

PRESENTATION

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THE BARMEN DECLARATION (by Bob Osborn)

The Barmen Declaration

The Declaration was published in May, 1934, by the Confessing Synod of the German Eevangelical (Protestant) church that is, the Reformed, Lutheran and United churches, meeting in the Reformed church of Barmen. The occasion was a critical, threatening division of the church brought about by the German Christian faction within the church.

It was drafted by a theological committee appointed by the churches. It consisted of two Lutheran pastors, a Lutheran professor and one Reformed professor, Swiss Professor Karl Barth, of Bonn University. During the nap time of the committee meeting, after lunch, when the others were sleeping, Karl Barth drafted the Declaration. In most respects it is a fine statement of Barth = s theology. At the same time, it brings together concerns of both the Reformed and Lutheran churches, but above all it addresses the problems posed by the German Christians that were threatening the church. In effect it sets forth a doctrine of the church. It has been adopted by Reformed churches throughout the world as a confession of their faith. Lutherans, on the other hand who really acknowledge only one confession, the Augsburg Confession, regarded it as a Declaration of the Confessing Church only for the particular time that it was drafted, that is during the Nazi era.

It should be noticed that it did not directly address the political situation, that is Nazism. It spoke to the reality of the of the day only indirectly as it spoke to the church.

The occasion of the Declaration.

It is occasioned by the theology of the German Christians, who were the dominant faction within the Protestant church at that time. Hans Asmussen, who along with Barth was a leader of the theological committee, wrote: If we protest against German Christian theology...we

are protesting against that same phenomenon which for more than two hundred years has been slowly preparing the devastation of the church.

That devastating phenomenon was the effort of the Protestant church to address the challenge of the Enlightenment. The distinguished German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), had shown that the cosmos as we know it is a phenomenon of human reason, that it is not the cosmos as it is in itself (the *Ding an sich*) but as it is presented to us, a priori, by human reason. For example, categories of time and space and cause-and-effect, which enable us to experience the world as we do, are a priori creations of human reason. They are the eye glasses, as it were, which give rational shape to the world as we experience it. Seventeenth century Scholastics found evidence and proof of the existence of God in the cosmos. Kant in the 18th century destroyed the proofs, showing that the alleged evidence of God found scientifically in the cosmos is put there a priori by human reason. In other words, the cosmos as we experience it takes us not to God but to man. Descartes, the French philosopher summed up when he said, I think, therefore I am. The only thing Descartes could be certain of was himself as a thinking self.

To sum it up, the Enlightenment said that the human person, not God, is the center.³) A powerful totalitarian state which alone is capable of both. 4) A tightly organized political community of faith and struggle, the Nazi party, and 5) the coordination or incorporation of the churches.

Hitler and the People = s Movement (*Volkische Bewegung*)

Accordingly (in August of 1933?) Hitler:

Abolished freedom of religion,

A State Commission for Ecclesiastical Affairs was established

The Aryan clause was adopted; it banned Jews from the civil service (including pastors and other church workers) and

The Führer principle was enforced when he appointed the ardent German

Christian, Ludwig Mueller, as Reich Bishop the leader (Führer) of a national (Reich) Church

Incorporation or co-ordination of all state and independent Protestant churches into the Reich church was forcibly and often violently begun.

This also meant efforts on the part of Nazi authorities to enforce the Aryan clause in the churches. As reported by the Breslau Christian Weekly in nineteen thirty-three a Protestant service begins: Non-Aryans are requested to leave the church. Three times the Christ descends from the crucifix on the altar and leaves the church.

The German Christians

German Christian doctrine was an imitation of Nazi ideology. It featured: Gleichshaltung (incorporation), blood and race purity, the Führer principal, Artgleichheit (conformity of style to Nazism) and a Reich church. It called for a political theology, that is, a theology that presupposes a correct German politics of full solidarity with the German people, the German state, and with all that the Lord of history has done and is doing in German history today. The German Christian theologian Paul Althaus contended that our (the German) quest for salvation comes today in the political dimension. The brilliant German Christian theologian Emanuel Hirsch wrote, there is no other way to describe sacrifice for state and nation on the hearts of our folk than by awakening faith in the Lord of history, who has given Germany its remarkable statesman. Also from Hirsch: Not a single people of the world has such a statesman as ours, who is so earnestly Christian...In a great speech on May 1st he concluded with prayer, in which the whole world felt his wonderful sincerity. In the following statement of Paul Althaus he offered his justification for a German Christian theology: To every age the one eternal gospel must be proclaimed. But to every age it has to be proclaimed differently, as an answer to the specific questions of that age... at the time of the Reformation the question of salvation was the question of deliverance of guilt, of peace with God.... Today we [Germans] are an utterly political species. And our quest for salvation comes alive in the political dimension. People today are not concerned about peace with God, but with overcoming political calamity in the broadest sense the moral distress of the people, the destruction of the national community, the freedom of the Volk for its own life, the fulfillment of its particular mission. This was pure political theology, one for which a particular politics is held to be a necessary presupposition.

