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Historical overview of the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934¹

ABSTRACT

This article places the Barmen Theological Declaration against the backdrop of nationalist socialist rule and the way it was supported by the so-called “faith movement” of the “German Christians”. Reference is also made to the resistance to it by the “Confessing Church.” The fact that the six theses of Barmen (as “Protestant truths”) follow the style of a reformatory confession is reiterated, but it is also argued that confessions always need to be tested in the light of Scripture, hence the need for the church of Jesus Christ, as church *in the world*, to go “with Barmen and beyond Barmen.” The article also refers to the interpretation history of the phrase “the one Word of God” in the famous first thesis of Barmen. In the last section four cursory remarks are made about the possible enduring implications of the Barmen Declaration. It is emphasised that freedom serves as a keyword in the Declaration, expressing the special profile of the church of Jesus Christ.

1. THE OCCASION OF THE BARMEN THEOLOGICAL DECLARATION

The Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934 documents the constitution of the “Confessing Church” in Germany. It originated in the early days of national socialist rule in Germany. The national socialists ruled over this country from 1933. In those days the full extent of the crimes to be committed by them in the name of German-nationalist race-ideology in Germany, in Europe, and world wide was still unperceivable. But, from the very beginning the hatred for anyone who would not bend to this ideology, determined the national socialist rule with “Führer” Adolf Hitler as the head. The anti-Semitism of this ideology bore its first bad fruit in the disfranchisement and persecution of the Jews. All democratic structures were annihilated. All independent social and cultural institutions were prohibited or subjected to the dictate of the national socialist state by force. The aim was to permeate all of society with national socialist ideology down to the very lives and thoughts of each individual.

It is obvious that the churches in Germany would stand in the way of such endeavours, because they were independent organisations based on religious principles that did not originate from national socialist ideology. However, a religious variant of the fascist anti-spirit within the German Protestant churches came to aid of Hitler’s attempt to subject the churches as well. This was the so-called “faith movement” of the “German Christians”. They gained an overwhelming victory in the 1933 church elections and, from then on held all vital positions in the governing bodies of the German churches, from the “Reichsbischof”, appointed by Adolf Hitler, down to the parish

1 Paper read at the Barmen/Belhar Consultation, Belhar, 19 October 2004.

councils. According to the “Führer-principle”, the German churches were to be reorganised into one national “Reichs”-church. And so, against all principles of state-church law, the “German Christians” set out to establish just that.

The religious-ideological basis of this destruction of the German churches was the conviction that – I quote a short passage from a text characteristic of this disposition – that God the Creator gave the German people “*ein arteigenes Gesetz eingeschaffen*” (“a law specifically created for their race”). This law placed all Christians “*in die Blut- und Schicksalsgemeinschaft des deutschen Volkes*” (“within the common blood and destiny of the German people”), which it also stated took “shape in the Führer Adolf Hitler” and in the “national socialist state”.² Acknowledging Adolf Hitler as God’s revelation in German history now became a requirement for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.³ The Germanic race rose to become the organ for the Creator’s Law for the Germans. Emanuel Hirsch, one of the most ardent “German Christians”, called the rise to power of the Nazis an “hour of God”.⁴ He demanded of the church to renew the “blood covenant” of the Germans. The church was to be a counter-force against “mixed marriages” and the “overgrowth of the inferior”.⁵ The most outrageous violations of human rights, of the law, and the persecution of the Jews, in fact any kind of violence was being theologically justified.

From here only a small step was needed to reach the infamous address by a certain Dr Krause on the occasion of the rally of the German Christians at the “Sportpalast” in the district or “Gau” Berlin on November 13th, 1933. In his address Krause said: “Rejecting all that is foreign in faith and morality, we stand on the soil [...] of German piety. [...] We demand that a German national church earnestly preach a simple gospel, cleansed of all oriental disfiguration, and a heroic Jesus-figure as the foundation of a Christianity appropriate to the German race [...] we confess that the only true ministry for us is the ministry to our fellow Germans.”⁶

If this confession had prevailed, the Protestant churches as church of Christ would have been disfigured beyond recognition. And so, towards the end of the year 1933 with the motto “Church under the Word”, resistance began to grow within the Protestant churches against the rule of the German-Christian church government. This is not the occasion to tell the story of the development and the fate of the so-called “Confessing Church”, but the Confessing Synod that met in the industrial town of Barmen from May 29th to 30th, 1934 came to be the climax of the movement. The synod was constituted by Lutheran and Reformed churches, single parishes and individuals. At the synod the Confessing Church of Germany gave itself a theological foundation: the “Theological Declaration Concerning the Present Situation of the German Evangelical Church” (that is the full title of the declaration).

