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Against the Stream

How Karl Barth Reframed Church-State Relations

According to the Scriptures the office of the State is that of the servant of God who does not carry the sword to no purpose, but for rewarding the good and punishing the evil, for the rescue of the poor and oppressed, and to make room externally for the free proclamation of the Gospel. And National Socialism in its deeds has fundamentally and absolutely denied and disowned this office.

—KARL BARTH¹

FROM WORLD WAR I TO THE BARMEN DECLARATION

DEFENDERS OF THE BARMEN Declaration's apolitical tone remind us that it was never intended to establish a program of political protest, that Karl Barth and the others were pastors not politicians; that the goal was to reassert the integrity of the gospel in the face of the attempted subversion by the German Christians.² On the one hand, the soundness of this interpretation is self-evident. And yet it should surprise no one that an apolitical strategy would have little political impact on the German state. It is also true that Barth's views on church and state relations changed after Barmen; that afterward he expressed remorse over his own sins of omission. If we explore Barth's writings over a twenty-year period, the change will become evident

1. *The Church and the Political Problem of Our Day*, 52.

2. Cf. Conway, *Nazi Persecution of the Church*, 84.

and so also his impact on the emerging political theology in Eastern Europe. The next two chapters will chronicle this development.

Despite the intentionally apolitical tone, it is also true that the high-water mark of the church's political resistance to Nazism was the synod held at Barmen, May 29–31, 1934, in which Barth played the role of principle author. It is also fair to say that this document, though theological to the core, had an implicit political message that would eventually become fully articulated. Before we consider Barmen in detail, we should take a closer look at this Swiss Reformed pastor who came to exercise such influence in Germany's Confessing Church. In particular, what were the sources of his resistance to the Protestant Christianity which was so amenable to supporting National Socialism? To answer, we must begin with a brief consideration of World War I and its shattering impact on Barth.

A Double Insanity

Not long before the Great War, Barth returned from his pastoral education in Germany to become a curate in a Reformed parish in Geneva. Two years later he followed his father's footsteps as a pastor in the Aargau region of Switzerland, in Safenwil, a small industrial town near his native Basel. There he served from 1911–21. During the years in Safenwil Barth became known throughout Protestant circles in Europe and North America for his provocative restatement of Christian theology in conversation with Western culture as it had evolved from the Reformation to the Enlightenment era. Barth has testified that what was decisive for him in his new approach to theology was the outbreak of World War I. Why the outbreak and not the German defeat? Barth answers: "Ninety-three German intellectuals issued a terrible manifesto, identifying themselves before all the world with the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. . . . And to my dismay, among the signatories I discovered the names of almost all my German teachers."³ This was the theological half of a "double insanity" that shook Barth to his core. The other half was learning that his own political party, the German Social Democrats, endorsed the war as well. This deflated Barth's youthful confidence that the emergence of socialism signaled the coming kingdom of God.⁴ How was it possible that his politi-

3. Barth, *Theology of Schleiermacher*, 263–64. The "Manifesto of the 93" included the following prominent theologians in order of signature: Adolf Deissman, Adolf von Harnack, Wilhelm Herrmann (one of Barth's favorite teachers), Adolf von Schlatter, and Reinhold Seeberg (who later supervised Bonhoeffer's doctoral thesis). Cf. *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Manifesto of the Ninety-Three," 2.1. List of Signatories, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifesto_of_the_Ninety-Three#List_of_signatories.

4. Jehle, *Ever Against the Stream*, 37.

cal party had joined his theological mentors to endorse this infernal European war? For Barth, there was no need for further evidence to demonstrate that his once revered cultural Protestant synthesis had reached its ignoble end. In both theology and in politics, his teachers were now “hopelessly compromised by what I regarded as their ethical failure in the face of the ideology of war.”⁵ In a letter to his friend and fellow pastor Eduard Thurneysen, he described this event as amounting to an exchange of the Christian gospel for a “German war-theology,” whose Christianity was reduced to “trimmings” and “surface varnish” composed “of a lot of talk about sacrifice and the like.”⁶ An ethical failure of such magnitude exposed the entire edifice of Barth’s biblical interpretation, doctrinal theology and political expression as fundamentally flawed. It must be all rethought from scratch.