However, on November 7, 1933, in the Berlin Sports Palace, there was a huge German Christian rally which, because of its anti-Semitic attacks especially on the Old Testament and the

New Testament = s Rabbi Paul, led to the end of German Christianity as a popular movement. It remained, however, a power in the Reich church.

The Rise of the Confessional Movement

This inspired and fortified the PASTORS = EMERGENCY DEFENSE LEAGUE (under the leadership of Martin Niemöller (who had been a submarine commander in the war) which was organized primarily to defend Jewish Christians from efforts to implement the Aryan clause) and also stimulated the rapid-rising Confessional movements in the state and free churches. These churches had come to realize that the Reich church was not a true church, and like Israel of old, they would have to take to their tents, and stand under and on their traditional Confessions. The fate of the German Christians, after all only a movement within the churches, did not however stop for a minute the efforts of the Reich church to co-ordinate or incorporate the state churches, using what force was available if necessary--- removing and imprisoning pastors, silencing publications, etc.

Thus, under the leadership of the Pastors = Emergency League and some Bishops and leaders of Confessing churches, it was soon agreed by both the Lutheran and Reformed representatives of these churches that it was necessary and time to convene a national synod of all confessing churches in order to unite in their resistance and in their confession. This was decided upon, and the first national synod of the Confessing Church met in Barmen, Germany (modern Wuppertal), on May 29-31, 1934. Four representatives of the churches were appointed to be a theological committee to draft a Declaration to be presented to the Synod for its evaluation and approval. Accordingly it had two tasks: 1) Unite the two church traditions: Lutheran and Reformed, who had never formally come together on any issue from the time of the Reformation beginnings in the 16th century. 2) Take a stand based on their confessions of faith against the Reich Church on behalf of a united Confessional Protestant Church.

It might be relevant here to ask: What were the relevant issues separating the two churches? Actually, it was one issue the the political issue. Churches of the Reformation had spoken traditionally of **Altar and Throne**, church and state, or gospel and law; Catholics spoke similarly of divine law and natural law. The church is a natural phenomenon and a divine phenomenon; it is both subject to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the church and to Law of the Creator and the state. There are two kingdoms, the kingdom of law, of the Father and Creator, and the kingdom of Gospel, the Kingdom of the Son and Savior, Jesus Christ. Christians in all lands pray for the church and for the state, for the president and for the Bishop. The difference between the Reformed Christian and the Lutheran Christian was the understanding of how to draw the line between the two kingdoms. In what respect is the church subject to the law of the state, and in what respect is it subject to the Gospel and Jesus Christ? Lutherans tended to hold that in its external aspects, as an institution in the state, the church is determined by state law, that is, by

natural law, by universal moral reason, and not by the Gospel. Whereas, of course, its worship, preaching and teaching are determined by the lordship of Jesus Christ. The Reformed Church was uncomfortable with the sharp separation of the church in its external aspects as an institution in society from its spiritual identity and its obligation to Jesus Christ as its Lord. It contended that Jesus Christ is Lord over both the church and the state, that he determines both life in the church and life in the state, without confusing them, however. This means that while Christ determines the inner life of the church he also shapes and determines the outer life of the church. An oversimplified metaphor: In Lutheran perspective the building of a house is subject to the law, building codes, etc., and in significant measure is shaped by these. On the other hand, life in the house is determined by the head of the household. The Reformed say that the head of the household as well as the law determines the shape and building of the house.

THE BARMEN THESES

There are six Barmen theses. For our purposes today I will focus on the first two, which more than the others are basic Christological statements. The first concerns the nature of Jesus Christ and the second, the work of Jesus Christ. The third and fourth theses, which we will not delve into, concern the corresponding shape of the church and its ministry insofar as these are determined by its Lord Jesus Christ. The fifth thesis, one of the most important and controversial of the theses, concerns the relationship of the church to the world/state as determined by Jesus Christ. The sixth thesis is more a summary and, as it were, a benediction.

Each thesis is introduced by words of Scripture suggesting that the thesis is an exposition of the Scripture. This is followed by the thesis itself, which for its part is followed by a rejection clause in which is presented the corresponding false teaching (specifically, a teaching of the German Christians which however is all too typical of the church generally) which the thesis addresses.

FIRST THESIS:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me (John 14:6). Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved (John 10:1, 9)

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear, trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine that the church could and would have to acknowledge as a

source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.

Bob's Comments

Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture

Jesus Christ, not simply Christ

as attested in Scripture, not outside Scripture, e.g. somewhere in history to be found by the Jesus seminar

Jesus a unique, once-for-all, particular, human person. A male Jew, not a Gentile, not every man

Christ the man Jesus (That is, Jesus defines Christ, not vice versa.)

the Messiah of the Jews and as such the Savior of the world

as attested by God's resurrection of Jesus

living and present in the proclamation of the church

coming again to bring in the kingdom on earth as in heaven

As attested in Scripture

not as discovered by the historian (the Jesus seminar)

not as contained in creeds (creeds, like buoys in the water, are guides not the goal)

not as created by the church or the creative preacher

The one word that we have to hear

--the alternative to a faithfully hearing church is the imaginatively-talking church

the good news of the gospels a news report (have you heard?! =)

we cannot tell it to ourselves; it is not the result of our research.

we can only hear from others who have heard and witnessed to us

it is the only word we have (1) to hear (we do hear other words, but none are necessary; it is after all the Word of God) and (2) to trust (His free grace, mercy,

and forgiveness [Barmen 2]) and (3) obey (recognize and accept His claim and

command in life and in death He comes to us as the One who conquered death

that we might live.)

