

Remembering The Declaration of Barmen on its 75th Anniversary

A Declaration Adopted at the May 29-31, 1934 Gathering of the Confessing Church of Germany and Adopted as a Confession of Faith in May 1967 by the then United Presbyterian Church in the USA

Background

*****The Synod of Barmen** was composed of 139 delegates, from 18 ‘provincial’ churches with a wide degree of geographical, denominational and theological diversity. Equally the delegates were clergy (80), academics (6), and lay-people (53). Among them were pastors Hans Asmussen, Karl Koch, Karl Iraruer, and Martin Niemoller, and theologian Karl Barth. Following a number of regional meetings, these men assembled representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches. This was a small minority voice of resistance to the social, political and ecclesiastical status quo, who sought to oppose the church’s captivity to National Socialism.

*****The Theological Declaration of Barmen** was written, debated and adopted unanimously by this representative group of the Confessing Church who stood opposed to the German Christian/Reich Church movement which sought to baptize Adolf Hitler’s National Socialism which created an ideology which brought together the Christian faith/church, nationalism, economics and militarism into a new sense of patriotism and pride in being German; pure German. The symbol of National Socialism, the swastika, was an obvious mis/ab-use of the cross. Hitler’s ideological manifesto Mein Kampf and the Bible were placed on the same altar. **The German Church/Reich Church adopted their theological position based upon their belief that God was revealing His good, perfect and pleasing will for Germany and the whole world through the aspirations of National Socialism and of German culture.** In July 1933 the German Christian Church elected Ludwig Muller to be bishop of the church and he declared himself “Reich Bishop” who had ultimate authority under Hitler to lead the church of Germany. They also adopted the “Aryan paragraph” which prohibited anyone with any Jewish ancestry or married to anyone with any Jewish ancestry from serving as ministers or elders in the church. It was a time to be proud German Christians. In addition the policies of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists were based on fear...fear about the future economic realities, fear of communism, fear of the Jews which in turn became hatred. “As he consolidated his power, Hitler abolished all political rights and democratic processes: police could detain persons in prison without a trial, search private dwellings without a warrant, seize property, censor publications, tap telephones, and forbid meetings. He soon outlawed all political parties except his own, smashed labor unions, purged universities, replaced the judicial system with his own “People’s Courts,” initiated a systematic terrorizing of Jews, and obtained the support of church leaders allied with or sympathetic to the German Christians.” **[introduction to the Barmen Declaration from the Book of Confessions]**

*****The Confessing Church Movement and the Declaration of Barmen** sought to call the Evangelical churches of Germany to stand firm against the German Christian accommodation to National Socialism. The Theological Declaration of Barmen contains six propositions, each quoting from Scripture, stating its implications for the present day, and rejecting the heresies of the German Christians. The declaration proclaims the church's freedom in Jesus Christ who is Lord of every area of life. The church obeys him as God's one and only Word who determines its order, ministry, and relation to the state. [introduction to the Barmen Declaration from the Book of Confession]

The original declaration was drafted by Karl Barth who during an afternoon lunch break at the Synod meeting wrote the declaration "fortified by strong coffee and one or two Brazilian cigars." The Declaration is a concise summary of Karl Barth's entire theology, namely that God has uniquely and supremely revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, as witnessed in Holy Scripture and faithfully proclaimed in word and deed by the Church of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The thing I love about Karl Barth is that whatever you read of his writings, he points you to a deeper understanding and experience of Jesus Christ. This year is the 75th Anniversary of that courageous declaration. It remains so contemporary for today challenging the church that has either adopted bad theology or has neglected theology all together. The danger now as it was then is that the church would be heretical in their theology and idolatrous in their practice.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen

I. An Appeal to the Evangelical Congregations and Christians in Germany

The Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church met in Barmen, May 29-31, 1934. Here representatives from all the German Confessional Churches met with one accord in a confession of the one Lord of the one, holy, apostolic Church. In fidelity to their Confession of Faith, members of Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches sought **a common message for the need and temptation of the Church in our day. With gratitude to God they are convinced that they have been given a common word to utter.** It was not their intention to found a new Church or to form a union. For nothing was farther from their minds than the abolition of the confessional status of our Churches. Their intention was, rather, to withstand in faith and unanimity the destruction of the Confession of Faith, and thus of the Evangelical Church in Germany. In opposition to attempts to establish the unity of the German Evangelical Church by means of false doctrine, by the use of force and insincere practices, the Confessional Synod insists that the unity of the Evangelical Churches in Germany can come only from the Word of God in faith through the Holy Spirit. Thus alone is the Church renewed.

