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The Theological Declaration of Barmen Revisited

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In May 1967, the 179th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America adopted the Book of Confessions, combining ten confessions into a collection of statements of confessional character which are to be regarded as “subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him” (Book of Confessions, 9.03). Included in this Book of Confessions were two doctrinal texts from the 20th century, the Theological Declaration of Barmen of 1934 and the Confession of 1967. After the reunification of the two largest Presbyterian churches into the Presbyterian Church (USA) a Brief Statement of Faith was added to the Book of Confessions in 1983. Thus, our Book of Confessions in the Presbyterian Church (USA) today contains two ancient creeds, six documents from the extended period of the Reformation, and three texts from the twentieth century.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen is the product of a crisis in the Protestant church whose dimension is unprecedented since the Reformation of the 16th century. It was written and agreed upon by a group opposed, not so much to the secular government of the Nazis, as to the national church government that acted in defiance of the church’s constitution and supported a brand of teaching

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which the framers of Barmen condemned as false teaching. The signatories of Barmen were, however, also conscious of speaking out against a crisis in the church’s teaching and practice far older than the political and ecclesiastical turmoil in the Germany of the 1930s. Their Declaration was a call to theological repentance of a history of errors that had plagued the church for the previous 200 years. As a voice in this crisis, the Theological Declaration was, to the framers of Barmen, both a beacon of hope, because it had found a common ground on which historically separated branches of the Reformation could stand together, and simultaneously, a document of separation from a strong, indeed from the ruling, group in the church. Barmen is, at one and the same time, the promulgation of a miracle discovering a new unity and the announcement of a separation on principle from heretical teaching. One of the first commentators on Barmen spoke of the joint confession of Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches, as “a miracle before our eyes,” and fifty years later, one of the original signatories of the Declaration wrote, in retrospect, that Barmen “appeared to us then like a miracle from God.”¹ It is this dual character of the Theological Declaration of Barmen that will occupy the center of attention in this essay: Barmen as the promulgation of a new-found unity among Protestant churches which had traditionally been alienated from each other, and Barmen as a pronouncement of separation from false teaching and practice in the same churches.

Barmen is the product of German Protestantism of the 1930s. We shall endeavor to listen to the voice of the

Theological Declaration as a historical document whose origin is rooted in circumstances far removed from the situation of the Presbyterian Church (USA) at the start of the third millennium. We shall therefore resist attempts to draw quick parallels between the Barmen Declaration and our own situation today. But we shall also include in this exercise of listening to a historical voice our own Christian life with its own problems and demands in the hope that a dialogue will ensue in which a word of the past can engage, without losing its integrity, in living dialogue with our own voice in the present.

In The Lion's Den

The Barmen Theological Declaration does not confront the Hitler regime directly. It is not a manifesto of a movement of political resistance against the Nazi government. Its framers took pains to distance themselves from the accusation of being disloyal to the political order that had been introduced into German life with Hitler's assumption of power in January 1933. When Hans Asmussen presented the officially approved explanatory comments to the delegates of the Synod on the day before the unanimous reception of the Declaration, he noted that the accusation of rebellion against the state, leveled against the Barmen Synod, was completely false and unjust.² Already in the preparatory stages of the Barmen Synod it was abundantly clear that the opposition, against which the Declaration was to be presented, was a movement within the Protestant Churches of Germany. Karl Koch, who as president of the Synod of Westphalia had been given the responsibility to coordinate efforts of the emerging confessing church, wrote to Karl Barth three weeks before the meeting of the Barmen Synod: "In the confessional declaration we are concerned with the clarification of the common aim of the (Protestant) confessions vis-a-vis the German Christians, their teaching and their methods." Koch's subsequent five points outline exclusively ecclesiastical themes and make no mention of Hitler's state.³ Months before, a young aide to the Lutheran bishop of Bavaria, who also happened to be an early member of the National Socialist Party, reported about a meeting with two leaders of the confessing church (Koch and Niemöller): "The entire evening there was not one word directed against the state ... nothing about the National Socialist Party, nothing at all, but simply the uncompromising struggle against the non-church (of the German Christians)."⁴ The Barmen Declaration is, without a doubt, a document of vigorous resistance. But its resistance is aimed at a danger inside the Protestant German church at that time. In its original intention Barmen called for vigilance in a struggle involving opposing movements within one church.

In spite of this orientation, the Synod of Barmen in May 1934 has become one of the most important expressions of a political resistance against Hitler's totalitarian rule. Many papers and entire books evaluating the Barmen Declaration after World War II see in the Declaration a clarion call through which "the Church confronts the

Nazis."⁵ These assessments of Barmen as an event signaling political resistance are not misleading, although they reflect a view of the effects of Barmen that could be gained only in retrospect. Factually, Barmen speaks to an inner-ecclesiastical controversy in a manner that political consequences are necessarily implied. It is needed, therefore, to sketch the political events of the fateful years 1933 and 1934 that brought the establishment of Hitler's tyranny and the consolidation of various religious groups into the "Faith Movement of the German Christians" who became allies of Nazi ideology and power. The hidden polemic of the Barmen Declaration against this alliance could not be understood otherwise.

The German defeat in World War I (1918) had produced in Germany a spirit of nationalistic defiance. A cult of the supposedly superior Germanic spirit had spread already in the 19th century, propagated by the idealistic philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, advanced by the Romantic Movement, popularized by the musical dramas of Richard Wagner, and given the form of ideological theory by such non-Germans as Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, the pioneer of the myth of Aryanism, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. The military defeat of 1918, far from dampening the Germanic spirit, had only served to fan its fire. Groups celebrating the Germanic way sprang up in different forms, and under different names, all over German lands, and soon undertook to amalgamate the Christian tradition with nationalistic aspirations. Two examples of principles adopted by such groups may illustrate the ideology for which they stood. In Ernst Bergmann's *Confessio Germanica* of 1933 one was told, in mocking imitation of a trinitarian faith: "I believe in the God of German religion who works in nature, in the exalted human spirit, and in the strength of his people. And in the helper in need, Krist who fights for the nobility of the human soul. And in Germany, the land for the cultivation of a new humanity." Some more remnants of a Christian substance are still preserved in the creed of another group, also from 1933, in which loyalty to Hitler and his party has already been integrated into a religious faith statement: "We German Christians believe in our savior Jesus Christ, in the power of his cross and resurrection. Jesus' life and death teaches us that the way of fight is also the way of love and the way of life ... As in every people, the eternal God has implanted as creator in our people also a law that is distinct to it. This law assumed historical form in the leader Adolf Hitler and in the national-socialist state fashioned by him. 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."⁶

Out of the diverse groups that shared the nationalistic-religious convictions captured in these quotes, the Faith Movement of the German Christians arose. Under the leadership of the Berlin pastor Joachim Hossenfelder it had consolidated itself as a missionary reform movement already before Hitler became chancellor of Germany. But Hitler's takeover of power provided the stimulus for

Hossenfelder's faith-movement to pursue its nationalistic-religious aims in close alliance with the Nazi government.

It is this Faith Movement of the German Christians which is the target of the attack by the Barmen Theological Declaration. Since these "German Christians" had, already by July 1933, succeeded in large part to occupy strategic positions of leadership in the Protestant churches in Germany, Barmen's call to resistance implied also the refusal to accept the organizational claims of the "German Christians" who had set themselves the goal to bring the Protestant church in line with the nationalistic ideas of the Nazi rule. For that reason, the Barmen Declaration included necessarily a political statement. To understand this dimension of the Declaration we must, first, trace the outlines of the history of Nazism between January 30, 1933 and May 31, 1934, paying attention to the simultaneous ascent to power by the Faith Movement of the German Christians.

Events during the first 18 months of Hitler's regime happen at break-neck speed. Through a series of executive orders and legislative decrees the deadly vice of a totalitarian system is laid upon a people who, for the most part, greet it enthusiastically or succumb to it passively.

January 30, 1933:

Hitler is named Chancellor of Germany by the President of the German Republic.