We reject ... still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God =s revelation.

For example: enlightenment and reason, Hitler and Volkstum. Race, gender, rank and position, etc.

SECOND THESIS:

Christ Jesus whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption (I Corinthians 1:30).

Just as Jesus Christ is God =s gift of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, with the same seriousness, he is also God =s mighty claim upon our entire life; through him we experience a joyful liberation from the godless bonds of this world unto a free, thankful service to his creation.

We reject the false teaching that there be dimensions of our lives in which we belong not to Jesus Christ but to other lords, dimensions in which we have no need of his justification or sanctification.

Bob = s Comments

Jesus IS God = s forgiveness---_not only proclaims or declares forgiveness. He is the event of our forgiveness; in him that forgiveness has actually occurred, and occurs as he comes and witnesses to us. (Forgiveness is justification; here is the Lutheran emphasis.)

So, with the same seriousness---Jesus is God = s mighty claim. Forgiveness does not get us off the hook as it were; to the contrary, by Jesus = s forgiveness he overcomes the distance between us sinners and our righteous God so that we are within the reach of God and actually subject to his claim.

And Jesus is not only the one who makes a claim, but he is also the event of its realization.

In him that claim is effected. Its effectiveness does not depend upon our response.
(Claim is command, law; here is the Reformed emphasis.)

With the same seriousness ---- as is attached to the divine forgiveness. Here is the affirmation that the good news of the gospel is the good news not only of God = s forgiveness but also of his gracious and effective claim upon us.

Upon our entire life-----that is, both our personal, spiritual life as well as our public and political life, both as a church and as individual members. This 2nd thesis (together with the 1st) points ahead to the 5th thesis which focuses on the relationship of the church to the state, a matter which Barth took up later in his remarkable (so say I) *Christian Community and Civil Community*. (This important essay alone would take care of another session together.)

A CONCLUDING, RATHER UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

When I finished drafting this manuscript I was puzzled as to what it all finally meant. Specifically, I was unclear in my own mind about the relationship between the first part, the sketch of liberal theology = s response to the Enlightenment, and the second part, the presentation of the *Barmen Declaration*. I confess to a very recent moment of enlightenment, which I should have arrived at before I began the paper. I failed to acknowledge or even recognize the contradiction in what I was expectingnamely, that an enlightened person could overcome the Enlightenment of which he or she is both a creator and a creature. Let me be more specific and clear: the enlightened person is, in the case of these three thinkers, the godless person who begins with the assumption through the critical use of reason an enlightened person could nevertheless explain how in the godless world one can speak rationally of God, as the theologian intends to do. We looked at three theologians/philosophers each of whom alleges to explain how the enlightened reason can know God and talk reasonably (and thus necessarily) about God = s existence. Kant said that because we are moral human beings we must reasonably posit the existence of God. Schleiermacher also posited the existence of God, in his case because we are religious and feel dependent. Fichte posited with certainty to the existence of God because his own existence as a human being radically presupposed a People of which he is a part. Each of these thinkers jumped from himself, from a dimension of his own existence (the center of it all), to God, implicitly the God of Christianity, as the immanent ground or basis of his position. That is, God is the basis of morality, the source of our feeling of dependence, and the source of the

German nation and People. To which I, also an enlightened person, respond, so you say! Since each of these thinkers is allegedly speaking a universal, rational truth, then I am supposed to conclude that the many people of the world who do not find reason for or the necessity of speaking of God are simply irrational, not using their heads.

How could these obviously intelligent, enlightened gentlemen make this, I have to say, irrational leap to God from a mere human feeling, an inchoate human sense of duty, from membership in a People, any people, to God. The answer is only too obvious to be recognized; each of these was raised in a pious Protestant Christian home where he had heard something, probably long before he had written a word of philosophy or theology, that made possible and necessary for him to use and think about the word God, and most certainly the words Jesus Christ.

Which brings us to the *Barmen Declaration* and its first thesis: Jesus Christ as attested to us in Scripture is the one word of God that we have to hear, trust and obey, in life and in death. It is because of the attestation of Scripture, that is, because of the hearing of the witness of Paul, the Gospel evangelists, and others, that our three great theologians could and did use their reason to speak of God. Karl Barth, in an oft-told story, relates how a reporter, near the end of Barth's life, asked if he could summarize his theology in a few words. Barth responded with the familiar words of the children's hymn, Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. These are the words that Barmen says we have to hear, and which, having heard, embolden us even in our enlightenment to seek and to find evidences of God and echoes of God's Word in our world.