhar Confession (hereafter referred to as “the Confession”).

I concur with Prof Modise, moderator of the Uniting Reformed Church (URCSA) that

(a) confession is not written to become an ornament; it is useful not only for the moment but also for the future moments to reflect upon. Confessions exist to become interpretive statements of the meaning of the biblical message for the church and for their time, to form a concrete embodiment of the church's convictions in everyday actions, including, cultural, social, political and economic activities¹

This presentation will deal with the relevance of this Confession today from a South African perspective. I will start off by showing how the relevance of the Confession is linked to the fact that it is grounded in and receives its authority from the Bible. Therefore, while we still accept the Bible as the Word of God, the Confession will not lose its relevance.

I will then proceed to show the relevance of the three main themes of the confession, viz. unity, reconciliation and justice to our current South African context. I will conclude to deal with the call for radical obedience as expressed in the final segment of the Confession.

1. Relevance then and now

From the very onset of the DRMC adopting the Draft Confession in 1982 after declaring a *status confessionis*, the question concerning the need for a confession

¹ *The impact of Belhar Confession in ecclesiological life of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa: Theoretical and practical perspective.* Combined text of the lectures 26.11.2018 and 25.01.2019 in Detmold

was raised. Prof Jaap Durand² dealt with this question and pointed out that in the light of the history of confessions, the Confession was a big risk. He pointed out that the Confession was not just a reaction or response to the policy of Apartheid (the word “apartheid” does not appear anywhere in the Confession), but in essence, it was a response to the ecclesial heresy that justified and defended the oppressive system of Apartheid as a comprehensive ideology and life-view – a “pseudo-gospel” that has grown out of the church. However, the political implications of the Confession are very clear. The heresy or false doctrine underlying Apartheid has led to a political system that has dehumanised and disenfranchised millions of South Africans excluding them from the right to share in the economic fruits of the country.

Durand posits that the polemic nature of the socio-political situation in South Africa, the seriousness of the situation, and the fact that the existing confessions were inadequate as a response to the situation, as well as the non-response of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) to earlier statements and declarations of the DRMC regarding Apartheid, prepared the way for a new confession. Durand states that the true quality of a confession lies in the fact that it will rise above the historical situation and will remain relevant even when the wheels of history have rolled on and new circumstances have been created. A confession can only be an expansion of the church’s primordial confession that Jesus is the Lord. Herein the continued relevance or timeliness of the confession is guaranteed. The three themes of the Confession, viz. unity, reconciliation and justice are very close to the heart of the Gospel.

Johan Botha and Piet Naudé³ have argued that the Belhar Confession is indeed good news for our own time and for the future, and that the primordial confession of the church is circumscribed in our own language, time and context. In terms of its content, the Confession speaks again and again in our changing contexts – it warns against old heresies and call us to renewed confession.

I furthermore concur with Leepo Modise⁴ that the Confession has “its historical and theological roots in the Reformed tradition and has proved itself to be a worthy bearer of the historical continuation of the reformed endeavour to be forever reforming in response to God’s call in a changing world.” The contributions from various authors in the book edited by Mary-Anne Plaatjies-

² Durand, JF, 1984. “n Belydenis – was dit werklik nodig?” in Cloete, GD & Smit DJ, *’n Oomblik van waarheid*, Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 39-48.

³ Botha, J & Naude, P. 1998. *Op pad met Belhar. Goeie nuus vir gister, vandag en more*. Pretoria: JL van Schaik

⁴ Modise, L. 2017. “The Belhar Confession of Faith: A spirituality sense-making confession,” in Plaatjies-van Huffel, M & Modise, L, *Belhar Confession. The Embracing Confession of Faith for Church and Society*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 199-214.

Van Huffel and Leepo Modise strengthen the thesis that the Confession has continued relevance, not only for our South African context, but indeed globally.

The premise of the authors is that good and just societies do not just need constitutions and laws, but also a worshipping church, calling people to, among other things, justice, solidarity and care of the marginalised and suffering.

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It is my sincere belief that the Belhar Confession based on its groundedness in the Bible has remained relevant over the past thirty-seven years since its adoption as a draft confession in 1982. In the words of Plaatjies-vanHuffel, "The Belhar Confession is a living document and a guiding light in the discourse on race, ethnicity, apartheid and the unification of racially segregated churches in both the global South and the global North."⁶

I will now continue to discuss the relevance of the Confession to our South African situation with specific reference to its main themes of unity, reconciliation and justice.

2. The elusive unity of our church: challenges within URCSA (intra-) and between URCSA and the DRC-family (inter-)

The Confession is very clear with its formulation regarding the unity of the church in Article 2:

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 (Eph. 4:1-16).

