

The Barmen Theological Declaration: On Celebrating a Text Out of Context 75 Years Later

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Theological declarations and confessions are most often best celebrated than explained or translated from one context to another. The contexts in which they were formulated are nearly impossible to recover in times and places other than when and where they were birthed. In other words, crucial aspects of the content may be transposable but the context as such is not entirely available to us, thus turning the translated text into a counterfeit when applied to different context. Between the text and the context there is a mutual correlation that influences both and largely determines not only the relevance of the text but also the gist of the argument. To use an illustration from photography, in another context the “portrait” (text) becomes out of focus; something is still visible and recognizable but the sharpness of the image is no longer there, leading one to incorporate images that might not have been originally there. However, what can be recognized is the intent of the photographer; if the *substance* is not entirely available there, the *principle*, the gesture that led to the shot is what is left and passed on. And that is what we celebrate.

The Barmen Declaration is such a case in point. Therefore, my attempt here will be to make a brief but critical case of what

I regard to be the nucleus of the declaration and a few elements of its context, largely unknown to us in the twenty-first century, without forgetting to touch upon its nuances and idiosyncrasies. This year, 2009, marks the 75th anniversary of the declaration, a proper occasion for a celebration. A sketch of the significance of its observance and punctual relevance as a historical marker of a moment of creative, even revolutionary theological dissonance will then follow.

The Barmen Theological Declaration, though issued under the auspices of the Confessing Church movement in a meeting of several of its theologians, was originally drafted by Karl Barth, who penned it, “fortified by strong coffee and one or two Brazil cigars,”¹ while his Lutheran co-workers had their afternoon siesta.² The document follows the conventional form of declarations and confessions in its written format. It begins with an epigraph, which is a quotation from the Scriptures or a canonic document. A fundamental theological thesis is

1. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 245.

2. Karl Barth: *A Theologian of Freedom* (ed. Clifford Green.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 148.

then proposed. Finally an anathema is issued. It is the latter that indicates the road not taken and gives us a glimpse into the context being addressed. The text, following its preamble, presents six theses. Thesis 2 is the theological and polemical center, the pivot on which the rest of the text gravitates. In this thesis the theological groundings that mark the divide between the German Christians and the Confessing Church are presented. For this reason, I confine my brief remarks to this thesis as it reads:

2. "Christ Jesus, whom God has made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." (1 Cor 1:30.)

Jesus Christ is God's assurance [*Zuspruch*] of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God's mighty claim [*Anspruch*] 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 [*Herren*]³—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.³

This thesis forms the theological nucleus of the declaration. Its basic claim is that Christ is the only Lord. Hence, it is proposed that there is nothing over which he does not have a claim or authority, even though it might be recognized that the declaration of forgiveness is not accepted by all. But herein lies the problem: while this thesis may be effective in targeting Nazi idolatry, if used literally in other contexts it will cause significant collateral damage. The Barmen declaration, one of the most im-

portant documents that caused a representative portion of the Protestant church in Germany to show solidarity with those who were being the victims of the Nazi regime, above all the Jews, has at its theological core an exclusivist and Christocentric statement. Its effectiveness was so momentous because of the politico-theological and ecclesial context in which it was pronounced.

Theologians at the time, many of Lutheran persuasion, were working with a sociological category, developed by Max Weber and followed by significant theological voices at the time,⁴ that there were spheres of life in an age of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*), particularly in politics and economics, in which reason was autonomous, not subject to the control of beliefs, emotions, dispositions, or aesthetic values. It is worth remembering here that in Lutheran circles the expression "two spheres" or "realms" was already common currency throughout the nineteenth century.⁵ But it was just a year before the Barmen Declaration that the expression "Two Kingdoms Doctrine" (*Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*)⁶ was first used in a technical sense, and elevated to the status of "doctrine," often in order to buttress this separation of spheres. The motivating force of the Barmen Declaration was to fight against this autonomy of the realm of reason from the realm of faith, but it did it by imposing an absolute Christocentric focus.

4. See Ulrich Duchrow, *Christenheit und Weltverantwortung: Traditionsgeschichte und systematische Struktur der Zweireichelehre* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1970), 582-84.

