The Theological Declaration of Barmen

OCTOBER 7, 2012
Agenda

• **The Theological Declaration of Barmen: What Is It?**
  • Who wrote it; When; Where; Why?
  • What struggle was the Church facing that made Barmen necessary?
  • Why did our Church incorporate it into the Book of Confessions which define our approach?
  • Why is it relevant for today? What struggles are we facing to which Barmen can help guide our response?

• **Timeline Leading up to the Declaration**

• **Discussion of the Barmen Declaration**

• **What Sin Does Barmen Disavow?**

• **Where to Learn More**

• **Now Thank We All Our God, last verse**
What Is It?

“The Theological Declaration of Barmen was written by a group of church leaders in Germany to help Christians withstand the challenges of the Nazi party and of the so-called “German Christians,” a popular movement that saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Hitler’s National Socialism.”

Primary Author: Theologian Karl Barth

When: May 29–31, 1934

Where: Germany, City of Wupperthal, Barmen

Why? The rise of Hitler and Nazis in Germany threatened not just the civil and political rights of Germans, but also matters of conscience and faith.

The Nazi government installed its own hand-picked delegate as leader of the German Church, and made it illegal to preach sermons opposing this and related actions. In protest, the pastors, theologians, and university professors who gathered in Barmen felt they had to explain the theological errors inherent in state control of Christianity.
Timeline Leading up to the Declaration of Barmen

- **1919** – Hitler founds the National Socialist Party in Germany.
- **August 11, 1919** – After WW1, the new constitution of the German Reich ends the “state church” system, although some denominations are still supported by civil taxes.
- **1922** – Wittenberg – German Evangelical Federation of Churches is formed.

- **June 6, 1932** – Publication of guiding principles for the “German Christian” movement, created at the initiative of the Nazis. These principles reflect the main points of Nazi propaganda.
- **January 30, 1933** – Adolf Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany.
- **February 27, 1933** – Hitler issues an emergency order virtually abolishing civil rights.
- **April 3-5, 1933** – First national convention of “German Christians.” Slogan: “The State of Adolf Hitler appeals to the Church, and the Church has to hear his call.”
- **April, 1933** – Hitler appoints a State Commissioner of the Evangelical Church. Appoints Ludwig Muller to the responsibility of creating a “Reich Church.”
- **July 14, 1933** – New constitution of the German Evangelical Church accepted by State Law.
  - Hitler outlaws all political parties except the National Socialist Party.
- **July-Aug-Sept, 1933** – Church elections; “German Christians” win control of the new “Reich Church.”
  - Muller is elected Reich Bishop at the General Synod of the Prussian Church (largest Landeskirch).
  - German President dies (Aug 2); Hitler proclaims himself “Reichsfuehrer” (National Leader) as well as Chancellor.
September 21, 1933 – Martin Niemoeller establishes the Pastors’ Emergency League in opposition to the “German Christians.”

November 13, 1933 – Berlin Sport Palace demonstration staged by “German Christians.” Dr. Reinhold Krause delivers speech claiming that the “German Christian” movement is the next stage of the German Reformation; the first step being to get rid of the Old Testament “with its Jewish morality... And stories of cattle dealers,” and also to purge the New Testament of all “superstitious” passages.

November 19, 1933 – Pastors’ Emergency League demands the denunciation of Krause.

January 3-4, 1934 – First Free Reformed Synod meeting. Niemoller and theologian Karl Barth draw up the first anti-Nazi confession by an organized church body. It is promptly endorse by those present.

January 4, 1934 – Reich Bishop Muller issues a “Muzzling Order” forbidding any public criticism of church administration or discussion of church controversy.

January 25, 1934 – Hitler summons church leaders to a meeting in attempt to shore up Muller and stifle unwelcome press comment in the rest of the world. Niemoeller continued to assert the primacy of God. This angers his supporters, who feel his outspokenness has ruined the last chance to patch things up.

January 26, 1934 – Most of those in attendance at the meeting with Hitler, withdraw from the Pastors’ Emergency League and write a letter denouncing Niemoeller.

April 1934 – Dr. August Jager, a man of anti-Christian convictions, is appointed Legal Administrator of the Reich Church.

April 22, 1934 – The leaders of the Pastors’ Emergency League form the Constitutional Evangelical Church of Germany and declare it to be the true church within the German Evangelical Church.

May 29-31, 1934 – Barmen Synod. Karl Barth drafts the Declaration of Barmen, which is unanimously adopted by the Synod.
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 made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” (I 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 is he 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 to itself, or allow to be given to it, special leaders vested with ruling powers.
5. “Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (I 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.” (II 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.
What Sin Does Barmen Disavow?

**IDOLATRY**

Idolatry = Putting any human or creation of humans, or anything of the natural world, which God created, ahead of God.

The First Commandment:
“You shall have no other god before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them.” - Exodus 20:3, 4, 5a.

“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.” - Book of Confessions.
All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
The Son and Him Who reigns with Them in highest Heaven;
The one eternal God, Whom earth and Heav’n adore;
For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.

Now Thank We All Our God, last verse
words by Martin Rinkart, c.1636
translation by Catherine Winkworth, 1856
Copyright: Public Domain
Reference Materials
Where to Learn More

(1) START: The Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Can be downloaded as a PDF from the PC(USA) website: 


(3) Other websites that may be useful:
http://www.creeds.net/reformed/barmen.htm
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barmen_Declaration
http://www.gci.org/history/barmen

a. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God’s grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in *The Book of Confessions*. In these confessional statements the church declares to its members and to the world
   a. who and what it is,
   b. what it believes,
   c. what it resolves to do.

b. These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation. (*Book of Order, G-2.0100*)
The Theological Declaration of Barmen was written by a group of church leaders in Germany to help Christians withstand the challenges of the Nazi party and of the so-called “German Christians,” a popular movement that saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Hitler’s National Socialism.

In January 1933, after frustrating years in which no government in Germany was able to solve problems of economic depression and mass unemployment, Adolph Hitler was named chancellor. By playing on people’s fear of communism and Bolshevism, he was able to persuade the Parliament to allow him to rule by edict. 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.

Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. The German Christians exalted the racially pure nation and the rule of Hitler as God’s will for the German people.

Nonetheless, some in the churches resisted. Among those few determined church leaders who did oppose the church’s captivity to National Socialism 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 in Gemarke Church, Barmen, in the city of Wupperthal, May 29–31, 1934. Among the one hundred thirty-nine delegates were ordained ministers, fifty-three church members, and six university professors.

The chief item of business was discussion of a declaration to appeal to 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 false doctrine 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.

The declaration was debated and adopted without amendment, and the Confessing Church, that part of the church that opposed the German Christians, rallied around it.
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.

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 interrelations 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 are also thereby 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 made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” (I 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 is he 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 to itself, or allow to be given to it, special leaders vested with ruling powers.

5. “Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (I 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.” (II 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.