But where to begin? Certainly Barth continued to be haunted by the powerful messages of the Russian novelists, challenged by the melancholic Kierkegaard, and inspired with hope by father and son Blumhardt.⁷ All these teachers would remain his fellow pilgrims. But after several philosophical false starts, he took the risk of reading Paul’s Letter to the Romans as though he had never read it before. The result was at the tender age (theologically speaking) of thirty-two he published his landmark *Der Romerbrieff* (The Epistle to the Romans), which the Catholic writer Karl Adam later described as a theological bomb dropped on the playground of the theologians.⁸ In retrospect, it may have been the most significant theological book of the century. Eventually, it would lead Barth into political matters but from an entirely new direction.

The Failed Foundations of Cultural Protestantism

To describe the variety of ways in which a church may relate to culture, H. R. Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* remains invaluable. Using Niebuhr’s categories, we could say Barth now set his formidable intellectual ability to articulate a paradigm of *Christ transforming culture*. In light of the “Manifesto of the Ninety-Three,” Germany (and no doubt Switzerland), had settled into a *Christ of culture* approach, that is, Christianity had adapted itself rather too comfortably to local culture, and hence had become domesticated by

5. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 81.

6. Barth, *Revolutionary Theology*, 26.

7. Readers unfamiliar with the Blumhardts may consult Roger Newell, “Blumhardt, Johann Christoph (1805–1880) and Christoph Friedrich (1842–1919),” 76–77, in Hart, *Dictionary of Historical Theology*, 76–77. The classic biography of the elder Blumhardt is Züngel, *Pastor Johann Christoph Blumhardt*. A comprehensive new biography is Ising, *Johann Christoph Blumhardt*.

8. Quoted in Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 17.

other cultural values, some far from neutral. The German adaptation was all the stronger because it was woven together by two reinforcing threads, one conservative, one liberal.

The Conservative Thread: Pietism

Among the various movements within the Swiss church, Pietism was Barth's next of kin. Many of his family were Pietists. Throughout his life, he remained their troublesome friend.⁹ As a movement, Pietism emerged from a series of spiritual awakenings in various regions of Germany throughout the end of the seventeenth century. Key guides of the movement included Philip Spener (whose classic devotional, *Pia Desideria* [1675], remains in print), his colleague August Franke, and later Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf and the Herrnhut community to which he gave refuge at his family estate, including the Moravian Brethren. The spiritual legacy emerging from this German stream of witness is immense. It includes John and Charles Wesley as well as legions of later revivalist and charismatic renewal groups.

Perhaps the defining form of Pietism's way of being Christian in the world, is that while it *assumes* Luther's teaching on *justification* by faith, its focus has shifted to *sanctification*, the living awareness of Christ's interior presence in the believer.¹⁰ Despite or perhaps due to this emphasis on the inner life, Pietism soon became a familiar supporting feature of what might be termed Germany's military/spiritual complex. For example, Otto Von Bismarck, the architect of German unification in 1871, was much admired in his lifetime for both his personal devotion to Christ and his "blood and iron" approach to the settling of political disputes. To say the least, Pietism's proximity to power politics demands we recalibrate our normal views about the spiritual life. Furthermore, the focus on the inward side of faith also stressed the link between personal (individual) *conversion* and *separation* from the world with its carnal values and temptations. Yet as a matter of historical record, the seeming opposites of personal conversion and power politics were connected. What is the best way to make sense of this paradox?

Consider the saying attributed to Bismarck: "You can't rule a nation by the Sermon on the Mount." How does an inward piety connect to a style of politics famous for its preference for military over diplomatic solutions? In a talk given after the Second World War, Barth suggested several links. First, Bismarck's strategy ought to be mentioned in the same breath as Hitler's because the former had neglected the basic contribution of Christianity to

9. According to his biographer, Eberhard Busch (*Karl Barth and the Pietists*, 316).

10. Sheldrake, *Pietism*, 491-92.

political community, which, to put it simply, is to serve, not to rule. "Bismarck—not to mention Hitler—was (in spite of the *Daily Bible Readings* on his bedside table) no model statesman because he wanted to establish and develop his work on naked power" that is, *potentia*, the kind of power that "masters and bends and breaks the law."¹¹ Interestingly, Bonhoeffer also spotted this lack of congruence between private faith and public policy as a recurrent failure of the German church in the Third Reich. The result was to make church a narrow place, where "there have been many cases of pastors refusing to assume the public responsibility of speaking out on the affliction of their colleagues and those suffering persecution of all kinds precisely because their own congregations had not yet been affected."¹² The failure here is the notion that any intervention by the church oversteps its calling and interferes with the state's God-ordained duties.

