

TRUTH AT ALL COSTS: THEOLOGICAL DECLARATION OF BARMEN

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Ephesians 4:1-16

As I mentioned last week, the Presbyterian Church (USA)—our denomination—has a constitution. This constitution consists of the Book of Order and the Book of Confessions. The Book of Order contains the nuts and bolts of the day-to-day task of maintaining the Presbyterian Church institution. The Book of Confessions, on the other hand, is different. It contains no rules or regulations, statutes or laws. Instead, it contains twelve historic confessional documents of the church. Because we choose to anchor ourselves to these confessions, our church is, by definition, a confessional or confessing church. A confessional church is one that adheres to certain statements of faith that seek to unify the people in Jesus Christ.

Confessions don't replace the Scripture, but, instead, point us back to Scripture. As you have seen in these confessions, we seek unity in Christ, not uniformity in belief. That is what makes being a Presbyterian so maddening sometimes. As preacher, I don't tell you what to believe, I seek to instruct you in scripture and urge you to mold your life around God's Word. We Presbyterians are often criticized as being wishy-washy, but we're not. We adhere to Scripture as if it were an unmoving rock.

Our confessions are statements of belief. They are usually produced at contentious times in our history—times that would benefit from a powerful declaration of faith. The Apostles Creed is a concise statement of belief for all Christians. The Nicene Creed affirms our understanding of the Trinity and was written at a time when the nature of Jesus Christ was under assault. In the sixteenth century, the confessions of the Reformation reflect times when the church was undergoing cataclysmic changes. Here we find the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Second Helvetic Confession. A century later, when the gains of the Reformation seemed to be slipping away, the Westminster Assembly convened in London and confirmed the Reformation ideals of Christ alone, Scripture alone, faith alone, and grace alone giving us the Westminster Confession of Faith.

In the modern era, we have the Declaration of Barmen which was a repudiation of the rise of Nazism in Germany. The Belhar Confession of 1986 is a document from South Africa and is a statement rejecting apartheid in the country. The Confession of 1967 arose at a time of social confusion and upheaval and rising secularism in the U.S. and was an opportunity for the Presbyterian Church to take a stand in this tumultuous time. The Brief Confession of Faith in 1996 helped unite the divided southern and northern Presbyterian churches into the denomination we enjoy today.

For the past four weeks we have been examining these confessions which emerged from the Protestant Reformation. I have done this in recognition that October 31st—two days from now—marks the five-hundredth anniversary of the day that Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses—his protest against the church's practice of selling indulgences.

Today, we are stepping out of the period of the Reformation and into the twentieth century to look at the Theological Declaration of Barmen, which was written in 1934. I am making this jump because as Protestants we do not view the Reformation as a single point in history, but that Reformation continues, that the church is always in the process of reforming, always changing, always adapting to God's presence in our lives.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen emerged during the rise of Nazism in Germany. You would assume that this document would be a condemnation of Hitler's government. But it is not. Surprisingly, the document does not address the government at all. Instead, it targets the German church.

In 1933 and 1934, the political landscape in Germany changed at a breakneck pace. Germany's defeat in World War I had produced in Germany a spirit of nationalistic defiance. A number of social elements converged at the time to inspire the German spirit with a strong sense of nationalism. A large portion of the German church was swept up in this movement. One of a number of religious groups which emerged at this time was one known as the Faith Movement of German Christians. This group preceded Hitler but Hitler's rise to power emboldened the movement. Members of this group are known as "German Christians." These German Christians placed their nationalist interest on par with their Christian interest. They believed that "God's law assumed historical form in the leader Adolf Hitler and in the nationalist socialist state fashioned by him." Furthermore, they wrote, "this law speaks in the history of our people that has grown out of blood and soil. Fidelity to this law demands of us the fight for honor and freedom." If that phrase "blood and soil" sounds familiar, it is commonly chanted by white supremacists, including yesterday in Shelbyville.¹

Many German Christians successfully assumed strategic leadership positions in the Protestant churches of Germany. Their goal was to unify the twenty-seven regional churches into a single confederation, and to bring the Protestant church as a whole in line with the nationalistic ideas of Nazism.

I would like to offer you a brief rundown of the events of 1933 and 1934.

- On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler is named chancellor of Germany.