2. THE BARMEN THEOLOGICAL DECLARATION – A CONFESSION?

The six theses of Barmen follow the style of the other reformatory confessions. First a word is quoted from the Bible. This is meant to exemplify that the decisions of the Confessing Church are

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- 2 “Guidelines of the church movement German Christians (national church movement) in Thuringia, December 11, 1933.” In: Kurt Dietrich Schmidt. 1934. *Die Bekenntnisse und grundsätzlichen Äußerungen zur Kirchenfrage des Jahres 1933*. Göttingen, p.102.
 - 3 Cf. *ibid.*
 - 4 Cf. Emmanuel Hirsch. 1934. “Die Fügung und der Vater Jesu Christi”. In: *Der Offenbarungsglaube, Hammer und Nagel, Theologische Lehrschriften*, Vol. 2. Bordesholm, p. 55.
 - 5 Emmanuel Hirsch. 1933. *Das kirchliche Wollen der deutschen Christen*. Berlin, p. 11.
 - 6 Cf. “Richtsätze der Glaubensbewegung Deutsche Volkskirche (Dr. Krause)”, in: Kurt Dietrich Schmidt (ed.), *Die Bekenntnisse und grundsätzlichen Äußerungen zur Kirchenfrage des Jahres 1933*. I. c., p. 135.

to be made in listening to Scripture. Every single thesis is therefore understood to be a response of the church after hearing the Word. On ground of this the “false doctrine” as represented by the “German Christians” is rejected. This rejection or condemnation has the meaning of a *damnatio* (damnation) as it is encountered in the confessional tradition. The false doctrine is excluded from the church and there is to be no dialogue with representatives of this doctrine. The only choice left to the latter is to let go of their doctrine.

Despite its confessional style, the synod of Barmen could not bring themselves to call their six theses a formal “confession”. The reason for this was that there was an argument between the Lutheran and the Reformed churches on whether churches with fundamental doctrinal differences (for example in their understanding of the holy communion) are able to commit themselves to a single categorical theological orientation in their doctrine. Regretfully, the Lutheran churches of Germany subsequently do not consider themselves fundamentally committed to the positive statements of the Barmen Theological Declaration. Therefore, they do not use it in the ordination of their ministers even though they approve of its condemnation of the “German Christians”. Indeed, all in the Christian churches now agree on what the six Barmen Theses then condemned, namely that Adolf Hitler was no revelation of God; that God’s law was not to be equated with the “hour of the Germans”; that the church of Jesus Christ was not to be subjected to the “Führer-principle”; that the state must not claim to be “the single and totalitarian order of human life”; and that the Church must not place itself “in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans”.

However, if these insights, which were confirmed by terrible experience, are not supported by categorical theological understanding, the condemnations of 1934 cease to be fundamental. Today, long after the demise of the ideology of the “German Christians”, issues that had buoyed up the ideology of the German Christians in 1934 are being discussed once again. Issues like: Do we not today perceive the voice of God - coming to us from history, through our own existence, in the religions of the world - anymore? Are there not laws of the world, within the realms of politics and economics, which we are also obliged to respect in view of our faith in Jesus Christ? Are there not charismatic leaders or “Führer” in the Christian church who claim authority? Are Christian church’s choices to respect reality only “arbitrarily chosen desires”?

In the face of such questions, is the term “Protestant truths” given by the Barmen Theological Declaration to its six theses to be taken seriously? “Truths” are in the understanding of Jesus Christ not just flashlights that quickly fade away. They are certainties of faith that we can rely on at all times. They articulate what - in a dramatic situation of conflict - made itself known to be the truth and surpass any one specific situation. Wherever this happens we are dealing with the spirit of an entirely valid Christian confession – no matter if it is called that or not.

However, the claim of truth in a Christian confession does not mean that it cannot be critically questioned. In the Protestant sense, confessions always need to be tried in the face of Scripture. Accordingly, in its “Appeal to the Evangelical Congregations and Christians in Germany” the Barmen synod called upon all to judge whether the theses of the declaration were in accordance with Scripture and the confessions of the Fathers.⁷ Instead of simply being emulated the Barmen theses invites being put to the test.