5. See Uwe Rieske-Braun, *Zwei-Bereiche-Lehre und christlicher Staat* (Gütersloh: Verlagshaus, 1993).

6. Franz Lau, "Äusserliche Ordnung" und "weltlich Ding" in *Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933).

3. *The Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934: The Archeology of a Confessional Text* (ed. Rolf Ahlers; Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1986), art. 2

With the establishment of the Nazi regime, this notion of autonomy was used to extend the power of the state even into affairs of the church, which is clarified and critiqued in Thesis 3. The circumstantial effectiveness of Barmen under a totalitarian state can only be read under the conditions in which it was brought about. Taken out of context, and reading it as a theological and universally valid theological axiom, can produce, in other circumstances, precisely the opposite of what was intended. The declaration was concerned to not allow the separation of creation from salvation, the realm of responsibility from the realm of redemption. This was the same plight that early dialectical theology, which was the driving force behind Barmen, criticized in nineteenth century theology.⁷ However, what Barmen evoked so effectively to counter a political totalitarianism can be read in different, non-totalitarian, and above all pluralistic circumstances, as an exclusivistic claim of the Christian faith and a “totalitarianism” of the church and its mission. The

presence of the majority of Christians now in the twenty-first century in societies that are very pluralistic should make this point self-evident. Even the language that is used, “Lord,” “Master,” etc., betrays this exclusivistic tendency toward a Christomonism. And this might be a lesson for us to learn about the contextuality of theology: Do not try to make a claim that emerges in its own circumstances by recruiting some past in order to justify it. What we call “tradition” either in a positive or a negative sense is a form of appealing to a selective past in order to underwrite the present. This is what Karl Barth himself did only some months before he put his pen to work at Barmen, even as he spares Luther and Calvin.

The error which has broken out today in the theology and Church politics of the German-Christians originated neither in the school of Luther nor of Calvin, but rather (Schleiermacher, R. Roth, W. Bey-schlag might be named among its particular fathers) the typical error of the final phase of that “Union” of the nineteenth century.⁸

7. Incidentally, this was what Bonhoeffer did in his practice and his theology, when he called for a reading of the Scripture being not only, nor even uniquely, a narrative of redemption, at least not an extra-historical redemption. See his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1971), 337: “The decisive factor is said to be that in Christianity the hope of resurrection is proclaimed, and that means the emergence of a genuine religion of redemption...in a better world beyond the grave. But is this really the essential character of the proclamation of Christ in the gospels and by Paul? I should say not....The Christian, unlike the devotees of the redemption myths, has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but like Christ himself (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”), he must drink the earthy cup to the dregs, and only in his doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ. *This world must not be prematurely written off; in this the Old and New Testaments are at one.*”

Barmen, by the very exclusivist claims it makes, is able to keep ethics and world responsibility within the theological realm. This is above all Barth’s (its main author) accomplishment. By doing so, at least at the time of the Barmen Declaration, he exiles all reality that has not received the assurance (*Zuspruch*) of forgiveness by Christ alone from the claim (*Anspruch*) God has upon all of life. But all of life is claimed by God, the creator, even without recognizing the assurance of the forgiveness by Christ—also life beyond Christendom. The proverbial defenestration of the baby

8. “On the Situation 1933-34,” in Karl Barth, *The German Church Conflict* (trans. P. T. A. Parker; Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), 27.

with the bath water illustrates the problem. Barmen restricts God's *Anspruch* (claim) to the redeeming *Zuspruch* (assurance or declaration) by Christ. The target of Barmen is clear; God's *Anspruch* cannot be divided into different realms of jurisdiction as the German-Christians were doing within a Christian cultural context. But against the backdrop of the pluralistic contexts as those we are in now, Barmen's aim sadly is off target. That is, in a multi-religious context to secure the undivided claim of God by Christ's assurance of forgiveness severs precisely the claim that God has over the entire creation. While it is crucial that we recognize the danger of keeping the spheres of reason and faith, the secular and the religious autonomously apart and thus dividing the claim or the sources of God's authority toward all that is created—one pertaining to all humanity and the other to the redeemed by Christ—it is equally pertinent that we not surrender the freedom of all creatures in response to the claims of God, lest we reduce creation theology to a neo-orthodox Christology. Certainly Christians do accept God's claim *because of and within* the declaration of forgiveness in Christ; yet the non-acceptance of the *Zuspruch* (the assurance of forgiveness) of God through Christ does not cancel God's *Anspruch* (God's claim over all creation).

Whilst recognizing the contextual nature of even such a memorable document as Barmen, the translation of which to other circumstances creates insurmountable difficulties, it is equally pertinent to celebrate its timely and prophetic insurgence. As I read the present and current state of affairs, it would be wrong to say that Barmen has to be celebrated in spite of its limiting circumstances; it needs, however, to be celebrated because and in remembrance of the limits of its context. The celebration of Barmen in our own cir-

cumstances is vital because we might have the vision to detect the cracks and fissures that need to be exposed in the dominant systems of our day. It might also lay bare the pain and suffering it might entail and dissonance it causes within the theological systems we construe. Those theologians and church people gathered in Barmen with their swords of pen were able to see and name it for their time when most of the people did not see it. This is why we ought to celebrate it so that we might do the same for our time and detect the fissures and cracks in the systems, and name the powers that are so skilled in disguising them. These cracks, to use an expression of Walter Benjamin, once laid bare are "chips of messianic time...the small gates through which the messiah might enter."⁹ And she might even come as a little Dalit Hindu girl.

9. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 264.