I will say something about the process of unity between URCSA and the rest of the DRC-family, as well as the challenges regarding our internal unity in URCSA.

2.1 (Re-)unification process: URCSA and the rest of the DRC-family

Despite the severe challenges and many disappointments over the last three decades, URCSA has committed itself to covenanting together with other churches in the DRC-family towards organic unity⁷. At the Esselen Park meeting in 2006 between URCSA and the DRC, a commitment was made that the two churches would reunite "within three years, where the Belhar Confession was no longer a prerequisite for unity, but would function as a fully-fledged confession

⁵ Plaatjies-van Huffel, M & Modise, L. 2017. *Belhar Confession. The Embracing Confession of Faith for Church and Society*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, xiii.

⁶ Plaatjies-Van Huffel, 2017. "Acceptance, adoption, advocacy, reception and protestation: A chronology of the Belhar Confession, *op. cit.*, 24

⁷ Cf. the Esselen Park Declaration (22 June 2006), and the Memorandum of Agreement between URCSA and the DRC (2012)

in the envisaged unified church.”⁸ More than a year later in November 2007 it is reported that the delegates of URCSA, the DRC, Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA) “left the Achterberg II consultation with great optimism. They hoped that church reunification would be realised soon.”⁹

However, it seems like a case of ‘easier said than done’ as we are not much further in this journey. The only real and concrete development ever since, has been the development of a Provisional Church Order (PCO). Under the guidance of Prof Jerry Pillay who was appointed as facilitator by the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) between the churches, URCSA and the rest of the DRC-family embarked on a “new road towards church unity.”¹⁰ A memorandum of agreement and a road map towards unity were adopted and a Season of Human Dignity was started. The intention of the Season was “to promote the basic values of the Confession of Belhar as foundation for our efforts to establish unity between our churches”¹¹ Subsequently, the PCO was written under the guidance of Prof Leo Koffeman of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, which was approved by the general synods of the DRC (2015) and URCSA (2016). The DRCA and the RCA have chosen not to adopt the PCO at this stage, but have given their blessings to URCSA and the DRC to proceed with the unity process as agreed upon.

In adopting the PCO, URCSA and the DRC declare as follows:

“Church unity is a matter of conviction and leadership, of prayer and discernment, of values and the pouring out of yourself way beyond whatever you could imagine. But it is also a matter of true discipleship, obedience, fulfilment and of being authentic to the Gospel... so that the world may believe.”¹²

At least four congregations have decided to unite on the basis of the PCO, viz. URCSA Melodi ya Tshwane and DRC Pretoria (Northern Synod), as well as URCSA Bredasdorp and DRC Bredasdorp (Cape Regional Synod). A few other congregations are also busy exploring the possibility of uniting, while others have started a journey together. In addition, a number of presbyteries have also decided to merge.

There are divided and at times divergent views regarding the PCO. My personal view is that there is no wide-spread enthusiasm for this journey at this stage. Four reasons may be put forward:

⁸ Plaatjies-Van Huffel, op.cit., 71

⁹ Plaatjies-Van Huffel, op. cit., 74

¹⁰ *Pilgrimage to Unity, so that the world may believe, 15*

¹¹ *Pilgrimage to Unity, 15*

¹² *Pilgrimage to Unity, 16*

- there is a general sense of so-called ‘re-racialisation’ and political polarisation taking place in South Africa, coupled with the emergence of so-called identity politics across the globe;¹³
- many congregations are really struggling to survive on a local level, absorbing most of their energy;
- the legacy of apartheid’s spatial and environmental design continues to keep communities segregated along racial and economic lines;
- the frustration experienced in cases of united congregations and presbyteries, because they still operate within two separate churches with different church orders resulting in hampering of decision-making, and restricting real unity between them.

It remains a sad state of affairs that the unification process between the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) and the rest of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) family has been derailed so many times that people on both sides of the spectrum are seriously doubting whether unity will ever be achieved. There is definitely a strong temptation to give up, to accept that it was never meant to be, to continue to use all sorts of arguments to justify our separateness. But the challenges and frustrations are not restricted to the inter-unification (i.e. between URCSA and the rest of the DRC-family), but also with regard to the intra-unification (i.e. internal unity within URCSA).

2.2 Internal Unity: Fighting the legacy of Apartheid within the household of the Cape

The Cape Regional Synod is the largest synod of the seven regional synods of URCSA in terms of geography (it stretches from the border of the province of KwaZulu-Natal in the East to the border of Namibia in the West) and numbers, with 320 of the total of 683 congregations in URCSA. It furthermore consists of mainly Afrikaans- and isiXhosa-speaking members and congregations, with about 70% of these being Afrikaans. The only other region where there is a large concentration of Afrikaans congregations is the Phororo region in the Northern Cape and North-West provinces.