Today when we examine the Barmen Declaration, we immediately notice the absence of something we find hard to comprehend in view of our knowledge of the magnitude of Nazi-

7 Alfred Burgsmüller / Rudolf Weth (eds.) 1984. *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung, Einführung und Dokumentation*. Neukirchen, p. 63.

crimes: the “evangelical truths” are not directed specifically against the national socialists and the state which was created by them. The declaration is not a document of Christian resistance against a murderous ideology as such. It does not pose the question of a choice between being “Christian or national socialist” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer had.⁸ It contains no direct reference to the persecution of the Jews. At best, one might interpret the words of the Church as a “community of brethren” in the 3rd thesis to be a hint at the Christian brotherhood in which all racial differentiation disappears. Or, one might relate the rejection of a doctrine legitimising a totalitarian state (5th thesis) directly to the national socialist state. However, Lutheran pastor Hans Asmussen emphasised in Barmen in the name of all members of the Confessing Synod that the Theological Declaration was not a protest against “the recent history of the people” or “against the new state”.⁹ Its concern was only preservation the church. This is a limitation in the confession that we cannot be content with. If we take seriously the fundamental meaning of the theses of Barmen regarding the life of the church of Jesus Christ *in the world*, we shall have to go “with Barmen and beyond Barmen”.

3. CONFESSING TO THE ONE WORD OF GOD

The entire Barmen Theological Declaration is to be read from the perspective of its first thesis. This thesis determines our understanding of all the others and reads: “*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*”.

This appears to be a perfectly clear statement. However, on closer inspection it allows for different understandings. This was the reason why the first thesis was accepted at Barmen with a different accent in its meaning which pertains specifically to the meaning one ascribes to the phrase “the one Word of God”. Karl Barth – essentially the author of the Barmen Theses – understood Jesus Christ himself to be the *only* Word of God whom we have to trust and obey. Especially in the Lutheran tradition “the one Word of God” was understood as the *decisive* Word of God through which God speaks to us. The far-reaching consequences of these different understandings are clear. If Jesus Christ is the *only* Word of God then everything that constitutes the Christian faith, Christian life, the church and its works in the world can *only* be decided by listening to Jesus Christ. As such the Barmen Theological Declaration would indeed constitute an innovation as it then excludes the so-called “natural theology” from proclamation and church life.¹⁰ In effect it then declares that the notion that we may recognise God through a source other and besides Jesus Christ a “false doctrine”. However, if Jesus Christ is understood to be the *decisive* Word of God it is not totally impossible that God may speak to us and be heard by us elsewhere than in Jesus Christ.

In the situation of 1934 both interpretations of the one Word of God coincided fortunately or maybe even providentially. The *one* Word of God here was at the same time the *decisive* Word to restrain the “German Christians”. It indicates where we encounter God’s revelation and what may be rightfully called “revelation” (thesis 1); It reveals to us the will of God, the meaning of his *Law* for our actions and demeanour (thesis 2); It shapes the *church*, that trusts and obeys him (theses 3 and 4); It provides an orientation for the relationship between church and state (thesis 5); and It commissions the church (thesis 6).

8 “Letter to Bishop Ove Valdemar Amnundsen from Aug. 10th, 1934.” *DBW* 13, p. 179.

9 Hans Asmussen, “Address on Theological Declaration Concerning the Present Situation of the German Evangelical Church”. In: Alfred Burgsmüller/Rudolf Weth (eds.), *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung Einführung und Dokumentation*. 1. c., 48. 55.

10 Cf. Karl Barth. 1958. *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik II/1*, Zollikon, pp. 194-200.

Despite the clear orientation of the six theses as determined by the Word of God, the different interpretations of this Word can be applied to all of them as well. For example, in the 5th thesis that deals with the state, one may notice that the understanding of the state is not clear regarding the one Word of God called Jesus Christ, but refers more generally to “what Scripture tells us”. Karl Barth, who had to rephrase his draft of this thesis at the synod, could only allude to the concerns for a christological substantiation in the 5th thesis with a quote from Hebrews 1:3. With the state in view it is said that the church “*trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things*” – including the state. In its version on hand, the 5th thesis as a whole sounds like an update of the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms.