February 27-28, 1933:

Burning of the Parliament Building in Berlin. Although details of the fire remain uncertain, it appears beyond doubt that the Nazis were the arsonists. The fire is blamed on the communists and while the building is still smoldering, a decree suspending civil liberties is issued. Called the Decree for the Protection of the People and the State, the order states that "restrictions on personal liberty, on the right of free expression of opinion, including freedom of the press; on the rights of assembly and association; and violations of the privacy of postal, telegraphic and telephonic communications; and warrants for house searches, orders for confiscations as well as restrictions on property, are also permissible beyond the legal limits otherwise prescribed."⁷

March 23, 1933:

Hitler's speech before Parliament declares the protection of the German churches by the state. He states: "The national government sees in the two Christian Confessions (Catholic and Protestant) the most important factors for the preservation of our nationality. It will respect the agreements that have been drawn up between them and the provincial states ... The national government will provide and guarantee to the Christian Confessions the influence due them in the schools and education ... The rights of the churches will not be curtailed; their position in relation to the state will not be changed."⁸ On the same day the "Law for removing the Distress of People

and Nation" is issued canceling the right of Parliament to legislate, control the budget, and ratify treaties with foreign states.

April 1, 1933:

First climax of organized anti-Jewish activity. Boycott of Jewish businesses and stores.

April 3-5, 1933:

First national convention of the "German Christians" in Berlin. The convention declares it to be a goal of the movement to re-organize the 27 Protestant regional churches into a single, national church under the single leadership of a national bishop to achieve coordination with the political order.

April 7, 1933:

The "Law for the Reconstruction of a National Civil Service" contains an "Aryan paragraph" that forces Jewish officials to retire from civil service, and a paragraph saying that "officials who, in view of their previous political activity, cannot guarantee that they will support the national state at all times and without reservation can be discharged from the service."⁹

April 14, 1933:

A new law declares: "The National Socialist German Worker's Party constitutes the only political Party in Germany. Whoever undertakes to maintain the organizational structure of another political party or to form a new political party will be punished with penal servitude up to three years or with imprisonment of from six months to three years, if the deed is not subject to a greater penalty according to other regulations."¹⁰

May 27, 1933:

Delegates of all regional Protestant churches elect Friedrich von Bodelschwingh as the first national Protestant bishop, defeating the "German Christian" candidate Ludwig Müller.

June 24, 1933:

In an act of blatant interference by the state in church affairs, the Prussian Minister of Education appoints the "German Christian" August Jäger to the ad hoc invented position of State Commissioner in the Protestant church of Prussia. Jäger discharges all church elected officers and appoints in their place "German Christians." Nearly all members of the Prussian church boards are dismissed. Jäger declares opposition to his actions treason against the nation and the state. Von Bodelschwingh resigns as national bishop in protest.

June 28, 1933:

Ludwig Müller pronounces himself, with the authorization of Chancellor Hitler, chairman of the council of the Federation of the 27 regional Protestant churches.

July 12, 1933:

A new constitution of the Federation of Protestant churches in Germany is published, the work of a committee appointed by Ludwig Müller. Hitler, to avoid divisive fights inside the Protestant churches, relieves August Jäger of his office and reinstates the dismissed Prussian pastors and administrators.

July 26, 1933:

General national elections for offices in the Protestant churches lead, not without considerable pressure from the Nazi party, to an overwhelming victory of the “German Christians.”

September 4-5, 1933:

The church senate of the Prussian Protestant church elects Ludwig Müller to its presidency with the title “bishop,” eliminates the older positions with the title “superintendents,” and creates 10 new bishops in their place installing reliable “German Christians” in the new bishoprics. Opponents of pastoral rank are dismissed, non-Aryans are excluded from pastoral positions.

September 27, 1933:

Election of Ludwig Müller as national bishop by a national synod dominated by “German Christians.” Müller declares triumphantly: “The old has passed away. The new has emerged. The church’s political struggle is past. Now begins the struggle for the soul of the people.”¹¹

November 13, 1933:

Mass rally of the “German Christians” in the Sports Palace of Berlin. The main speaker, Reinhold Krause, urges the completion of the Lutheran Reformation through the establishment of a single national church, the abolition of the Old Testament, the purge of the New Testament from the theology of an inferiority complex evidenced by the rabbi Paul, and the separation from all non-Aryan Christians. With this rally in Berlin the “German Christians” overextend their credit. The following Sunday letters of protest are read from the pulpits of 30,000 Protestant churches, Krause is dismissed, and the national bishop distances himself from the event. But, in spite of that, on

December 21, 1933:

Bishop Müller, acting on his own, signs an agreement with the leader of the Hitler-Youth incorporating 700,000 members of the youth work of the Protestant churches into the party organization of the Hitler-Youth.

January 4, 1934:

The “Decree concerning the Restoration of Order in the German Protestant Church” is issued by the national bishop, called the “muzzling order.” It forbids any reference in sermons to ecclesiastical controversies, and announces that pastors have to face immediate suspension and cuts in salary if they publicly criticize the national church government.

The “muzzling order” is met by strong, negative responses. A protest is read from nearly 400,000 Protestant pulpits in Germany that amounts to open rejection of the bishop’s authority. Under the impact of the ensuing chaotic situation Hitler acts on

January 25, 1934:

Hitler meets in Berlin with leading figures of the German Protestant churches. The meeting explodes through the use of a dirty trick that was prepared

ahead of time. A wiretap is read, in the middle of the meeting, of a phone conversation of one of the leaders in attendance (Martin Niemöller) that is less than respectful of key personalities in the national government. Hitler has a fit of rage, the church leaders—with one exception—disclaim their common cause with Niemöller and endorse the continued leadership of Ludwig Müller as the national bishop. The unity of the opposition against the “German Christians” appears irretrievably broken.

April 22, 1934:

Diligent efforts to mend the rift in the opposition, and arrogant behavior on the part of the ruling “German Christian” church government, lead to a joint conference of opposition delegates from many parts of Germany. The declaration of this assembly claims to speak “as the constitutional Protestant church of Germany,” denying the claim of the “German Christian” church government to speak for the church. Following up on this assembly in Ulm, the opposition, now called the “Confessing Church” in Germany, is to prepare a national synod, clarifying the legal, confessional, and practical situation of the “confessing church.” After only a few weeks of preparation, on

May 29-31, 1934:

The meeting of the “Confessional Synod of the German Protestant Church” takes place in Barmen. 138 delegates of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches adopt unanimously the Theological Declaration, together with a declaration concerning the legal status of the German Protestant churches, and a declaration about the practical work of the Confessional Synod.

The Advance of Neo-Paganism

The Theological Declaration of Barmen issues a call to resistance. It states unambiguously who the opposition is that must be resisted. For Barmen, the confession of the federation of German Protestant churches 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” (Book of Confessions, hereafter BoC, 8.07). Teaching and practice of this movement have brought about a situation in which “the theological basis” of German Protestantism “has been continually and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles, on the part of the leaders and spokesmen of the ‘German Christians’” (BoC 8.07). The “errors of the ‘German Christians’ of the present Reich Church government ... are devastating the Church” (BoC 8.09). Against their false teaching the Barmen Declaration is directed.

One might expect that the Declaration would consequently offer a refutation of specific topics that were characteristic of the teaching of the “German Christians.” This is, however, not the case. Even from the sentences of rejection that conclude each of the six theses of Barmen one could not derive a clear picture of the actual content

of the “German Christians” doctrinal proposals. The Barmen theses attempt to penetrate so much to the ground of the issues which were discussed at the time that a great deal of the concrete controversies is omitted. At the time of its publication the Declaration could depend on a high degree of familiarity with the critical issues raised by the “German Christians.” Some 70 years after Barmen, and in greatly different circumstances, we cannot assume this familiarity. It is, therefore, necessary to draw a picture of the ideas, hopes, and aspirations of the “German Christians” in the 1930s to understand the background on which Barmen is placed.

One of the most influential programmatic publications of the “German Christians” was the paper entitled “Guiding Principles of the Faith Movement of the German Christians” of June 6, 1933. Later publications of this movement differed from these guidelines. Some were much more extreme, others were more cautious. But the Guiding Principles of 1932 remain a good introduction into the spirit of the “German Christian” movement. Here is the text of this document.¹²

*The Guiding Principles of the Faith Movement
of the German Christians*

1. These guiding principles seek to show to all believing Germans the ways and the goals leading to the reorganization of the Church. They are not intended to be or to take the place of a Confession of faith, or to disturb the confessional basis of the evangelical Church. They are a living Confession.