Since the regional synod of 2002 the issue of ‘equal representation’ (the so-called 50-50 principle) on the moderamen of the synod has been raised, resulting in resolutions to the effect that the moderamen must be constituted by 50%

¹³ The SA Reconciliation Barometer 2017 published by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) points out that the prominence of race and class as primary sources of identity and how the most divisive aspects of apartheid-era laws, namely racial segregation and socio-economic divisions are persisting as divisions today, www.ijr.org.za

Afrikaans- and 50% isiXhosa-speaking members. The underlying feeling or conviction from the side of some isiXhosa members was that the Afrikaans-speaking ministers in particular, were dominating leadership positions. This has especially boiled over in heated debates at the last two synods of 2014 and 2014. It seems as if this debate is restricted to the Cape region only¹⁴, resulting in resolutions that mandated our current leadership to prioritise internal unity above unity talks with the DRC in the region.

My painful observation and opinion is that we have struggled to rid ourselves of the shackles of Apartheid in our minds and thinking, which has a deep impact on our relationships, and influencing our theological thoughts and arguments. This leaves us with questions such as: How does culture as well as politics shape and influence our theology? When we united as two former mission-initiated churches, were we naïve to assume that we came from the same side of Apartheid, and would therefore seamlessly united and become one new church? Did we underestimate the impact of centuries and decades of colonisation and apartheid segregation on the minds both the oppressor and oppressed? Have we failed to integrate Belhar-theology into our thinking, conversations, discussions and behaviour? Why do some of us find it difficult to accept the other as my brother, sister or colleague without racially-tainted glasses? Have we elevated the pursuit for positions above personal relationships?

The mandate to the new leadership has forced us to tackle the elephant in the room head-on and timeously during the recess through some courageous conversations in an honest and open manner. This will also require some intentional acts of crossing borders between us.

I remain hopeful that our common faith and identity in Jesus Christ will allow us to overcome these obstacles. In this regard, the Belhar Confession will continue to help, guide and inspire us to refuse to give up on the vision and goal of a truly united URCSA.

Unity and reconciliation are closely linked concepts. In the next section I will deal with the challenges facing us with regard to reconciliation and how the Confession place an obligation on us to continue to be agents or instruments of reconciliation, despite the already mentioned re-racialisation and emergence of identity-politics.

¹⁴ The Cape, and in particular the Western Cape, has a different history, politics and demographics than the rest of South Africa. It is probably the only region with a history of slavery. Through the old National Party's Coloured Labour Preference Act, Coloureds had a distinct advantage over Black Africans in finding employment. The Western Cape has the somewhat stigmatised status as being the only one of South Africa's nine provinces that is not governed by the African National Congress (ANC).

3. The ministry of reconciliation: A call for the church to take the lead as bridge-builders

Article 3 of the Confession deals with reconciliation. Citing biblical passages, such as 2 Corinthians 5:17-21, Matthew 5:13-16 and Matthew 5:9, the call to activism, or the active involvement of the church in the midst of the enforced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour, is clear. I believe that this separation leads to the 'othering'¹⁵ of people and perpetuates prejudice, fear, selfishness, alienation, hatred and enmity. This, in turn, makes it easier to discriminate against 'others' and to strip people of their God-given humanity and dignity. The ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ have indeed been obstructed and weakened. Despite the realities of the past that separated us and left us with deep resentment and suspicion, we are called to a ministry of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is more than a wish and a prayer that hopefully will 'happen' without our involvement and some sacrifice from all of us. It means standing where God stands, within the worldly realities.¹⁶ "Reconciliation," says Villa-Vicencio (discussing political reconciliation in Africa), "is both *process* and *goal*" (2009:170). As *process* it is "inevitably uneven ... it requires restraint, generosity of spirit, empathy, and perseverance. It is about exploring ways of gaining a deeper and more inclusive understanding of the problems that are at the root of conflict. ... Above all, it is about finding ways to connect people across what are often historic and entrenched barriers of suspicion, prejudice, and inequality (Villa-Vicencio, 2009:170). According to Villa-Vicencio (2009:17), the *goal* of reconciliation "at the level of *having* is the creation of a socio-economic situation in which people have equal access to essential social services and basic material necessities. At the level of *belonging*, it involves the transcending of identity barriers where entrenched privilege subordinates or excludes others. Put differently, reconciliation is about the sharing the resources of life that are available in a given place at a given time". These are important aspects of reconciliation that are easily forgotten when reconciliation is sugar-coated by focusing only on the feel-good element, with no regard for the strong connection between reconciliation and justice. Reconciliation involves social dialogue, healing and grieving, acknowledgement of the truth, the pursuit of justice,

¹⁵ "'Othering' in the general discourse is portrayed as the sometimes conscious tactic of the power holders to keep or make the powerless powerless, and is often seen as undemocratic, imperialist and quite wrong" (Narrowe 2003:164).

