

Resistance is Futile? Barmen Today

Almost 75 years' ago, on 29th May 138 people from 25 state and provincial churches, largely ministers and academic theologians from the Reformed, Lutheran and Free denominations of the Protestant churches, met at the City Church at Barmen. They accepted the 'Barmen Theological Declaration' penned by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, which was a highly controversial confession of Christian faith in 6 articles, each beginning with a quotation from the Bible, followed by a theological claim, and completed by a series of refusals.

Sixteen months earlier, on 30th January 1933, Adolf Hitler had assumed the post of Germany's Chancellor, and his National Socialist state had begun a programme of *gleichschaltung* (total co-ordination and synchronisation) aimed at a unified organisation of cultural and national life. Within a mere two months in office he had been empowered to change the law by decree, even when this new law was otherwise contrary to the German constitution. Alongside this had been the persecution of the Jews, initially in the form of Party-organised boycotting of Jewish businesses.

With the wave of optimistic German nationalism that greeted much of Hitler's pre-war governance many in the churches had followed suit. In mid 1933 the so-called 'German Christians' (*Deutsche Christen* or DC for short) had won significant victories in church elections, and issued the 'Directives of the Faith Movement German People's Church'. These had emphasised the *Germanness* of the Church, making it a one-faith movement for the Germanic people rooted in 'blood and soil', and with service to the nation being explicitly identified as service to God. It was not uncommon to hear proclamations such as that of Walter Grundmann, a leader of German Christians in Saxony: "The Swastika is a sign of sacrifice which lets the cross of Christ shine out for us in a new light." This racial Christian movement had soon after introduced the 'Aryan paragraph' into church administration in order to exclude those with Jewish or mixed racial connections, either through birth or marriage, from ecclesiastical office; and became the powerful voice in Protestant church affairs, with its own Reich-bishop, Ludwig Müller. It was in response to this that the 'Confessing Church' had emerged (*Bekennende Kirche*, BK for short) and met for their first Synod at Barmen.

The Declaration itself is a specifically *theological* declaration, making claims about the nature and identity of the Church in the light of the identity of the God confessed to have been incarnationally present in Jesus Christ. While this sense of human unity in obedience to the Christian God (broadly, article 1) has understandably sounded oppressive to many, for the Declaration's framer Karl Barth it was precisely that declaration which questioned German racism, the power-politics of the Nazis, the claim made on the state to an absolute allegiance

among those defined as its citizens, and the accommodation of churches to the spirit of the age. The state's claim on one's existence was radically undermined by the confession of the overlordship of Christ (article 2). The temptation to succumb to the prevailing ideologies of the day is refused because it lives in and from Christ alone (article 3). The National Socialist appeal to power, expressed largely through militarism, is denied legitimacy on the grounds that the church is called to the service of human flourishing (broadly, article 4). The state's injustices are resisted in the name of the God believed to call the church, and the state it is within, to act for justice and peace (article 5). Finally, self-securing and self-chosen desires are judged dangerous and improper by confession of the freedom-making God who is pure gift (article 6).

The stand taken at Barmen against the Hitler-supporting German Christians in the end proved to be weak. The Declaration said nothing explicit in support for the persecuted Jews; and while some viewed it as a judgment on the Third Reich itself many others merely understood it as resisting the state's intrusion into church affairs. Importantly, compared to the turning point in the history of Europe that Adolf Hitler's policies and the subsequent war laid the foundations for, it looked like distinctly ineffective resistance.

Yet the Declaration has come to take on something of a life its own since then. It has encouraged resistance to temptations to power and self-security in a changing world, and so it frequently has provided an inspiration beyond its historical significance. One American commentator was led to claim that the Declaration's "contemporaneity and its power, as well as its focus on the nature of the church, are what led me to it for direction for the church today." For example, it has been approvingly cited as a symbol and source of hope by anti-sectarian groups in apartheid South Africa and N. Ireland in the 1970s and 80s, been drawn on in response to the increasing proliferation of American nuclear arms during the Presidency of Ronald Reagan, and most recently been used in opposition to George W. Bush's aggression against the governments of Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the hands of those committed to the Declaration's broadly radical theological perspective of liberatingly living a confession of the God of Jesus Christ's sovereign freedom, the questions it can pose concerning, among others, the nature of human identity and the responsibilities we have for one another, the ideologies that generate all our self-understandings (whether we are aware of them or not), the nature of our every allegiance, the role of the state, the self-preserving consolations of religiosity without potentially dangerous responsibility to justice, and the practical consequences of our dreams, self-concern and desires can all remain deeply significant and interrogative in different contexts today. Here, if anywhere, is a claim that commitment to human flourishing may well require us in good conscience to be bad patriots.

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