2. We are fighting for a union of the twenty-nine Churches included in the “German Evangelical Federation of Churches” into one evangelical State Church. We march under the banner: “Outwardly united and in the might of the spirit gathered around Christ and his Word, inwardly rich and varied, each a Christian according to his own character and calling.”

3. The “German Christian” ticket is not intended to be a political party in the Church in the ordinary sense. It pertains to all evangelical Christians of German stock. The time of parliamentarianism has outlived itself even in the Church. Ecclesiastical parties have no religious sanction to represent Church people and are opposed to the lofty purpose of becoming a national Church. We want a vital national Church that will express all the spiritual forces of our people.

4. We take our stand upon the ground of positive Christianity. We profess an affirmative and typical faith in Christ, corresponding to the German spirit of Luther and to a heroic piety.

5. We want the reawakened German sense of vitality respected in our Church. We want to make our Church a vital force. In the fateful struggle for the freedom and future of Germany the Church in its administration has proven weak. Hitherto the Church has not called for an

all-out fight against atheistic Marxism and the reactionary Center Party. Instead it has made an ecclesiastical pact with the political parties of these powers. We want our Church to be in the forefront of the crucial battle for the existence of our people. It may not stand aside or even turn its back upon those fighting for liberty.

6. We demand that the Church pact be amended and that a fight be waged against a Marxism which is the enemy of religion and the nation and against its Christian social fellow travelers of every shade. In this Church pact we miss a confident daring for God and for the mission of the Church. The way into the Kingdom of God is through struggle, cross, and sacrifice, not through a false peace.

7. We see in race, folk, and nation, orders of existence granted and entrusted to us by God. God’s law for us is that we look to the preservation of these orders. Consequently miscegenation is to be opposed. For a long time German Foreign Missions, on the basis of its experience, has been calling to the German people: “Keep your race pure” and tells us that faith in Christ does not destroy one’s race but deepens and sanctifies it.

8. In home missions, properly understood, we see a vital Christianity based on deeds which in our opinion, however, is not rooted in mere pity but in obedience to God’s will and in gratitude for Christ’s death on the cross. Mere pity is charity and becomes presumptuous, coupled with a bad conscience, and makes people soft. We know something about Christian duty and Christian love toward those who are helpless, but we also demand that the nation be protected against the unfit and inferior. In no event may home missions contribute to the degeneration of our people. Furthermore, it has to keep away from economic adventures and not become mercenary.

9. In the mission to the Jews we perceive a grave danger to our nationality. It is an entrance gate for alien blood into our body politic. It has no justification for existence beside foreign missions. As long as the Jews possess the right to citizenship and there is thereby the danger of racial camouflage and bastardization, we repudiate a mission to the Jews in Germany. Holy Scripture is also able to speak of a holy wrath and a refusal of love. In particular, marriage between Germans and Jews is to be forbidden.

10. We want an evangelical Church that is rooted in our nationhood. We repudiate the spirit of a Christian world-citizenship. We want the degenerating manifestations of this spirit, such as pacifism, internationalism, Free Masonry, etc., overcome by a faith in our national mission that God has committed to us. Membership in a Masonic Lodge by an evangelical minister is not permissible.

The ten guiding principles outline a program of church reform that permits an assessment of the ideological forces behind the movement of the “German Christians.” We try to summarize them in four points.

1. The Faith Movement of the “German Christians.”

It would be entirely misleading to picture the “German Christian” movement as a conspiracy of rebels bent on transforming the church into a secular organization with purely political aims. Precisely the opposite was the case. In a rush of religious intoxication highly idealistic aims were conceived for the rejuvenation of the church. The movement was designed to be a faith movement, and faith meant definitely the Christian faith. “German Christians” did not wish “to disturb the confessional basis of the evangelical Church” (thesis 1). They wanted to set free life affirming forces to create “a vital national Church that will express all the spiritual forces of our people” (3). Taking their stand “upon the ground of positive Christianity” (4) they strove to renew a church that had become stagnant and devoid of enthusiasm because it did not show “a confident daring for God and for the mission of the Church” (6). The religious fervor of the movement was coupled with the conviction that the arrival of Hitler and his national program marked a new, historic moment in which God was at work. One of the leading Lutheran theologians wrote in 1934, “our Protestant churches have welcomed the turning point of 1933 as a gift and miracle of God.”¹³

The “historic hour” of the advent of the Nazi government was constantly celebrated, and that not only by voices belonging to the “German Christians.” Clearly Christian language was used to justify decisions that were disastrous in their consequences. When Ludwig Müller handed over the entire youth work of the church to the Hitler-Youth he explained that this incorporation had been for him a difficult decision over which he had wrestled with God in prayer, and when the same Müller usurped the presidency of the Federation of Protestant churches he commented “with trust in God and in the awareness of my responsibility before God and our people I start to work, obedient to the truth of the pure and genuine Gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴

2. The Martial Spirit of the Faith Movement.

It is striking how much the wording of the ten guiding principles is couched in language reflecting an imagination dominated by conflict and war. The faith envisioned by the “German Christians” repudiated “ideas of a Christian world-citizenship, of pacifism, and internationalism” because they were conceived to be contrary to a faith “rooted in our nationhood” (10). Invoking a highly romanticized image of Martin Luther the faith movement strove to rekindle “the German spirit of Luther” as the pioneer of “a heroic piety” (4). “German Christians” saw themselves “fighting” for a national church, and marching, as in military formation, under the banner bearing the slogan of their reform (2). Cross and sacrifice mark the way to the new reformation that must involve “a fateful struggle” and an “all-out fight” (5). The historic hour demands the participation in “the crucial battle for the existence of our people” (5). It is all too clear in these statements of the ten guiding principles how the resentment over the military defeat in

World War I had hardened into an attitude of defiance that extolled military power as virtue and blended it with Christian concepts of sacrifice. As it turned out, this was a deadly mixture.

3. The Mythology of Folk, Race, Blood, and Soil.

The most important sentence in the ten guiding principles is stated in thesis 7: “We see in race, folk, and nation orders of existence granted and entrusted to us by God. God’s law for us is that we look to the preservation of these orders.” From that premise was derived the conclusion that Jewish life was to be excluded from Germany, Jewish citizenship in Germany and marriages with Jews were considered a danger because they provided “an entrance gate for alien blood” (9).

Key word in this line of reasoning is the word “folk” which renders the German “Volk”. A fully satisfactory translation of the German “Volk” is virtually impossible. The English “folk” has the sense of intimate familiarity; in its frequent plural usage “folks” it signifies the opposite of snobbish, people who are simple and straightforward. The German “Volk,” in contrast to “folk,” is heavy with ideology, at least in the usage it had assumed in the “Völkische Bewegung” (folk movement) of which the “German Christians” were a part. Rather than attempting an abstract definition of “Volk” I am going to give the translation of a short piece of official writing from the Nazi period. In my files of personal memoranda from this time is a list of ancestors of our family that my brother collected. The list is entered on a form designed by the government. It contains the family tree extending through five generations. On the back cover of this document is the following text (I leave the word “Volk” untranslated): “Your Volk and You! Your little self, German boy and German girl, your 2 parents, your 4 grandparents, your 8 great-grandparents, and your 16 great-great-grandparents, and the chain of thousands and thousands before you, that is your Volk and You! The stream of blood that courses in your heart was flowing already in the time centuries before you in the veins of your ancestors. You are together one kin, one tribe, one family, and so you find in your line of generations the mighty insight that you are yourself a part of your Volk that, bound by nature and blood, is entwined with the eternal mother soil of Germany.”