Therefore the Confessional Synod calls upon the congregations to range themselves behind it in prayer, and steadfastly to gather around those pastors and teachers who are loyal to the Confessions. [The Call for Corporate Prayer and Support of Pastoral Leadership]

Be not deceived by loose talk, as if we meant to oppose the unity of the German nation!
Do not listen to the seducers who pervert our intentions, as if we wanted to break up the unity of the German Evangelical Church or to forsake the Confessions of the Fathers!
Try the spirits whether they are of God! Prove also the words of the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church to **see whether they agree with Holy Scripture and with the Confessions of the Fathers**. If you find that we are speaking contrary to Scripture, then do not listen to us! But if you find that we are taking our stand upon Scripture, then **let no fear or temptation keep you from treading with us the path of faith and obedience to the Word of God, in order that God's people be of one mind upon earth and that we in faith experience what he himself has said:** "I will never leave you, nor forsake you." Therefore, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

II. Theological Declaration Concerning the Present Situation of the German Evangelical Church

According to the opening words of its constitution of July 11, 1933, the German Evangelical Church is a federation of Confessional Churches that grew out of the Reformation and that enjoy equal rights. The theological basis for the unification of these Churches is laid down in Article 1 and Article 2(1) of the constitution of the German Evangelical Church that was recognized by the Reich Government on July 14, 1933:

- Article 1. The inviolable foundation of the German Evangelical Church is the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is attested for us in Holy Scripture and brought to light again in the Confessions of the Reformation. The full powers that the Church needs for its mission are hereby determined and limited.
- Article 2 (1). The German Evangelical Church is divided into member Churches (*Landeskirchen*).

We, the representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches, of free synods, Church assemblies, and parish organizations united in the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church, declare that we stand together on the ground of the German Evangelical Church as a federation of German Confessional Churches. **We are bound together by the confession of the one Lord of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.**

We publicly declare before all evangelical Churches in Germany that **what they hold in common in this Confession is grievously imperiled**, and with it the unity of the German Evangelical Church. **It is threatened by the teaching methods and actions** of the ruling Church party of the "German Christians" and of the Church administration carried on by them. These have become more and more apparent during the first year of the existence of the German Evangelical Church. This threat consists in the fact that **the theological basis, in which the German Evangelical Church is united, has been continually and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles**, on the part of the leaders and spokesmen of the "German Christians" as well as on the part of the Church administration. When these principles are held to be valid, then, according to all the Confessions in force among us, **the Church ceases to be the Church** and the German Evangelical Church, as a federation of Confessional Churches, becomes intrinsically impossible.

As members of Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches **we may and must speak with one voice in this matter today.** Precisely because **we want to be and to remain faithful** to our various Confessions, **we may not keep silent**, since we believe that we have been given a common message to utter in a time of common need and temptation. We commend to God what this may mean for the inter-relations of the Confessional Churches.

In view of the errors of the "German Christians" of the present Reich Church government which are devastating the Church and also therefore breaking up the unity of the German Evangelical Church, **we confess the following evangelical truths:**

1. "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 and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, as though 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.**
2. "Christ Jesus, whom God has made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." (**1 Cor. 1:30**.) **As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness, he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures. We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords--areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.**
3. "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body [is] joined and knit together." (**Eph. 4:15,16**.) **The Christian Church is the congregation of the brethren in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit. As the Church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.**
4. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant." (**Matt. 20:25,26**.) **The various offices in the Church do not establish a dominion of some over the others; on the contrary, they are for the exercise of the ministry entrusted to and enjoined upon the whole congregation.**

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church, apart from this ministry, could and were permitted to give itself, or allow to be given to it, special leaders vested with ruling powers.