For Barth, the ethical irrelevance of Pietism manifested itself for all to see when many of its adherents among German leadership in church and academy publically supported the Kaiser's war. Perhaps one might argue this was simply business as usual for all stripes of Lutherans with their "two kingdom" tradition whereby one was taught to obey the state as a Christian duty. However, after Hitler ordered German soldiers into Europe for a second time in twenty years, how did the Pietists respond? Busch records that when revelations of Hitler's brutality came to light, Pietist leaders typically pleaded ignorance of Hitler's true nature. "Had we known, we wouldn't have supported him." Busch, however, presents a collage of Pietist comments from one of their primary magazines during Hitler's rise to power which gives ample evidence to the contrary. For example, while the Pietist theme of separation from the world mandated an aversion to movie theatres, dancing, opera and alcohol, there is no sliver of caution about separation from the war effort.¹³ Other articles lament the demise of the death penalty; some reject pacifism as ignoble. The broadside against pacifism is particularly revealing for it shows the extent to which Pietism had aligned itself with the military and *Volk* mentality that permeated Nazism.

We are all human beings only through the medium of a particular nation. . . . We are not human beings in and of ourselves, we are Germans. Loyalty to our nation and loyalty to our faith go hand in hand. Those who cannot sacrifice for the nation cannot make sacrifices for God.¹⁴

11. Barth, *Against the Stream*, 40.

12. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 296.

13. Busch, *Karl Barth and the Pietists*, 232.

14. *Ibid.*, 233.

Busch includes other examples of Pietism's Christ of culture alignment, including:

1. A critique of parliamentary democracy as a kind of hypnosis, with a preference for an authoritarian state.
2. A lack of concern for labor issues at the heart of the workers movements and trade unions. ("Selfishness is the great engine . . . in the economic life" which is irreplaceable).
3. Open anti-Semitism. "Generally speaking, we too consider the Jews to be a detrimental influence, and we are convinced that a curse rests on the Jewish people . . . and they also carry this curse into the host nation in which they have settled. . . . A Jew remains a Jew, and his blood is not changed by baptism's washing with water."
4. A fierce attack on the treaty of Versailles as shameful, including the "lie" about German war guilt.¹⁵

If we take these various pronouncements as representative of German Pietism between the wars, it seems disingenuous to argue that the Pietists who supported the Third Reich were gullible innocents. Despite the strong claim to have separated themselves from the world with its dance halls and alcohol, their political-social record reflects an unequal yoke between the kingdom of God and the toxic myth of the German *Volk*. The result was to encourage a corporate narcissism, one that not only tolerated but encouraged the loss of civil rights to minorities of race or politics. Thus Pietism, judged by the fruit of its reflections on political ethics, particularly its enthusiasm for the *Volkish* revival, "dug a riverbed for the things that were to come." As Barth put it at Barmen: "What was not good about Pietism has woken up with the German Christians."¹⁶

Christianity Without Solidarity

If we leap ahead to Leipzig and Pastor Führer's theme of radical welcome (*ofen für alles*) for atheists and dissidents, Pietism's attack on various outsiders contrasts starkly. It exposes the extent to which Pietism severed itself from any sense of solidarity with the world. From the very first edition of *Der Romerbrief*, Barth challenged the church-centric style that enabled Pietism to remain indifferent to the earthly distress of the working classes.¹⁷ The

15. *Ibid.*, 232–34.

16. Quoted in *ibid.*, 236.

17. *Ibid.*, 20.

sheer contrast between the Pietist focus on individual salvation, individual sanctification, and individual happiness, was in large part why Barth was completely won over by J. C. and C. F. Blumhardt. Father and Son Blumhardt's ministry in the Baden-Württemberg region (1840–1919) expressed quite prophetically an awareness of a kingdom that was “comprehensive” and “holistic.” Blumhardt wrote: “Yes, dear Christian, make sure that you die saved! But the Lord Jesus wants more. He wants not only my redemption and yours, but the redemption of all the world.”¹⁸ As Barth saw it, a self-preoccupied frame of mind was very near the darkness at the core of a fallen world. How could a temperamentally *individualistic* approach to human life ever stand in solidarity with the poor, the hungry, the persecuted of the world? Indeed to withdraw was to separate oneself from the world, but not in a Christ-like way! It was a separation that walked by on the other side. Moreover, to walk by on the other side was the severest form of worldliness, for it only reinforced the curvature inward pattern that turns away from the other, which epitomizes the deformity at the heart of a fallen world. Barth was convinced that though Pietism imagined it had separated itself from the world, in fact it had only hid its complacent connection.¹⁹ That the Pietists gave their spiritual *imprimatur* to Germany's “thoroughly sinful, godless” march to war provoked an angry Barth to assert that “it was time to become an atheist against this would-be god of German nationalism and militarism precisely for the sake of the real God's honor!”²⁰

