

THE DECLARATION OF BARMEN

What Is It? “The Theological Declaration of Barmen was written by a group of church leaders in Germany to help Christians withstand the challenges of the Nazi party and of the so-called “German Christians,” a popular movement that saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Hitler’s National Socialism.”

Primary Author: Theologian Karl Barth

When: May 29–31, 1934

Where: Germany, City of Wupperthal, Barmen

Why? The rise of Hitler and Nazis in Germany threatened not just the civil and political rights of Germans, but also matters of conscience and faith. The Nazi government installed its own hand-picked delegate as leader of the German Church, and made it illegal to preach sermons opposing this and related actions. In protest, the pastors, theologians, and university professors who gathered in Barmen felt they had to explain the theological errors inherent in state control of Christianity.

1. “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.

2. “Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” (I 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.

3. “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body [is] joined and knit together.” (Eph. 4:15–16.) The Christian Church is the congregation of the brethren in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word and Sacrament through the Holy Spirit. As the church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the

expectation of his appearance. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.

4. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant." (Matt. 20:25, 26.) The various offices in the church do not establish a dominion of some over the others; on the contrary, they are for the exercise of the ministry entrusted to and enjoined upon the whole congregation. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, apart from this ministry, could and were permitted to give to itself, or allow to be given to it, special leaders vested with ruling powers.

5. "Fear God. Honor the emperor." (I Peter 2:17.) Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace. [It fulfills this task] by means of the threat and exercise of force, according to the measure of human judgment and human ability. The church acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and of the ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things. We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State.

6. "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matt. 28:20.) "The word of God is not fettered." (II Tim. 2:9.) 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, and therefore in the ministry of his own Word and work through sermon and Sacrament. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans.

What Sin Does Barmen Disavow? IDOLATRY Idolatry = Putting any human or creation of humans, or anything of the natural world, which God created, ahead of God. The First Commandment: "You shall have no other god before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them." - Exodus 20:3, 4, 5a. "The declaration proclaims the church's freedom in Jesus Christ who is Lord of every area of life. The church obeys him as God's one and only Word who determines its order, ministry, and relation to the state." - Book of Confessions.

RECLAIMING JESUS

A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis

We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake.

It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography. Our identity in Christ precedes every other identity.

When politics undermines our theology, we must examine that politics. The church's role is to change the world through the life and love of Jesus Christ. The government's role is to serve the common good by protecting justice and peace. When that role is undermined by political leadership, faith leaders must stand up and speak out. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state."

It is often the duty of Christian leaders, especially elders, to speak the truth in love to our churches and to name and warn against temptations, racial and cultural captivities, false doctrines, and political idolatries—and even our complicity in them. We do so here with humility, prayer, and a deep dependency on the grace and Holy Spirit of God.

Jesus is Lord. That is our foundational confession. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar was not—nor any other political ruler since. We pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Our faith is personal but never private, meant not only for heaven but for this earth.

Applying what "Jesus is Lord" means today is the message we commend as elders to our churches. We pray that we, as followers of Jesus, will find the depth of faith to match the danger of our political crisis.

The present crisis calls us to go deeper—deeper into our relationship to God; into our relationships with each other, especially across racial, ethnic, and national lines; and into our relationships with the most vulnerable, who are at greatest risk.

We need to recover the power of confessing our faith. Lament, repent, and then repair. If Jesus is Lord, there is always space for grace. We believe it is time to speak and to act in faith and conscience, not because of politics, but because we are disciples of Jesus Christ—to whom be all authority, honor, and glory. He is the light in our darkness. "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Signed: *Bishop Carroll A. Baltimore, Rev. Dr. Peter Borgdorff, Dr. Amos Brown, Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, Dr. Tony Campolo, Dr. Iva Carruthers, Bishop Michael Curry, Rev. Dr. James Forbes, Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Dr. Cynthia Hale, Rev. Dr. Richard Hamm, Rev. Dr. Joel Hunter, Rev. Dr. Jo Anne Lyon, Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr., Dr. John Perkins, Bishop Lawrence Reddick, Fr. Richard Rohr, Dr. Ron Sider, Rev. Jim Wallis, Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, Dr. Barbara Williams-Skinner, Bishop Will Willimon*

I. WE BELIEVE each human being is made in God's image and likeness. Racial bigotry is a brutal denial of the image of God in some of the children of God.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT the resurgence of white nationalism and racism in our nation on many fronts, including the highest levels of political leadership. We reject white supremacy and commit ourselves to help dismantle the systems and structures that perpetuate white preference and advantage. Any doctrines or political strategies that use racist resentments, fears, or language must be named as public sin.

II. WE BELIEVE we are one body. In Christ, there is to be no oppression based on race, gender, identity, or class.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT misogyny, the mistreatment, violent abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of women being further revealed in our culture and politics, including in our churches, and the oppression of any other child of God.

III. WE BELIEVE how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT the language and policies of political leaders who would debase and abandon the most vulnerable children of God. We strongly deplore the growing attacks on immigrants and refugees; we won't accept the neglect of the well-being of low-income families and children.

IV. WE BELIEVE that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives. Jesus promises, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

THEREFORE, WE REJECT the practice and pattern of lying that is invading our political and civil life. The normalization of lying presents a profound moral danger to the fabric of society.

V. WE BELIEVE that Christ's way of leadership is servanthood, not domination. We support democracy, not because we believe in human perfection, but because we do not.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT any moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian rule. We believe authoritarian political leadership is a theological danger threatening democracy and the common good—and we will resist it.

VI. WE BELIEVE Jesus when he tells us to go into all nations making disciples. Our churches and our nations are part of an international community whose interests always surpass national boundaries. We in turn should love and serve the world and all its inhabitants rather than to seek first narrow nationalistic prerogatives.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT "America first" as a theological heresy for followers of Christ. While we share a patriotic love for our country, we reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation over others as a political goal.