For the “German Christians” this myth-drenched, emotion-laden concept of the sanctity of “Volk,” race, blood, and soil, was a religious entity that was grounded in the Christian faith statement of God the creator of the world. Some daring paraphrases of biblical sentences are understandable on that basis. Joachim Hossenfelder, one of the authors of the ten guiding principles, is reported to have said, in imitation of the language of Genesis 1: “God said: Let there be Volk, and there was Volk.”¹⁵ One of the earliest critical reactions to the Barmen Declaration was the objection by Paul Althaus that God’s revelation is not confined to the revelation in Christ, but must acknowledge that God is also revealed in the law. Part of this law is found in the orders of creation, engrafted into

human nature, one of which is operative in the “Volk.” It was, to Althaus, one of the major flaws of the Barmen Declaration that the word “Volk” is omitted from it.¹⁶

Once the ideological complex of the interrelated ideas of “Volk,” race, blood, and soil was accepted as a prerequisite for understanding what a German form of Christian faith and life was to be, there was hardly any limit to the demands to reformulate Christian teaching in accordance with these ideological presuppositions. Thus, the notorious mass meeting of the “German Christians” in Berlin’s Sports Palace of November 1933 adopted, with a single vote of dissent, a resolution that called for the completion of the Reformation of the 16th century by expulsion of all Christian Jews from German churches, the expurgation of alien, oriental elements from the Bible, especially, but not exclusively from the Old Testament, the elimination of anything un-Germanic from liturgies and confessions, and the presentation of a Christ image in conformity to the idea of a national hero who spends himself in service to his countrymen and his nation. The ideological captivity of Christian faith in nationalistic expectations was complete.

4. The Polemic against the Home Missions.

Thesis 8 of the guiding principles acknowledges, on the one hand, the work of home missions of the Protestant churches as forms of vital Christianity, only to continue, on the other hand, with the warning that this work can degenerate into “mere pity” which “makes people soft.” The nation, so the thesis states, must “be protected against the unfit and the inferior.” These sentences require explanation.

The home missions of the Protestant churches maintained in the 1930s, as they do today, a well-developed and far-flung system of care for people, young and old, suffering from mental and physical disorders that prevented them from being incorporated into normal forms of employment. The Protestant regional churches paid for, and staffed, centers of care for persons suffering from severe disabilities and provided for many a home in which they could spend their entire life. These are the human beings who, in thesis 8 of the guiding principles, are called the unfit and the inferior whose care must not be allowed to degenerate into expressions of mere pity. The thesis does not state a solution to this problem. But it cannot be forgotten that its warning against degeneration into softness was put into horrifying practice by the Nazi government in the early years of World War II.

One of the early memories of my childhood is the photograph, hung in my father’s work-room, of a splendid mansion surrounded by lush growth of old forest. My father loved this picture because it reminded him of the most prominent site in the area where he had grown up, the mansion being only about an hour’s walk away from his native village. The mansion was called “Schloss Grafeneck.” It was built by Duke Christoph of Württemberg in the years 1556-59 as a family retreat.

Through the centuries it changed ownership repeatedly and had become, in 1929, an institution administered by the home mission of the Protestant church in Württemberg for the care of incurably handicapped persons. In October 1939, two months after the beginning of World War II, the government confiscated the property, evacuated its residents to other institutions, and re-organized Grafeneck into a center for “the elimination of worthless life.” The mansion became one of six locations, spread over several parts of Germany, in which a systematic killing of the handicapped took place, under the code name “action T4.” Beginning on January 6, 1940, the gas chamber that had been installed in Grafeneck started its deadly work and its also newly constructed crematorium finished it. When it ended, at the end of 1940, 10,654 of the “unfit and inferior” had been murdered by the authority of the state. In the six centers of Germany combined, at least 70,000 perished, not counting an uncertain number of children of whom no official documentation has been preserved. I might mention, parenthetically, that these murders could not be completely concealed from the general public. Through the accumulation of too many similar terse notifications of death through some “epidemic” and the subsequent speedy cremation that were sent to families, dark rumors of the awful facts seeped through the blankets of secrecy.¹⁷

It would, of course, be unfair to accuse the “German Christians” of the manifesto of 1932 of having planned or suggested the dastardly implementation during the war of their warnings against those they declared to be “unfit and inferior.” Mass murder was not in their mind when they wrote their thesis 8 of the guiding principles. But they led minds to accept the idea that human life could be considered “unfit and inferior,” that care for them was tantamount to a degeneration of the vitality of a nation, and that Christian service had to be limited by the consideration of what would enhance the nation’s biological vigor. In this way the idea of a “vital Christianity” contributed to fostering a spirit of brutal utilitarianism that resulted in the victimization of the helpless.

Hard fought Unity on New Ground

During the first months of 1934 it had become evident that the Protestant churches in Germany were in serious disarray. The confederation of the 28 provincial churches had worked quite smoothly in the years of the Weimar Republic. Lutheran, Reformed, and Union churches lived together on the basis of their respective confessional traditions and their own constitutions in a loose, organizational federation. But the situation changed radically with the arrival of the “German Christians” in combination with the political revolution introduced by Hitler and his party. The great success of the “German Christians” at the national church elections in July 1933, the steady advance of Ludwig Müller from personal adviser to Hitler and deputy for church affairs, to president of the consistory of Prussia, to national bishop,

and the almost complete takeover of decisive positions in the national church offices by “German Christians” under Müller’s administration, had produced a state of affairs in German Protestantism in which the central administrative directives were controlled by the spirit of the “German Christian” faith movement. Almost all the heads and governing bodies of the provincial member churches of the Protestant confederation accepted the centralized national church government. There were, however, two exceptions. The two Lutheran bishops of the southern provinces of Bavaria and Württemberg, together with their boards and agencies, did not bow to the central national administration and resisted “German Christian” ideology. Sometimes, the bishop of Hannover made common cause with the southern non-conformists. Powerful opposition against the “German Christian” governance arose also in other places. Free synods, mostly of Reformed and Union churches, organized themselves, and resistance groups among Protestant pastors grew. The “Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church” that met in Barmen in May 1934 was preceded by assemblies of numerous “free synods” in various parts of Germany, and by individual faith statements and theses against the “German Christians” that were published and gained considerable attention.¹⁸ Martin Niemöller, from the beginning one of the most active leaders of the opposition, founded the “Pastors’ Emergency League” with 1,300 co-signers which grew by January 15, 1934 to over 7,000.¹⁹ The rebellion against the “German Christian”-led national church administration was so intense that thought was given among the ranks of the opposition to form an independent Protestant “confessing church” that would sever its ties with the official Protestant confederation.²⁰

However, the opposition did not succeed in maintaining a united front. Göring’s dirty trick at Hitler’s reception of church leaders split Niemöller’s Pastors’ Emergency League and the southern bishops, with the result that 1,800 pastors from Bavaria, Hannover, and Württemberg left the League. Increasing pressure, coupled with unconstitutional decrees and outright lies, by the national church administration against the non-conformist provincial churches forced the opposition groups together again. Two events dictated the course of history that eventually led to the confessional synod in Barmen in May 1934.

First, the bishop of Württemberg invited a large delegation from all parts of Germany to a meeting in Ulm on April 22, 1934. This meeting of faithful opposition members culminated in a break with the “German Christian” leadership of the Protestant churches. A declaration was issued that the representatives of Protestant churches devoted to the confession of the church, assembled in Ulm, considered themselves to be the only lawful Protestant church in Germany. They declared further that practice and belief of the ruling “German Christians” endangered the confessional loyalty which bound them in one body. In this declaration a line

of demarcation from the “German Christians” was publicly announced. But the Ulm declaration did not inaugurate a separate church. It denied the right of the “German Christian” administration to speak and to act in the name of the church, and it claimed for the confessing churches and congregations, meeting in Ulm, the exclusive right to be the true Protestant church. As mentioned earlier, this was the birth of the “confessing church.”

Second, the opposition decided to form a committee which was charged “to coordinate all forces that struggle for the continued purity of the Protestant church.”²¹ The committee formulated plans to continue the work that had begun in Ulm in making preparations for a “confessional synod” to which the confessing church was to invite representatives from Protestant churches in all German territories. This confessional synod was to demonstrate publicly that the confessing church constituted itself as an identifiable group, and it was further decided that the confessional synod be authorized to receive declarations clarifying its theological position, its legal status in distinction from the national church administration of the “German Christians,” and its practical, missionary program. The committee finalizing the plans for the confessional synod issued, on May 7, 1934, a resolution in which it stated its independence from the national ecclesiastical government: “We solemnly declare that we will not obey the orders that are contrary to the confessions or the constitution (of the church). As the legitimate German Protestant church, we cannot surrender this position as long as there is no assurance that in the German Protestant church actions are determined on the basis of the constitution and in the true spirit of the Protestant confession.”²²

The theological commission that was given the task of preparing a theological declaration at the confessional synod consisted of four persons: the Reformed theologian Karl Barth, the Lutheran pastor Hans Asmussen who had been suspended from his pastorate by the “German Christians,” the Lutheran theologian Hermann Sasse, and the Lutheran Thomas Breit as representative of the Bishop of Bavaria. The work of this group which led to the Theological Declaration of Barmen has been described by several authors in considerable detail.²³ It is not the purpose here to repeat even the outlines of this work. But three general remarks are necessary.

