***I BELIEVE: THE THEOLOGICAL DECLARATION OF BARMEN***

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Texts: Ephesians 4:14-16 and Matthew 22:15-22

There are those who claim that politics has no place in the pulpit or in the church. I believe that is right insofar as I should not be telling you who to vote for in any election or what policy is the only faithful political policy to adopt. But I think it erroneous to suggest that our Chrisitan faith does not speak to political circumstances and the values that underly the decisions of our government or to stand in opposition to those who would coopt or corrupt the Gospel in order to substantiate their preferred political candidate or party. Our Christian values are not Republican or Democratic values; they are values we hold as those who follow Jesus Christ and seek to live, love, and serve as he calls us to do. When there is a conflict between our Christian values and our preferred politics, our Christian values should prevail. There is perhaps no better example of that stance than the Barmen Declaration which is included in our Book of Confessions.

The year was 1934. In Germany Hitler had consolidated power, and the Nazi government was flexing its muscle. Hitler abolished all political rights and democratic processes and soon outlawed all political parties except his own; he smashed labor unions, purged universities, replaced the judicial system with his own “People’s Courts,” initiated a systematic terrorizing of Jews, and obtained the support of church leaders allied with the German Christians[[1]](#endnote-1) who exalted the racially pure nation and the rule of Hitler as God’s will for the German people. For them, being a good Christian meant being a good Nazi with all the racist, xenophobic, discriminatory attitudes that went with it.

In May of that year, the First Confessing Synod of the German Evangelical Church met in the industrial city of Barmen-Wuppertal to stake out ground in opposition to the German Christians and their Nazi supporters and in defense of the Gospel. It was dangerous ground to tread, for the Nazis were not hesitant to stamp out any opposition, but the 139 clergy and lay leaders who met there, including theologian Karl Barth and pastor Martin Niemoller, felt compelled to do more than sit back and watch the Gospel be corrupted in support of the Nazis. Unanimously they approved a bold statement, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, that is an inspiring expression of the Christian faith and an affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the face of an oppressive government and a corrupt representation of the Gospel.

The Barmen Declaration offers six propositions rooted in Scripture that affirm faith in Jesus Christ while rejecting false doctrines offered by the German Christian movement allied with the Nazis. They are as follows:

1. Jesus Christ is the one Word of God which we obey and trust in life and in death, rejecting any other events, powers, figures, or truths – including the suggestion that Hitler’s rule reflected God’s will for God’s people.
2. Jesus Christ is God’s assurance of the forgiveness of our sins and is also God’s claim upon our whole life; no part of our lives stands apart from him and is subject to some other lord – or fuehrer!
3. The Church is the community in which Jesus Christ acts as Lord in Word and Sacrament through the Holy Spirit, empowering us as pardoned sinners to testify faithfully in a sinful world and to obey Christ’s call and bear his message to the world; rejected is any suggestion that Christ’s message can or should be adapted to the whim of prevailing ideological or political convictions.
4. Offices in the church are not to be used to dominate others but to share in ministry; rejected is any suggestion that the church could be given ruling or governing powers by themselves or by anyone outside the church.
5. While recognizing the role of government to provide for justice and peace, subject to God’s Word, we reject any doctrine that suggests that the church could become the single and totalitarian order of human life or could become an organ of the State.
6. The church’s commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ’s stead, rejecting any suggestion that the church could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans – including those of the Reich.

Explicit in this Declaration is the affirmation of Jesus Christ as Lord in all of life. Implicit is the rejection of Hitler and the Nazis having any standing contrary to the Gospel and the rejection of any accommodation by the church to the governance and values of the Nazis or any cooperation in the governance of the Nazi state. Being a good Christian means following Christ and Christ alone!

In 1984 at the 50th anniversary of the Barmen Declaration, the Reverend Leopold Esselbach, an ecumenical delegate from the Evangelical Church of Germany addressed the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA, and offered these reflections:

*They (the clergy and laity at Barmen) confessed Jesus Christ as Lord of the whole world and of their lives. Most members of the church still thought it possible to combine their Christian faith with German nationalism. We are mindful that our Protestant churches share in the guilt of those times, and we must humble ourselves before the judgment of God. Today the Barmen Declaration confronts us with the question: What are the heresies and temptations of our world, so that we may not fall into them?[[2]](#endnote-2)*

What Rev. Esselbach suggests is that the Barmen Declaration is not just an historical statement of faith. It is also a challenge to us to assess how it might speak to the times in which we live and the challenges we face, 90 years after it was adopted.