Conversion Without Transformation

Barth's evolving approach to eschatology was another source of turbulence in his relationship with Pietism. Though Barth would always see personal conversion as central to discipleship, he grew increasingly skeptical that we either can or should draw a distinction between two tangible groups of humans, those converted and those unconverted.²¹ Augustine had already warned centuries before that in the visible church there are wolves within and sheep without. Besides, can one identify a single, visible difference between believer and worldling that cannot collapse into a new form of Pharisaism? As if, mused Barth, we can confidently lay hold of God “by performing our negative works of repentance, humility and self denial.”²²

18. Quoted in Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 650.

19. Busch, *Karl Barth and the Pietists*, 42–45.

20. *Ibid.*, 295.

21. *Ibid.*, 101.

22. *Ibid.*, 110–11.

Here Barth put his finger on the way Pietism unequally yoked creature and Creator, that is, culture (specifically German) and the crucified Lord of culture. What was now clear for Barth was that the church can and must be *against* Germany when Germany wanted the church to confirm its endemic racism and cultural imperialism. The church could only truly serve the German people by faithfully declaring and living out of the gospel. True service to the German people was by no means the same as doing whatever it takes for Germans to come back to church again.²³ As the church is intended to be *for* the world *against* the world, so the church must be *for* the German people *against* the German people.²⁴ Though the church holds out the gospel to all worldly kingdoms, including that of the Germans, she must preach it *in* the Third Reich, not *under* it, nor in *its* spirit.²⁵ With such expressions, we can see that already in 1933 Barth's theology was moving toward some kind of political embodiment. "If the German Evangelical Church excludes Jewish-Christians, or treats them as of a lower grade, she ceases to be a Christian church."²⁶ Barth never retreated from the awareness that the church must always swim against the stream and that Pietism, despite its rhetoric, had become unequally yoked to a people's (*Volk*) religiosity that, given certain conditions, could become toxic, indeed demonic.

Cultural Protestantism's Other Thread: Liberalism

Pietism was not the only stream flowing into the swelling river of German war theology. Barth was never shy about naming the other. He declared that the theology exposed in Kaiser Wilhelm's war manifesto was "grounded, determined and influenced decisively" by Friedrich Schleiermacher.²⁷ Schleiermacher, the father of liberal theology, was the crucial figure in moving theology from a study of Christian doctrine to the study of "conceptions of states of mind of Christian piety."²⁸ That is, doctrines derive from an inner state of experience. Hence the real subject matter of theology is a human state of consciousness. Whereas sixteenth-century theology said "the gospel," the "Word of God" or "Christ," Schleiermacher said "religion"

23. Barth, *Theological Existence Today!*, 51.

24. A phrase used by Newbigin, *Word in Season*, 54. Newbigin may well have Barth's own words from *Rechtfertigung und Recht* in the background. Cf. Barth, *Community, State and Church*, 140.

25. Barth, *Theological Existence Today!*, 52.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Barth, *Theology of Schleiermacher*, 264.

28. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 454.

or “piety.” In this way, Barth was convinced that theology’s center had been transferred from God to human action in regard to God. Hence Barth posed the disturbing question: had theology lost its proper theme?²⁹ Of course, the focus on human interiority was not original with Schleiermacher: it was the legacy of being raised in a Pietist home.

But was there a more intimate link between Schleiermacher and theologians who endorsed the Kaiser’s war? If so, it had to do with the relation between individual and group awareness. No one, said Schleiermacher, can be a person apart from a living community. All personal awareness of God occurs within the living community which is the church.³⁰ Moreover for Schleiermacher, individual self-awareness is so naturally linked together with group awareness that he fatefully named the church the *Volkskirche*, the People’s Church. National Socialism arose within a society permeated by the awareness that Christianity was at the core of what it meant to be German *Volk*.³¹ Nazi iconography constantly drew on the themes of sacrifice and redemption—themes borrowed directly from the gospel.³² It will be no surprise then, to find that the theologians who most ardently supported the Nazi movement were enthusiastic about coupling church and *Volk*. They were the ones to provide a sense of authority in church and in academy for a theology of *Volk* that undergirded the *German Christian* merger of Christianity with Nazism.