First, the theological commission had to wrestle from the beginning with a difficulty that had its origin in a specifically Lutheran understanding of the nature of a confessional church. The argument, advanced consistently by Sasse, stated that a truly Lutheran church is bound by its confessions. Outside these confessions unity is not possible. Therefore, if the confessional synod were to present a theological statement acceptable to Lutheran, Reformed, and Union churches it could not be considered a statement that would establish a united confession above and beyond the existing Lutheran confessions of the 16th

century. The Declaration (not confession!) of Barmen should, therefore, be discussed by Lutheran, Reformed, and Union delegates separately and, if accepted, not be considered a declaration establishing a new union of churches.

Second, in spite of the reservations just mentioned, the Barmen Declaration was the joint work of a commission on which Lutheran and Reformed theologians labored and agreed together, and which was unanimously accepted by delegates representing both bodies. Doctrinal controversies separating the two oldest Reformation churches were neither denied nor taken lightly. But a new word of a confessional nature was found, experienced as a new insight of foundational importance in which Lutheran and Reformed delegates shared, in a new situation presenting a new challenge. Thus a unity was found beyond the old, and remaining, doctrinal divisions, a unity that some of the architects of the Declaration and the delegates that embraced it could not but praise as a miracle from God. It took the crisis situation caused by the “German Christians” to bring it about.

Third, there is no question that the main author of the Barmen Declaration was Karl Barth. But the common testimony of members of the theological commission makes it clear that the Declaration was the outcome of very serious, protracted, deliberative considerations in which a genuine consensus was achieved. In this process critical reactions were heard and weighed, numerous changes in wording were worked out, and Hans Asmussen’s extensive explanatory comments, delivered to the whole synod before the vote was taken, were stipulated to be a part of the Declaration itself.

The New Ground : The First And Second Theses Of Barmen

The Theological Declaration of Barmen is resistance to the false teaching of the “German Christians” and through that also implied resistance against the Hitler regime. But it is more than that. It breaks new ground. It states new theological insights and opens new theological approaches that were not part of the older confessional traditions of the Reformation period, let alone of more recent doctrinal history.

Of the six theses of Barmen the first two are the most important. We will attempt to listen to these theses anew, to understand them in their own historical context, but also mindful of seeking the truth in our time in dialogue with Barmen.

The 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 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.

Like the other theses, the first thesis of Barmen consists of three parts: a statement of Scripture; a positive, doctrinal sentence; and a corresponding rejection. This structure of the theses is the initial pointer to the intended order of the entire confession. The biblical statement at the head of each thesis is the leading announcement. The positive sentence and the rejection follow the biblical statement like answers follow the proposition. The answer, in turn, is always double-edged; it contains necessarily an affirmation and a denial.

The statement of Scripture is not to be understood as a proof text that lends biblical support to a doctrinal point. Rather it is a sentence concentrating on an aspect of the total biblical message in a single phrase. This scriptural phrase is the voice that wants to be heard before all else. It is not a printed relic from an ancient period of history, but a living voice which affirms truth that, outside of this voice, would remain unknown and unknowable. The doctrinal sentences of position and rejection are echoes to the voice of Scripture sounded by those who receive that voice.

Thesis 1 of Barmen states that Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture is the one Word of God. The fact that all biblical statements in the six theses of Barmen are taken from the New Testament might lead one to the conclusion that Holy Scripture is identified with the New Testament. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, the question of the validity of the Old Testament for the church’s faith and proclamation was a cardinal issue over which the “German Christians” and the confessing church were deeply divided. Not only in their programmatic statements which were calculated for popular consumption but also in tightly argued books written by their most influential theologians, the “German Christians” limited the validity of the Old Testament or denied its relevance for the church altogether. The confessing church, on the other hand, fought with determination against the devaluation of the Old Testament. In saying that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God as he is attested by Holy Scripture, the first thesis means to concentrate Old and New Testament together as

witnesses to Christ. This affirmation is an act of systematic concentration of tremendous consequence. In maintaining that Old and New Testament together have a Christological center the first thesis forges a new synthesis between Lutheran and Reformed views of the relationship of Old and New Testament. The Lutherans would be at home with the proposition that the Old Testament belongs in the Christian church because it promotes Christ (*“was Christum treibet,”* Luther) and that that directedness toward Christ is also the critical test which sets limits to the Old Testament’s authority for the Christian community. At the same time the Reformed delegate at Barmen would read in the first thesis the appreciation for the positive connection between the Old Covenant and the New and sense the esteem for the abiding value of the law for the Christian life.

Of course, Barmen’s first thesis is not so naive as to suggest that Old and New Testaments have only a single topic and that topic is Jesus Christ. Thesis 1 does not deny the richness of themes, the opulence of sentiments, the variety of insights that the biblical tradition embraces. But it does say that in all their richness and variety, indeed even in their clash of point and counter-point, Old and New Testaments are the revelation of God because and insofar as they are open windows through which we can see Jesus Christ as the one Word of God. We will return to this claim later in view of the insistence of the first thesis that there is only one God and consequently also only one Word of God.

The first thesis says that Jesus Christ is known as he is attested in Scripture. For Christians in the tradition of the Reformation there is nothing novel in that sentence. The conviction that faith in Jesus Christ is grounded in Scripture, and in Scripture alone, is a statement of faith common to the Lutheran and to the Reformed churches. For Barmen, however, that faith statement assumed a definite polemical edge. Jesus Christ was not at all absent from “German Christian” language. But he had become a figment of nationalistic dreams and desires that imposed on him the clothing of a hero who had fought, with undaunted courage, a religious and political establishment in the form of an irreformable priesthood that would not let go of its class privileges and in that good fight he persevered until the bitter end, sacrificing himself in the service of his ideal. Great figures of the past were transposed into phantasies that had little relation to historical data. “Luther” had become the national hero who fought for “German religion” against the dominance of a caste of priests, just as Jesus had turned into a folk-champion who had more in common with a Germanic tribal chieftain than with the agent of the kingdom of the God of Israel. However, the polemic against the “German Christians” is not the only sharp edge of Barmen’s first thesis. As can be noticed throughout, the theses are worded with a great deal of abstraction because they are aware of a much broader front of opposition than the beliefs of the “German Christians.” The framers of Barmen were well aware that in the modern era the

question of the identity of Jesus Christ had become an open, and a disputed, question. Not only the “German Christian” folk-hero Jesus is meant when the first thesis defines Jesus Christ as he is attested in Scripture. For German theologians in the 1930s that wording took aim also at the innumerable constructions of the so-called “historical Jesus,” at the “Christ-myth” built on reconstructions from assumed parallels to Hellenistic redeemer myths, or at Jesus the social reformer proposed by a number of Christian socialists at the time. The phrase “Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture” abbreviates into the name Jesus and the title Christ the totality of the biblical witness to the life and the claim associated with a concrete historic human individual. The phrase distrusts the reliability of philosophical, or sociological, or psychological, or political assumptions that can be used as keys to identify the essential meaning of the life of Jesus of Nazareth for the church. The phrase restates the old principle that Scripture is its own best interpreter without denying that Scripture, and in its midst Jesus the Christ, borders on all sides on philosophy, sociology, psychology, politics, and whatever else is a part of human life. The implementation of the principle to find out who and what Jesus Christ is as he is attested in Scripture is not carried out in Barmen. The thesis calls for serious, sustained, and dedicated theological work to carry out the implementation of its principle. It is safe to assume that this is an ongoing process to which there will never be any final conclusion, a task that beckons active and faithful minds from one generation to the other.