In his book *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, Gregory Boyd identifies the roots of many tensions and conflicts in the world today. He writes:

*We fallen humans have passionate convictions that control us and lead us into conflict with others who have equally passionate convictions. We believe in* ***our*** *nation over and against* ***their*** *nation,* ***our*** *religion over and against* ***their*** *religion,* ***our*** *culture over and against* ***their*** *culture,* ***our*** *political ideology over and against* ***their*** *political ideology, and so on. And insofar as we are influenced* ***by the kingdom of the world****, we express these passions by attempting to exercise ‘power over’ others as their nation, culture, religion, or political ideology, conflicts with or threatens our own. Violence is the inevitable result.”[[3]](#endnote-3)*

The Barmen Declaration rejects the influence of the kingdom of the world in favor of embracing the Kingdom of God announced by Jesus. It rejects identifying any political party or government as representative of the Kingdom of God on earth. Again and again the crowds that followed Jesus wanted to make him a king and hoped that he might lead a revolt against Rome in order to establish the Kingdom of God among them. But Jesus rejected those attempts, declaring that his kingdom was not of this world. In him God’s reign had begun but was not yet fully realized, so he urged his followers to seek the kingdom of God which is rooted in love of God and neighbor rather than seeking to establish a political kingdom – a Christian government or Christian nation – here on earth.

Today there are so-called Christian nationalists who conflate the Christian faith with our national identity. They claim that America is uniquely blessed by God and should serve as God’s Kingdom on earth: its roots go back to a concept of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny that has no roots in Scripture and the false claim that America was founded as a Christian nation. Their self-righteous goals are to make the government an instrument of their particular brand of theology and to align the culture, morals, and laws to their rigid interpretation of Scripture. In America they see the new Israel, God’s chosen people, favored by God and superior to other nations. They are akin to the German Christians who conflated the Gospel with the Reich, and the Barmen Declaration stands as a specific repudiation of their claims. For, the Lord is Creator of all people, and no one nation is favored over any other. Jesus came among us because God so loved the world, and the world is much bigger than any one nation! When we pray, “Thy Kingdom come” we are praying for the kingdom to come to the world, not just to or through any one nation – including ours! But as J. Ellsworth Kalas notes in his book *The Will of God in an Unwilling World*:

*Those of us who pray often and earnestly for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done are sometimes poor allies in bringing the will of God to pass. We are too ready to acquiesce to the evil that is in the world, too ready to give up, too quick to say of the difficult and even of the ugly that ‘it must be God’s will.’[[4]](#endnote-4)*.

In the passage from Matthew’s Gospel that I read this morning, the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus with a question: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? If he says “Yes” then he angers the Jewish crowd; if he says “No” then he angers the Roman authorities. Jesus’ response avoids the trap and sets out our responsibilities: *Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and give to God the things that are God’s*. The two should not be conflated – the things that are Caesar’s and the things that are God’s. It is God alone who merits are wholehearted love and devotion, God alone whose guidance we seek and whose will we seek to do. The nation deserves our respect, our taxes and support; we should celebrate the good and willingly confess and repent of the wrongs, but such patriotism must never come at the expense of our faithfulness to God, for then we are giving to the nation the things that are God’s. Barmen demands of us something more, and its authors risked their lives to declare it.

At the conclusion of their meeting at Barmen, those church leaders sang the last stanza of “Now Thank We All Our God.” Today we give thanks to God for them and for their faithful courage, but perhaps we should also ask ourselves: Are we willing to take such a risk and make such a stand for the Gospel of Jesus Christ today? Amen

1. *The Book of Confessions*, The Office of the General Assembly, 2016, p.280 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions*, Westminster Press:1985, p.176 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, Zondervan:2005, pp.23-24 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. J. Ellsworth Kalas, *The Will of God in an Unwilling World*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2011, pp.80 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)