¹ <http://abcnews.go.com/US/tennessee-towns-bracing-upcoming-white-nationalist-rallies/story?id=50766204>

- On February 27, the Parliament building in Berlin is burned. This is known as the Reichstag fire. Hitler places blame for this fire on the Communists and urges the president to issue emergency decrees severely limiting civil liberties. Communist leaders are arrested including all Communist members of Parliament which enables the Nazis to become the majority party.
- In March, Hitler makes a speech before parliament upholding the power of churches, and then on the same day suspends the right of parliament to legislate, control the budget, or ratify treaties with foreign governments.
- In April, we first begin to see organized efforts against the Jews.
- Also in April, the German Christians hold their first national convention. They seek to organize the churches under a single bishop into a national church to achieve coordination with the political order.
- A few days later, Jews who serve in government or civil service are forced to retire from their jobs.
- A week later, the National Socialist German Workers Party is declared the only permitted political party in the country.
- From June through November, the German Christians accrue more and more power. Hitler appoints a chairman over the twenty-seven Protestant churches. Then, national elections for officers in the Protestant churches lead to an overwhelming victory for the German Christians. They achieve this with considerable backing from the Nazi party.
- In November 1933, a massive rally of German Christians is held at the Berlin Sports Palace. The main speaker calls for a completion of Martin Luther's Reformation by the establishment of a single national church. He calls for the abolishment of the Old Testament, for the purging of the New Testament of "the theology of an inferiority complex evidence by the rabbi Paul," and the separation from all non-Aryan Christians. This rally was a step too far for the churches and on the following Sunday letters of protest were read from the pulpits of thirty-thousand Protestant churches.
- In January 1934, an order is issued forbidding pastors from preaching on any ecclesiastical controversies or criticizing the national church government. This was called the muzzling order. Again, protests are read from pulpits.
- In April, opposition to the German Christians holds an assembly calling themselves the Confessing Church in Germany. And then in May, the opposition gathered in the city of Barmen and they name themselves the Confessional Synod of the German Protestant church. There are 138 delegates at the assembly and they unanimously adopt a declaration prepared primarily

by the theologian Karl Barth. This document is our confession—the Theological Declaration of Barmen.

The confession targets the Faith Movement of German Christians. To better understand the German Christians, it is necessary to read their document called Guiding Principles which was written in 1933. In this document, we read that the German Christians sought the reorganization of the church into one federation. They wanted this church to be a “vital” national church embracing “positive Christianity” and “heroic piety.”

They called for the reawakened German sense of vitality which had once been respected in the church. They wrote, “We see in race, folk², and nation, orders of existence granted and entrusted to us by our God.” In other words, some people are deemed by God to be better than others.

They also write, “We demand that the nation be protected against the unfit and inferior.” This is a reference to the Protestant church’s long practice of caring for the mentally and physically disabled. The Protestant church had homes across the country where they cared for the disabled. It is estimated that by 1940 that 70,000 disabled people had been put to death.

They also assert, “In the mission to the Jews we perceive a grave danger to our nationality.” And, “We want a church that is rooted in our nationhood.”

It is against all of this that the members of the Protestant churches organized in opposition to the German Christians and prepared their declaration.

The Declaration itself is brief—only a couple of pages. The purpose of the document is to find a “common” message to address the current “needs and temptations” of the church. The unity of the churches comes only from the word of God, and not through force or false Doctrine. After establishing the purpose of the document the writers make six assertions that they label as truths.

1. Jesus Christ is the one Word of God.
2. That through Christ our sins are forgiven.
3. That the Christian church is the congregation of believers who must testify in the midst of a sinful world.
4. Church officers are not to establish dominion over any others. There are no special leaders vested with ruling powers. We are all equal.

² The English word ‘folk’ does not begin to convey the depth of meaning of the German word *volk*. Volk carries the connotation of people/country/blood/race.

5. The church recognizes and supports that the state government has a purpose to provide justice and peace. The state, however, shall not become “the single and totalitarian order of human life.”
6. The purpose of the church is to deliver God's word to all people. The church serves God's Word; God's Word does not serve the church.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen was a powerful voice calling Christians to confront what the Apostle Paul called “the wind of doctrine,” and to withstand “people’s trickery.”

We see all of this in the church of the German Christians at the time. The Theological Declaration of Barmen was an important document emerging from this chaotic and terrible time in our history. It became a focal point for the church. It brought to light certain truths. But more than anything, it is a reminder of what we believe—we believe in Jesus Christ and that Christ brings salvation to the world, that Christ and God are greater than any institution that humans may create. Many people who participated in bringing this document to the world suffered. They were imprisoned or killed. We are thankful for this work and the work of all the saints who bring the Word of Christ to a very broken world.

I have greatly enjoyed preparing this series of sermons for you. It has been a joy to explore these Confessions and link them together through history. I was not sure where these sermons would lead. I do know that we have barely scratched the surface of these great documents. There are some many great people who sacrificed so much so that we might have these documents and the church today as we know it. We are blessed.

I hope from our study that these Confessions empower you to ask questions, to explore your faith, to challenge the truths that are presented to us in this world. Each confession in word or in spirit encourages us to do that. It is our questions that make us stronger as Christians. It is these confessions which bring us closer to Christ. Amen.ⁱ

ⁱ Two articles which were immensely helpful were *The Theological Declaration of Barmen Revisited* by Ulrich Mauser in *Theology Matters*, Vol 6, No. 6, Nov/Dec 2000, and *What Does It Mean to be a Confessional Church?* By Merwyn S. Johnson, *Presbyterian Outlook*, September 17, 2007. Both are available online.