The sentence of rejection in the first thesis declares that it is false teaching in the church when, apart from and besides Jesus Christ as the one Word of God, other events and powers, figures and truths, are regarded as God’s revelation which is the sole source of the church’s proclamation. It is manifest that this sentence is, first and foremost, directed against the teaching of the “German Christians.” To them the historic hour of Germany’s re-awakening, the arrival of an almost messianic political “leader,” the trust in the powers of restoration engendered by the cultivation of a genuine national spirit, the pride in indigenous traditions, all these were accepted as ideals and realities in which God spoke in contemporary terms. The aspirations and visions of the present were to be combined with the Christian proclamation, and this combination was expected to yield the true word of God for the time. However, the rejection of the “German Christian” ideology is only part of the target of the first thesis. In his opening address to the synod Hans Asmussen explained that the sentence of rejection of the first thesis is aimed at the demand “made upon the Church and its members to acknowledge the events of the year 1933 as binding for its proclamation and exposition of Scripture, and as demanding obedience alongside Holy Scripture and over and beyond its claim.”²⁴ But he continued: “We are raising a protest against the same phenomenon that has been slowly preparing the way for the devastation of the Church for more than two hundred years. For it is only a relative difference if whether beside

Holy Scripture in the Church historical events or reason, culture, aesthetic feelings, progress, or other powers and figures are said to be binding upon the Church.” Seen in this larger historical perspective, the first thesis of Barmen is a call to repentance for all engaged in responsible theological work. The Reformation of the 16th century is often said to revolve around three claims: Jesus Christ is the only agent of salvation, Scripture is the only judge of Christian faith, and faith is the only door to justification before God. Barmen adds a fourth “only”: Jesus Christ is the only revelation of God. The one Word of God is in its power of revelation without rival and without competition, it tolerates no supplement beside it, and it is not in need of support by any evidence outside itself.

Some explanatory words are needed for Barmen’s claim that Jesus Christ as the one Word of God is also God’s revelation that does not permit any rival claims beside it.

The thesis does not suggest that there are no events or truths outside Christ that are valuable, true, beautiful, and helpful. World history and our own life teem with marvels of human invention and imagination; great thinkers have unlocked secrets of nature, beauties of works of art and industry abound, and shining examples of human character and courage are edged into our collective memories. Barmen does not deny or belittle any of these wonders of God’s creation. But the wonders of history and nature, the marvels of the human mind and the splendors of a universe, are not the same as the God of whom the biblical story tells. God is more, higher than the heights of the natural world, and deeper than the mysteries of life.

Barmen has often been understood to wipe out with a single stroke of the pen all possibilities of a natural theology. This is not the case. Karl Barth himself has written that the rejection clause of thesis 1 “does not deny the existence of other events, powers, images, and truths next to that one Word of God, and that it also, therefore, does not completely deny the possibility of a natural theology as such.... But it denies to be false teaching that all this can be the source of the church’s proclamation. It excludes natural theology from the church’s proclamation.”²⁵

In a section of his *Church Dogmatics* on the glory of the mediating work of Christ, Barth put the positive doctrinal sentence of thesis 1 as the heading for an extended treatment of Christ, the light of life. In this section there is a great deal of thought given to the recognition that many smaller lights are in the world which receive from the glory of the mediator who is The Light of life. The Light of life is alive today and will be forever as the Lord not only of the church but also of the world and all creation. As the living Lord, Christ is powerful to act in and through his creatures without being restricted to the mediation of the church. Therefore, the praise of Christ as the Light of life does not exclude, but includes the

gratefulness for many lesser lights in the world, but it understands them all as reflections of Christ’s glory.²⁶

Barmen’s first thesis will to many sound harsh, uncomfortable, even imperialistic. Why should a single human life be the one Word of God, the only source of the church’s proclamation, beside which there are no other events or powers, figures or truths that can claim revelatory status? Barmen states that the sentence follows from its attestation in Scripture, and we remind ourselves that Scripture means the word of both the Old and the New Testaments. This statement requires explanation.

The God of the Old Testament is a God expecting and demanding exclusive loyalty. The first commandment of the Decalogue, the Magna Charta of Israel’s law, stipulates “you shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3; Deut 5:7). Other gods are known and worshipped all over the ancient Near East, and they remain a snare for Israel (Ex 34:12), therefore not even their names are to be mentioned (Ex 23:13; Joshua 23:7). The gods of other nations are often derided as the Philistine god Dagon whose statue in Ashdod falls on his face one night, and is dismembered the next, when the ark of the God of Israel is put into Dagon’s temple (1 Sam 5:3-4). Compared to other gods YHWH is incomparable. He is surrounded by other gods who form his council (Ps 82:1), yet he is “exalted far above all gods” (Ps 97:9). The exclusive loyalty to YHWH is, however, not the tyrannical requirement of a master whose lust for power suffers no competitor. The first commandment of the Decalogue is preceded by YHWH’s self-introduction: “I am YHWH your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex 20:2; Deut 5:6). It is the liberator who expects exclusive loyalty. YHWH’s insistence on undivided loyalty is grounded in his presence as his people’s benefactor who is always ready to listen to them and who has given them a law of perfect justice (Deut 4:7-8). To adhere to this God with all powers of heart and soul (Deut 6:4-5) is the way to health, security, justice, and peace. Consequently, in the entire deuteronomistic history (Joshua-2 Kings), the well-being of Israel depends on the total exclusion of all claims of other gods, and the full devotion to one God.

What can be observed about God in the Old Testament is strikingly paralleled in the New Testament’s language about Jesus. The Old Testament’s insistence on God’s incomparability that excludes all competition or rivalry is the outflow of God’s act of liberation that wills to fend off from Israel, and in some future even from the whole world, all evil that might diminish its fullness of life. In exactly the same way Jesus Christ is, in the New Testament, presented as the one who is incomparable and unique, not in order to enslave and subdue his people under an alien yoke, but to affirm and heal their lives. As the one exclusive God is the center of the Old Testament, so is the one exclusive Jesus Christ the center of the New Testament. It is for that reason that the word “one”

occurs, not all too often, but in significant places as a modifier to Jesus Christ. The assertion of John 14:6 “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” which stands at the head of Barmen’s first thesis, can with confidence be regarded as typical of the christology of the fourth gospel. But the uniqueness of Christ, expressed in John 14:6, is not restricted to the gospel of John. Matt 11:27 says, in words very similar to the fourth evangelist: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Again, in the same gospel, we hear Jesus’ instruction to his disciples: “you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And no one can call you father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you called to be instructors, for you have one instructor, Jesus Christ” (23:8-9). The authority of Jesus Christ that puts all other authorities aside is stated repeatedly in the gospels in the verdict: “he taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes” (Matt 7:29; Mark 1:21,27). This authority of Jesus Christ is not restricted to an unparalleled power of teaching, or an unequalled capacity to heal, but it is characteristic of his whole life, his death, his resurrection, and his rule as the risen Lord. The victor over death assures his disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” and in this power over all things he will be with his community “always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:18,20).

In similar ways, Paul stresses the singularity of Christ in analogy to the singularity of God. The basic Christian confession of 1 Cor 8:6 can be called a christological variant of the foundational Old Testament and Jewish confession of the oneness of God expressed in the *shema* of Deut 6:4: “For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” Christ’s lordship is universal, all-inclusive, and incomparable because it participates in the lordship of God the Father. Christ is totally unique because he represents God in the world. This singular position is, as for YHWH in the Old Testament, completely removed from oppression or enslaving dominance. He is, in Paul’s vision, the one and only human being in whom the grace of God abounds, through whom “the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness” established its dominion in the history of humanity (Rom 5:15,17). The exclusivity of Jesus Christ, exactly as the exclusivity of God the Father, is, therefore, the opposite of imperialism. Exclusive is the triumph of liberation, justice, mercy, and peace, and this triumph is accomplished by the one who bore the wretchedness of the miserable unto his death. Far from being imperialistic, the exclusive position of Jesus Christ is nothing but pure good news.

“Jesus Christ, whom God 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 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 (BoC 8.13-15).

As in thesis 1 the second thesis of Barmen opposes a series of errors of the “German Christians.” Both the sentence of affirmation and the rejection clause envision the whole of Christian life to be subject to and ordered by our justification through the grace of Jesus Christ alone and through the sanctification in which he claims our grateful service. From this pardon of the sinner, and from this claim to service, no department of life is to be excluded. All compartmentalization into a religious and a secular part of life, all separation of private and public space, must be avoided. It is false teaching, so Barmen claims, to reserve “areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords.” What in the teaching and practice of the “German Christians” is disavowed in this sentence?