¹⁶ MacMaster, LLM. 2017. "Standing where God stands (outside the gate, with Christ): The Belhar Confession as a call for a public pastoral care," in Plaatjies-van Huffel & Modise, op. cit. 273-294

reparations and (sometimes) forgiveness.¹⁷ The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) points out that how we remember the violent and divisive nature of apartheid matters for reconciliation (Reconciliation Barometer, 2014:29).

There will always be an element of ‘confrontation’ inherent in the ministry of reconciliation. We all should be confronted with our sin, sinful tendencies and our stubbornness and unwillingness to commit to and work towards reconciliation with God and with the other. This in itself is an ongoing call and task of the church.

In a sense, the South African dream is expressed in the National Development Plan (NDP)¹⁸ which envisions a country in which, by 2030, South Africans will be more conscious of what they have in common, rather than their differences. Hopefully by then South Africans will be more accepting of people’s multiple identities, with an emphasis on unity in diversity.

I believe URCSA was and is a gift to South Africa, given the fact that URCSA was formed on 14 April 1994, just two weeks before the birth of the democratic South Africa. This should place a special and perhaps extra responsibility on us to show the way with regard to unity and reconciliation. But, as I have already pointed out, the painful reality at this stage is that we have not succeeded in overcoming race-politics within our own midst. Hopefully, we will, by the grace of God, rise above these differences and divisions, and become what God has destined us to be, inspired by the Confession, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

In the next section, I will briefly focus on Article 4 of the Confession which addresses the issue of justice, and show its relevance for a South Africa which is seen as one of the most unequal societies in the world.

4. No peace without justice: Inequality, poverty, unemployment and service delivery protests tell a story of injustice

¹⁷ SA Reconciliation Barometer 2017. Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 9. www.ijr.org.za

¹⁸ The National Development Plan, launched in 2012, is a detailed blueprint for how the country can eliminate poverty and reduce inequality. It is a plan to unite South Africans, unleash the energies of its citizens, grow an inclusive economy, build capacities, and enhance the capability of the state and leaders working together to solve complex problems. <https://www.gov.za/issues/national-development-plan-2030>

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 prisoner 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;

that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;

that the church belonging to God, should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that 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.

A study by the World Bank in 2018¹⁹ has revealed that South Africa is the most unequal out of 149 countries surveyed. The report also states that is high, persistent and on the increase in the last 24 years. Although poverty is said to be declining, the report suggests that the rich is getting richer, with the poor getting poorer and the gap wider. The triple challenge of high poverty, high inequality, and high unemployment persists. Race still affects the ability to find a job, as well as the wages received once employed. Nearly half of the population of South Africa is considered chronically poor. Poverty also has a strong spatial dimension in South Africa, a demonstration of the enduring legacy of apartheid. In this regard, rural areas have the highest poverty concentration.

Statistics South Africa²⁰ has released the results of its general household survey recently, and these results show that 64.8% of households receive salaries from various forms of employment and 45.2% of households depend on social grants. This means that 17 million South Africans, one in five, rely on social grants from the state²¹. As expected, the distribution of grants differs along racial lines, with 33.9% of black African individuals receiving a social grant, compared to 29.9% of Coloured, 12.5% of Indian/Asian individuals, and 7.5% of the white population.

¹⁹ Overcoming Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: An Assessment of Drivers, Constraints and Opportunities, 2018. www.worldbank.org

²⁰ www.statssa.gov.za

²¹ Social grants in South Africa include old age pensions, child support grants, care dependency grants, grants in aid, war veterans grants, foster child grants and disability grants.

Villa-Vicencio (2009:28²²) reminds us that “democracy and access to resources go hand in hand”. He continues

These are essential ingredients of social justice and political polarization in countries struggling to transcend long periods of conflict and autocratic rule. Countries such as South Africa have attained an important level of political democracy by conducting free and fair elections. The struggle for economic justice is more elusive (2009:28).