5. "Fear God. Honor the emperor." (1 Peter 2:17.) Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the Church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace. [It fulfills this task] by means of the threat and exercise of force, according to the measure of human judgment and human ability. The Church acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and of the ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things. **We reject the false doctrine**, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church's vocation as well. **We reject the false doctrine**, as though the Church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State.

6. "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matt. 28:20.) "The word of God is not fettered." (2 Tim. 2:9.) **The Church's commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead, and therefore in the ministry of his own Word and work through sermon and sacrament. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans.**

The Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the acknowledgment of these truths and in the rejection of these errors the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a federation of Confessional Churches. It invites all who are able to accept its declaration to be mindful of these theological principles in their decisions in Church politics. It entreats all whom it concerns to return to the unity of faith, love, and hope.

**Verbum Dei manet in aeternum.
The Word of God will last for ever.**

The Declaration of Barmen and the Nature of a Confession of Faith (adopted from Arthur Cochrane's excellent book *The Church's Confession under Hitler*)

1. **A Confession of Faith** is a written document drawn up by the Church which confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. **(It is Christocentric at its heart)**

2. A Confession of Faith confesses Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture. **(It is a faithful commentary on Holy Scripture)**

3. A Confession of Faith is a confession of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church and should not be considered the confession of an individual theologian, or of a factional party of the church or even of a particular denomination or group of denominations. **(It speaks for the whole Church to the whole Church)**

4. A Confession of Faith is an act in which the Church is born and reborn whereby the Church's outward unity becomes visible as a corporate act of faith. **(the Church's unity of/in faith is reaffirmed)**

5. A Confession of Faith reflects its unity and continuity with the Church through the ages. **(New confessions do not seek to replace old confessions but rather seek to clarify and explain them in the face of new questions and circumstances)**

6. In and with A Confession of Faith, the Church claims to be the one, true Church **(This recognizes that there a Confession of Faith stands 'opposed' to a false Church with a false doctrine, practicing a false faith)**

7. A Confession of Faith occurs when the Church is convinced that its faith and unity are grievously imperiled by a heresy that has ripened and come to a head. **(This recognizes that heresy is still a legitimate theological category...read Alister McGrath's newest work Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth; Gillian R. Evans' A Short History of Heresy; GK Chesterton's Orthodoxy; Dorothy Sayers Creed or Chaos?)**

8. A Confession of Faith is not only relevant for the Church's doctrine and life but bears definite implications for concrete social and political issues .

9. A Confession of Faith invariably provokes opposition from the false Church and from the world precisely because in its witness to God's free grace for all peoples it constitutes a radical attack upon the false Church and the world...a genuine Confession of Faith will not only confess, declare and teach (implicitly or explicitly) but it will also condemn, reject and anathematize the opposing error.

10. A Confession of Faith possesses a relative and subordinate authority and freedom. **(relative and subordinate to the authority of Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture. relative and subordinate to the gift of freedom given by God to hear, choose, decide, act and obey)**

Some Contemporary Questions for Conversation

1. What similarities and differences do you see between the world of Barmen and our world today (locally, nationally, globally, ecclesiastically)?
2. Why were many so disturbed then and now about the strong affirmation of God's revelation in Jesus Christ as being the "one Word of God" which is to be proclaimed, heard, trusted, obeyed and lived by the people of God?
3. How do we compartmentalize our lives (personally and corporately) in relationship to the Lordship/the claim of Jesus Christ?
4. How would you summarize the Gospel message that has been entrusted to us as God's people (see Statement #3 of Barmen Declaration)?
5. Living as God's people in a democracy which asserts separation of Church and State, how comfortable are we with Statement #4 of Barmen?
6. What does unity of faith, love and hope look like to which Barmen invites all of God's people to live?
7. How does the Barmen Declaration particularly guide you and the church today, particularly in light of the ordination vows/constitutional questions each of us have affirmed (**Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God? W-4.4003c**)