Part and parcel of “German Christian” ideology was the demand that governmental principles of the new German state should become also the principles of the church in that state. The “new Germany” had adopted the notion that the powers of government were best vested in a single individual (the “Führer”), consequently the church administration was to fall in step by creating a corresponding head in the figure of the national bishop (the “Reichsbischof”). In the new state, democratic notions of governance were to be replaced by the one party system in accordance with the Germanic spirit, hence the church had to establish equally a centralized administrative procedure in which previously independent regional churches were integrated into a single administrative body. “German Christian” reasoning defended this procedure on the basis of the assumption that forms of administration were neutral with regard to Christian faith. The confession of the church was not chained to a specific form or method of church governance. Thus it was irrelevant to faith, so one said, if you had one national bishop or two dozen superintendents, whether you formulated church law through a central board with exclusive privileges of oversight or from relatively autonomous regional bodies which were united solely on the ground of their common confession. The “German Christian” policy was determined by the idea that religion is a private affair that

transcends mundane orders of human life. The protest of Barmen gets to the root of the problem by affirming that Christ's gift and claim are not restricted to sectors and fragments of the believers' life. Christian teaching has to deny attempts to create zones of life beyond the reach and the ordering impact of the gospel.

Together with its polemic against the construction of divided areas of life, the second thesis of Barmen declares that the Christian's justification and sanctification are inseparable from each other, each flowing with necessity from the one source Jesus Christ. The most authentic interpretation of this aspect of the second thesis is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *The Cost of Discipleship*. Some historical notes are necessary to undergird this assertion. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not a delegate to the synod of Barmen in May 1934. He was, at the time of the synod, pastor of a German congregation in London, England. It was not until April 1935 that he returned to Germany. Back in his own country he immediately made common cause with the Barmen Declaration. His support of the spirit and letter of the Declaration, together with a follow-up meeting in Dahlem in October 1934, was uncompromising. With other leaders of the confessing church he signed a letter to fellow pastors of July 1935 that contains these sentences: "We greet the brethren with thanks to God the Lord that he has put into our mouths in Barmen a common word Both synods (of Barmen and Dahlem) have called the church to the sole sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ; Barmen by placing the church's proclamation, Dahlem by putting its form and order exclusively on the one Word of God's revelation."²⁷ The *Cost of Discipleship* was written from 1935-37 while Bonhoeffer was director of the confessing church's training seminar for young pastors in Finkenwalde. The seminar was maintained through resources of the confessing church, but the "German Christian" administration sought continually, through decrees and orders, to undermine its activity. Bonhoeffer's academic career was seriously threatened. In the summer of 1936 his license to teach at the University of Berlin was withdrawn, partly because of his activity as director of the seminar in Finkenwalde. His students at the seminar also faced a most uncertain future. Finkenwalde was closed by action of the Gestapo in September 1937, and, by the end of the same year, 804 members of the confessing church were in jail.

The external circumstances around the writing of *The Cost of Discipleship* are not incidental to the book's content. Discipleship means being set in motion, and the motion of following Christ entails participation in Christ's cross. "To endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. When it comes, it is not an accident, but a necessity."²⁸ The struggle of the confessing church for the purity of its teaching and order is understood, and gladly accepted, as a consequence of following the one Word of God.

The opening section of *The Cost of Discipleship*, entitled "Grace and Discipleship," is an extended elaboration of the second thesis of Barmen. Barmen's thesis states that Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins and God's mighty claim upon our whole life. The two parts of this affirmation are linked by insisting that they are valid "in the same way and in the same seriousness." God's forgiveness and God's claim are rooted together in Jesus Christ. The free gift of grace is given together with the obligation to obedience. Christian receptivity and Christian activism have one common source. Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship* echoes, in different language, this fundamental simultaneity. The key sentence of the work is a novel description of the nature of faith: "faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience." Faith in Jesus Christ requires that "two propositions hold good and are equally true: only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes."²⁹ From this dialectic sprang Bonhoeffer's relentless attack against a Lutheranism that was accustomed to reduce Christian faith essentially to the acceptance of God's forgiveness of all sins. But this attack on the Lutheranism of cheap grace, as he called it, was at the same time a polemic against all other forms of Christian life and teaching that made the core of faith nothing but pure receptivity. For Bonhoeffer, as for Barmen, that misconstruction of Christian faith omits God's claim on our lives, and therefore does injury to the power of Christ among us. In Bonhoeffer's words the confessing church was called to recover costly grace. "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God proclaimed as the Christian 'conception' of God Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has Costly grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life."³⁰

An Epilogue

The synod of Barmen in 1934 with its Theological Declaration is far removed from us. We are not confronted with a totalitarian state, the religious phantasies based on myths of race, blood, and soil are not serious threats to our churches, and our system of governance in the church functions for the most part smoothly. Barmen is, like any other creed or confession, a product of its time, speaking the language of its time, with a message for its time. But that does not make it impossible, or useless, to enter into a dialogue with this text. The Theological Declaration of Barmen remains a powerful document with strength enough to raise pertinent questions of us, questions to which we might not yet have found appropriate answers. Questions, perhaps, whose answers require a spiritual and intellectual power and wisdom which we do not, or at least do not yet,

possess. It is one such question that Barmen puts to our time which I want to raise in conclusion.

As mentioned before, the entire Theological Declaration has a common structure of three interrelated parts: an appeal of Scripture to us, a theological affirmation, and a clause of rejection. In each thesis the answer to Scripture contains a Yes and a No. Does the very structure of the Barmen Declaration not suggest that, by necessity, the answer of the community of believers to the Word of God is both an affirmation and a negation? Does it not suggest that our confessions of the Reformation period are also a composite of strong affirmations and equally strong rejections? Does Barmen not ask us the question: how clear, how convincing, how well thought through is the Yes of your faith if it is not accompanied by a No of equal clarity, conviction, and rationality? Could it not be that the light which we are meant to be does not shine with a truly illuminating brightness because we are scared that it might also cast a stark shadow? What do we mean by the slogan “unity in diversity?” Do we mean by it the marvel of myriads of individual gifts of service and the wealth of insights that enrich the body of Christ, or do we mean by it an admission of resignation to the fact that we live in a cultural climate of relativism which tolerates no truth but feeds on endless declarations of subjective convictions? Are we willing to let Barmen cast a doubt on our habit of assuming that there is no heresy in the church except the pronouncement that some teaching might be definitely wrong?

These questions assume concrete shape if we honestly confront the fact that the PC(USA) is facing doctrinal, legal, and practical decisions which require answers in which a clear Yes and a clear No cannot be avoided. The PC(USA) has, in the last decades, experienced a lot of discussions on the question of the ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexual persons. The passage of Amendment B and its inclusion in the Constitution of the church (G-6.0106b) have decided the issue legally, for the time being. But the opposition to this decision continues. The Covenant Network of Presbyterians was founded with the express purpose of eliminating constitutional barriers to the ordination of openly homosexual persons. The question is now before us whether Presbyteries should approve Amendment 00-O prohibiting church ceremonies for same-sex unions. The amendment requires of Presbyteries a yes or a no decision, because abstentions from voting are counted as no votes.

What are the theological considerations that need to inform the decision on Amendment O? Is there any guidance in the Barmen Declaration that could help in the decision making? I attempt an answer in two steps.

1. The whole structure of the Barmen theses operates on the principle that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God, as attested in Scripture. Advocates of the acceptance of homosexuality into the church’s ordained ministry point

out that we have no definite word of Jesus on the question. Many of them do not deny that passages like Lev 18:22; 20:13 and Rom 1:26-27 prohibit homosexual acts, or consider them as evidence of corruption.