Poverty is a complex phenomenon. It is “not self-eliminating, but rather has a built-in self-perpetuating tendency” (Hofmeyer & Nyoka, 2013:16). Service delivery protests across the country indicate that too many people and communities are still not experiencing the ‘better life for all’ that has been promised by politicians.²³ Villa-Vicencio (2009:59) sounded this warning a decade ago in stating that “patience and national unity in time give way to impatience and social unrest in the face of the grim reality of continuing social exclusion (and material deprivation), although the language of exclusion changes in postindependent states.” We will have to continuously ask “the awkward questions about social inequality” and how “the playing fields are going to be levelled” (Alexander, 2013:62²⁴). “If we continue to ignore these questions,” warns Neville Alexander (2013:62), “this inequality will wreck the entire country sooner rather than later”. He continues, “Our society time and again sees the warning signs in the numerous protests and ‘riots’ about service delivery, financial exclusions and other manifestations of abhorrent social inequality”.

²² Villa-Vicencio, C. 2009. *Walk with Us and Listen. Political Reconciliation in Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.

²³ Villa-Vicencio points out that part of the negotiated settlement was to recognise that white South Africans, who controlled the economy, needed to be drawn into the new political dispensation – to enable them to experience the kind of belonging and well-being that provided a vested interest in the future of the nation. But it was equally important that black entrepreneurs be drawn into the centre of the economy through broad-based black economic empowerment. However, it was “even more important to ensure the poor, who can realistically only look longingly at the privilege of those (both black and white) who benefit from the wealth of the nation, have reason to believe that their material needs and aspirations can be met within the emerging economy” (Villa-Vicencio, 2009:58).

²⁴ Alexander, N. 2013. *Thoughts on the New South Africa*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media.

According to Municipal IQ, a specialised local government data and intelligence organisation, there were more protest in 2018 than any other year since 2005²⁵. The recorded 237 protests beat the previous record of 191 protests in 2014.

The unemployment rate in South Africa rose to 27.6 percent in the first quarter of 2019 from 27.1 percent in the previous period²⁶. Unemployment Rate in South Africa averaged 25.66 percent from 2000 until 2019, reaching an all time high of 31.20 percent in the first quarter of 2003 and a record low of 21.50 percent in the fourth quarter of 2008.

There will be no peace without justice. Poverty and economic deprivation create a situation of vulnerability for many people and communities. The expansion of opportunities at the top in the two decades following the end of Apartheid did not bring significant improvement for the majority of people at the bottom.

The statistics that we have referenced, remind URCSA of the lived reality of its members. It provides a lens for our reading of the bible and how we do theology. It furthermore strengthens the 'preferential option' for the poor and the most vulnerable in our communities, as stated in the Confession.

The Belhar Confession reminds us that theology is not only about God, about the church, and about Scripture, but that it is also about a *context*, or contextual situation, about interpreting the situation, about a vision and a strategy (Hendriks, 2001:6-16²⁷). This implies a shift from an ontological paradigm in the direction of a *hermeneutical paradigm* (Louw, 1992:122²⁸). In a hermeneutical paradigm we focus on an understanding and interpretation of God's acts of salvation in history with the aim of helping people find meaning in their lives and lived experiences through faith. It is about the *praxis of God* in the world – it is about function, action, praxis and operationalisation, without abandoning the theological character of the church (Louw, 1992:125). It will require that we make use of social and cultural sciences, starting with interpretation (therefore hermeneutics). Such a practical-theological ecclesiology, in essence, wants to

²⁵ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-01-16-more-protests-in-2018-than-in-any-of--previous-13-years--and-it-could-get-worse/>

²⁶ <https://tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/unemployment-rate>

²⁷ Hendricks, H.J. 2001. Developing a contextual, missional ecclesiology in a congregation using practical theological methodology. *Practical Theology in South Africa* 16(1):1-18.

²⁸ Louw, D.J. 1998 *A Pastoral Hermeneutics of Care & Encounter. A Theological Design for a Basic Theory, Anthropology, Method and Therapy*. Wellington: Lux Verbi.

focus on the life and function of the congregation (church, faith community), bringing the theological and empirical views of the congregation into creative tension with each other.

5. In Conclusion: A call for radical obedience

The Belhar Confession concludes with this Article:

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 (Eph. 4:15-16; Acts 5:29-33; 1 Peter 2:18-25; 2 Peter 3:15-18).

Jesus is Lord.

To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever.

I believe that this is a call for radical discipleship and radical obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ. URCSA, and any church for that matter, cannot ignore this call. It is what has set the confessing church apart from the institutionalised and captured church over the ages and in many contexts. Given the forces at work in the world that favours the powerful and privileged over the powerless and poor, the haves over the have-nots, etc., we are called to commit ourselves to the vision and values of the Kingdom of God.

“Here we stand, we can do no other.”