The 1st thesis also leaves open the question whether God may speak to humankind apart from and besides through his Word as it is heard by the church. The thesis merely objects to “events and powers, figures and truths” that claim to be, besides Jesus Christ, sources of the church’s proclamation as God’s revelation. It does not deny that there may be “events and powers, figures and truths” and that God may reveal himself in them. Karl Barth said: “God can speak to us through Russian communism, a flute concert, a flowering shrub, or a dead dog”. He can do it through “heathens and atheists”.¹¹ For the one Word of God is not imprisoned in the witness of the Bible or in our faith. Rather, it is to be understood as the *expression of God himself*. It is “his own Word” (thesis 6) that precedes all human witness to it. It is the revelation of God, who is and has been ever-present in his invisibility and in the power of his Spirit to the entire world.

Therefore, we can witness this presence everywhere from out our understanding in faith. However, we do not have the right to shape just any image of God for ourselves out of the diversity of human experiences of God and forcefully apply that image to others. The result of such an application was seen in the appalling example of the “German Christians”. In hearing the one Word of God we can never do without a critical examination of all extra-Christian experiences of God and claims of truth. On the other hand, we have to keep an open mind regarding encounters with reflections of the one Word of God outside the Christian church. This is an important consideration today when the dialogue of religions has become an imperative challenge for the sake of peace on earth.

4. THE LAW OF CHRIST AND THE FREE RESPONSIBILITY OF BELIEVERS

The one Word of God is a *concrete* word. It has something particular to say. It is only because of this that it concerns us. However, we notice that the Barmen Declaration contains few words on this concretisation of the Word. What is basically said is that it is the Word of the forgiveness of sins (thesis 2) and thus of the “free grace” of God (thesis 6). With the state in view, the 5th thesis also points to “*the Kingdom of God, God’s commandment and righteousness*” without being any more explicit. Without doubt, this retentiveness in further defining the one Word of God has as its reason the necessity of the churches in 1934 to concentrate on hearing this Word at all. Therefore, it was sufficient to point out the decisive fact that, if the church hears the Word of God, then freedom of sin, which destroys the relationship with God and human relationships with each other, becomes the starting point of its very existence.

The Barmen Declaration gains its dynamic profile by taking this experience of freedom as an obligation to act in a specific way. The 2nd thesis says: “The assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins” turns into “*God’s claim upon our whole life*”. This statement also allows for an understanding

11 Karl Barth. 1932. *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1*, München, pp. 55f.

with a different accent. Most of the members of the Barmen synod may have understood this in the sense of the *tertius usus legis* (the third use of the law). The justification of the sinner by God has to be followed by sanctification of our actions according to the will of God. This is not wrong. However, the statement that it is the will of God that the claim of Jesus Christ is valid for “all areas in our life” then has been and today still is problematic (for many theologians): Does this not mean that the Gospel is declared law? Can Jesus Christ give directions for social politics, for the economy and for scientific procedures?

Here too we need to closely read the declaration. In the 2nd thesis it says: Through the claim of Jesus Christ “*through him there comes to us joyful liberation from the godless ties of this world for free, grateful service to his creatures*”. The emphasised use of the word family *freedom* stands out in this passage. “*Joyful liberation*” must lead to “*free, grateful service*”. Liberation here means to be free of the “*godless ties*” of this world. And the latter means all that we encounter in this world and from this world claiming to be God’s ties.¹² Nothing in this world is worth tying ourselves to as to God; neither society, nor politics, not the economy, nor science.

Positively put this means: We are free in our faith in Jesus Christ to respect the laws of the world in their relative secularity and to make use of them in such a way. However, being free and responsible human beings we have to make decisions regarding how these laws serve God’s creatures. They do not serve God’s creatures if they cause people to become nothing more than anonymous numbers under the inherent necessities of the economy, science, and society; they do not serve God’s creatures if they are used as tools of oppression and in the violation of human dignity. Under the claim of Jesus Christ the Christian community has to state which human possibilities in the realms of politics, economics, and science will or will not benefit the dignity of those who are affirmed by Jesus Christ. Therefore, from this position the Christian community cannot accept claims that the principles of globalisation, which condemn so many people to a life of poverty and misery, are absolute laws. From this position Bonhoeffer demanded of all Christianity to ostracise war.

Accordingly, the 2nd thesis today calls upon us to ask ourselves how we perceive our responsibility for God’s creation, which correlates with our liberation for “service to his creatures” everywhere.