But they appeal to the higher authority of Jesus whose silence on the matter they interpret as a judgment that the issue was of no importance to him. Without engaging in speculation about the reason for this omission one has to admit that we have no word of Jesus that would unambiguously refer and interpret Jewish law and custom about homosexual activity. But there is a very telling passage about the question of divorce that indirectly sheds a beam of light on the question. We are told in Matt 19:3-9 and Mark 10:2-9 that Jesus was asked by Pharisees about his view on the regulation of divorce found in Deut 24: 1-4. Although the passages in Mark and Matthew show considerable differences, they render Jesus’ reply to his questioners essentially in the same words. In Matthew’s version the reply reads: “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt 19:4-6). Jesus’ answer to the questioners is the refusal to answer the question on the level at which the questioners had posed it. They wanted the clarification of an issue arising from Mosaic legislation. But Jesus’ answer leaves the level of practical regulations and their ongoing interpretation behind. He directs his questioners’ attention to a deeper level of reality, to an original depth of life that is shaped in the words of Genesis 1 and 2. His answer brushes aside problems of the ordering of marital relations by legislative measures. It addresses the problem by relating it back to the creation of human life in the creation story of Gen 1 and 2.

The answer quotes a piece of the narrative of God’s work of creation. When God made the human being (singular!), he made them (plural!) male and female (Gen 1:27). Creation reveals the ground and destiny of human existence. It is the good and gracious work of God that the human being should live in two different forms that are created with and for each other. They are one in that they share a single humanity. But they are also differentiated in this oneness by being male and female, a differentiation which destines them to be one in two, and two in one. As that, they receive God’s blessing and in that oneness in differentiation they are given the power to reproduce life of their own kind and to populate and rule the earth (Gen 1:28). The word of creation in Gen 1:27 speaks of God’s work untrammelled by the distortions introduced through the hardness of heart (Matt 19:8; Mark 10:5). The revelation of God’s act and decision in the creation story is followed by a human act and decision in the setting of the narrative of the garden of Eden (Gen 2:24). Jesus’ answer binds Gen 1:27 and 2:24 together by the word “therefore” which in the narrative of Gen 2

refers to the creation of Eve out of Adam. This new coordination of verses has the effect to make the human decision to establish a marital bond the consequence and implementation of a divine act which ordained human life in the complementarity of male and female.

Jesus' way of answering the question of divorce by penetrating to the depth of God's gracious will in creation reveals an extremely high estimation of the value of the differentiation between male and female. This evaluation is so exalted that it makes a devaluing or relativizing of the difference impossible. Precisely in the differentiation of male and female is the human being blessed. It should be beyond question that Jesus' vision of the creation of human life as male and female that establishes the ground and the destiny of their relation to each other, excludes the possibility to consider same-sex relations as a viable alternative to the union of husband and wife.

2. The second thesis of Barmen states: "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 on our whole life". It suffers no doubt that this sentence covers, among many other areas of life, also the whole field of human sexuality. What does this mean in regard to homosexuality and to same-sex unions?

a) Nothing can be taken away from the height and the depth of Jesus' estimation that sees in the union of male and female the original, creational will of God that must not be set aside by provisions of law that are engendered by the hardening of the human hearts. Placed in the light of that vision homosexuality and same-sex unions cannot be reconciled to the will and work of God the creator.

b) Homosexual activity and same-sex unions establish barren bonds. They cannot, by biological necessity, contribute to the passing on of life from one generation to the other. They can, of course, resort to substitutes like adoption or insemination. But by using the substitutes they have to employ forces outside their own relation to produce offspring. Viewed from the standpoint of the biblical and the church tradition this means cutting oneself off from the blessing and the obligation that are implanted into the God-created union of male and female. Of course, not every marriage produces children, and not everybody marries. By choice or by some deficiency there may not be children in a marriage. But choice and deficiency are not the same as a biological impossibility. Same-sex unions can, for that reason, never claim to be in essence equivalent to the union of a man and a woman.

c) Homosexual relations and same-sex unions disregard basic characteristics of male and female anatomy. This point is so banal that one hesitates to mention it at all. But the fact remains that anatomically the male is built for the female and the female for the male. The setting

aside of this fact results in actions that have dangers of causing illness other than infection by sexually transmitted diseases.³¹

The point is of theological significance because the honoring of one's body, the care for health, and the concern for the physical as an aspect of God's good creation are essential to Christian faith. Jesus Christ of the gospels is, in numerous narratives, the healer of bodily ills whose abundant graciousness shows itself in his care for the physical well-being and restoration of those he met. Sexual unions that disregard the most fundamental difference in the physical structure of male and female cannot be considered forms of obedience to the claims of the one Word of God.

d) Jesus Christ, according to Barmen, is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins. Those who practice homosexual relations and commit themselves to same-sex unions are not excluded from this sentence. The present day defense of homosexuality in the church does, however, not speak of forgiveness of sins but of justification of the practice as normal, natural and God-given. Two leading representatives of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians may be quoted. It is said that "homosexual acts are morally equivalent to heterosexual ones. In some circumstances both may be deeply sinful. Under other conditions, both may be used in God's service." For that reason, not only are gay and lesbian people welcome in the church but their sexual conduct is sanctioned as it is: "gay and lesbian people are natural. They are made this way by God's providence and by God's grace."³²

The care of homosexual people in the church is a mandate inherent in the gospel, and the respect for their personhood and civil rights has to be upheld by the church. But the thesis must be denied that homosexual practice and same-sex unions are an equivalent to heterosexual marriages, morally or otherwise. Advocacy of that thesis is false teaching to which the votes of Presbyteries have to give an unequivocal No.

More frequently quoted works are abbreviated as follows:

Cochrane= A.C.Cochrane, *The Church's Confession under Hitler*, Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1976.

Nicolaisen= C. Nicolaisen, *Der Weg nach Barmen: Die Entstehungsgeschichte der Theologischen Erklärung von 1934*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985.

Scholder= K.Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, Vol. I and 2. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988

Shirer= W.L.Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*, New York etc.: Simon & Schuster, 1990.

Wolf= E. Wolf, *Barmen: Kirche zwischen Versuchung und Gnade*, Munich: Kaiser, 1970.

1. See the comments by Klugkist Hesse and Joachim Beckmann, in A. Burgsmüller and R. Weth, eds., *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung: Einführung und Dokumentation*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984, 19 and 27.

2. Nicolaisen, 133.
3. Nicolaisen, 72.
4. Nicolaisen, 11.
5. One publication that can stand for many is entitled *The Church Confronts the Nazis: Barmen Then and Now*, Toronto Studies in Theology, vol.16, ed. H.G. Locke, New York and Toronto: Mellen Press, 1934.
6. The two quotes are found in K.D. Schmidt, *Die Bekenntnisse und grundsätzlichen Äusserungen zur Kirchenfrage des Jahres 1933*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1934, 131 and 102.
7. Shirer, 194.
8. Cochrane, 85.
9. Scholder, 272.
10. Shirer, 201.
11. Cochrane, 111.
12. The translation is taken from Cochrane, 222-23.
13. Paul Althaus, quoted in Wolf, 44.
14. The two quotes are found in Cochrane, 117-18, and Wolf, 54.
15. Wolf, 41.
16. Althaus admits that the word "Volk" is used in thesis 6 of the Declaration, but in a different, non-ideological sense, Nicolaisen, 87.
17. L. Loeffler, "Euthanasie," RGG, 3rd ed., vol. 4, 256-57. The data on Schloss Grafeneck and "action T4" are found in K. Morlok, *Wo bringt ihr uns hin? "Geheime Reichssache" Grafeneck*, Stuttgart: Quell Verlag, 2nd ed., 1990.
18. For lists and descriptions of these synods, statements, and theses, see Wolf, 63-68.
19. Cochrane, 108.
20. Nicolaisen, 6.
21. Nicolaisen, 14.
22. Nicolaisen, 26.
23. Very useful is still A. C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler*, 2nd ed., Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1976, 140-80. Also R Ahlers, *The Barmen Declaration of 1934: The Archeology of a Confessional Text*, Lewiston/Queenston: Mellen Press, 1986. Nicolaisen, *Der Weg nach Barmen: Die Entstehungsgeschichte der Theologischen Erklärung von 1934*, Neukirchen/Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985.
24. Cochrane, 254.
25. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 178.
26. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3,
27. D. Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Zweiter Band, Munich: Kaiser, 1959, 206-07.
28. D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, New York: Macmillan, 1963, 98.
29. *Discipleship*, 69.
30. *Discipleship*, 45-47.
31. J. Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996, 66-68.
32. B.G. Wheeler, in: *The Church and its Unity*, Office of Theology and Worship, Church Issues Series, No.1, Louisville: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1999, 3. L.J. Stuart, in: *Covenant Network of Presbyterians*, September 2000, 7.

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