5. THE FREE WITNESS AND THE FREE MINISTRY TO THE CONGREGATION

What mattered most in 1934 was the preservation of a church that rightfully holds the title church of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Barmen Theological Declaration has a strong tendency towards determining the nature of the church. The 3rd, 4th, and 6th, but in effect the 5th thesis as well, say what the church of Jesus Christ is and what it is commissioned to do. I cannot analyse this entire, very tight text in detail. Therefore, let me point out four aspects that we can understand as a lasting orientation for the very existence of our churches.

First of all, the church is to be understood as a community of people constituted by the presence of Jesus Christ. The patriarchal attitude of the authors of these theses prevented them from seeing any problem with calling this community a “community of brothers”. This is a point to be criticised. However, what remains important is that this community is said to function as a witness. In a world that is still determined by sin it has to show what changes the presence of Jesus

12 The ties to “blood and soil” (“Blut und Boden”) was considered such a claim by, for example by Werner Elert (cf. Werner Elert. 1934. *Bekennnis, Blut und Boden*.. Leipzig, p. 22).

Christ brings about in the community of humankind. Not just the church's message but its very existence speaks for itself. As a community of pardoned sinners it represents a new world in changing from all-divisive sin towards the community of the kingdom of God. Therefore, affiliations to the world, which is still dominated by sin, must never be an excuse to disobey the "direction" of Jesus Christ for a new life.

Secondly, even in 1934 the claim that the church "with its order" had to witness to its affiliation to Jesus Christ was considered provocative. According to Lutheran Reformed tradition a church order is a "purely secular thing". However, according to Barmen this must not lead to the church to merely imitate law and forms of organisation that are valid elsewhere in society. The introduction of the "Führer-principle" in the church may have been an extreme example of such an imitation and contrary to the very essence of the Christian church, but from the perspective of the 3rd thesis of Barmen, the order and structure of the church need to serve this essence. Practical and financial constraints, and the administration and bureaucracy that accompany it, should not dominate a Christian church any more than structures from the past should. The church that I am a member of suffers considerably from the fact that this is often the case. Barmen calls upon every church to examine whether, as an institution in this world, it serves its message and the people or if it clouds it and harms the living community of believers.

Thirdly, thesis 4 updates of the Reformed doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers". This means that all who belong to a congregation stand in the service of Jesus Christ and are witnesses to him. The special and various offices necessary in the congregation are dimensions of the one service entrusted to the entire congregation. No one has the right to use a church office or position in order to place him- or herself above others and lord over them as this would undermine the service towards the community expected of all its members. It also leads to a division in the church between official clergy and lay people, between a speaking active church and a silent passive church. In contrast, Karl Barth interprets thesis 4 saying: "In the Christian congregation, we are either all officials or no one - but if we all are, then we are all servants."¹³

The Barmen Theological Declaration envisions a church where all members encourage one another to allow their individual talents to blossom in the ministry of Jesus Christ. The greater the intensity of this, the better the church can show itself as community of people beginning a new life as God's creation.

Fourthly, the church of Jesus Christ as the Barmen Theological Declaration understands it can never be an end in itself. It misses the point if its witness and its ministry are restricted to the confines of community of believers. This community itself is indeed meant to be a speaking community *for others*. The 6th thesis brings out the dynamics of everything said about the essence of the church by assigning it to the *commission* of the church. This commission is to "deliver to all people ... the message of the free grace of God." The universal validity of the grace of Jesus Christ correlates with the delivering of this message to all people. The church is a community stepping out into the world. It cannot be stopped from approaching people and speaking to those who have never heard of the grace of Jesus Christ. This is its freedom, unhindered and unlimited - especially by any self-chosen ends and purposes.

It is remarkable that the Barmen Theological Declaration in its last thesis once more stresses the freedom of the church. Freedom virtually becomes a keyword of this declaration, expressing the special profile of the church of Jesus Christ. If the church lives out of the free grace of God, it will find strength and courage amidst sinful hostility towards God and humankind to be the

13 Karl Barth. 1955. *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/2*. Zollikon-Zürich, p. 787.

undaunted defender of all those whom God loves and affirms. It will be a church of the free Word and free action, always facing a free horizon, because the one Word of God will not cease to reveal this horizon to it. In this sense the Barmen Theological Declaration is a confession of today.

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