Theologians of the Volk

Robert Ericksen’s *Theologians under Hitler* tells the story of three professors who exemplified why Barth rejected the joining together of *Volk* and Christian faith. Ericksen begins with the story of Gerhard Kittel, famous for his scholarship as editor of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, who described Nazism as a “*volkish* renewal movement on a Christian, moral foundation.”³³ After seventeen months in an Allied prison following Germany’s defeat, Kittel claimed he had been deceived; that the *Volk* was “falsified into a system of imperialistic and megalomaniacal politics of

29. *Ibid.*, 460.

30. Barth, “Schleiermacher’s Celebration of Christmas,” in *Theology and Church*, 153.

31. Interestingly, Bismarck, the architect of Germany unification, was confirmed on his 16th birthday in Berlin by Schleiermacher. Cf. Hesekeiel, *Bismarck*, 111.

32. Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 9, 10.

33. Quoted in Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler*, 35.

brutality.”³⁴ Nonetheless he still valued “Volkish ideas” as a proper German alternative to Western liberalism.

Ericksen also relates the story of “moderate” Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus. At the time of World War I, Althaus had a self-described “epiphany” in which he experienced the *Volk* as a religious reality. As a result he longed for this awareness to be felt by the entire church in Germany. When the first war ended in defeat, he was convinced the new Weimar Republic was a disaster, lacking moral integrity. If only Germany could find a way to recover moral discipline, even a totalitarian state would be acceptable—as long as it embodied the needs and desires of the *Volk*.³⁵ So it came to pass that when Althaus read the very same Aryan paragraph which so appalled Bonhoeffer and Barth, he saw simple missional common sense. Yes, there is unity in Christ, but when admitting people to ministry the church has always recognized restrictions based on age, gender, and physical ability. The Aryan paragraph was more of the same.³⁶ The bottom line for Althaus was that Nazism was not just another political party; it was a movement of the *Volk*. He wrote in 1935, “We Christians know ourselves bound by God’s will to the promotion of National Socialism, so that all members and ranks of the *Volk* will be ready for service and sacrifice to one another.”³⁷ Moreover, Althaus reckoned that “living history” and the “law of conflict” made war more or less inevitable. Thus service and sacrifice *in war* were simply part of one’s duty to the *Volk*.³⁸ Not surprisingly, when the Confessing Church proclaimed its faith at Barmen, Althaus was unsympathetic. He not only refused to sign Barmen but endorsed an alternative, the Ansbach Counsel (*Ansbacher Ratschlag*), which included the following endorsement of Hitler: “We thank God our father that he has given to our *Volk* in its time of need the Führer as a pious and faithful sovereign . . . who wants to prepare a government of good rule . . . with discipline and honor.”³⁹

At the height of denazification after the war, Allied authorities required Althaus to present letters of endorsement in order to apply for exoneration for his Nazi affiliation. On behalf of his old teacher, Helmut Thieliicke defended Althaus on the grounds that his enthusiasm for the Nazis was basically an expression of nationalism.⁴⁰ To his credit, after the war Althaus roundly con-

34. *Ibid.*, 44.

35. *Ibid.*, 106.

36. *Ibid.*, 108.

37. Quoted in *ibid.*, 86.

38. Quoted by Barth, *Doctrine of Creation*, CD, III/4, 457.

39. Quoted in Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler*, 87.

40. *Ibid.*, 111.

demned the Nazi years, interpreting Germany's defeat as the clearest evidence that God had withdrawn his blessing. Nevertheless, as Ericksen insists, his commitment to the ideology of *Volk* had led him to ally himself to the Nazis for far too long.⁴¹ Meanwhile, Althaus was unrepentant in his deference to the verdict of history as the natural criterion of God's curse or blessing.

Ericksen's final study examines Emmanuel Hirsch, professor of theology at Göttingen, who, like Althaus, was convinced the Weimar democracy had led to Germany's moral failures. Yet he believed war could become a heroic prayer uttered as "a question to God" in which nations that deserve strength and honor may win these because of their inner strength.⁴² Through war Germany could be restored by will, unity, discipline, purpose and sacrifice as the *Volk* acted within history to accomplish God's purposes. Like Althaus, Hirsch happily applied the Aryan paragraph to the church, since he was convinced that evangelism works best through identification, common blood and culture.⁴³

In the end, Hirsch's central theme virtually became the core argument of the German Christian movement, viz. the belief in a *Volk* in which religion and racial self-awareness reinforced each other in a decisive historical meeting point determined and designed by God to bring a further maturation of the world toward its destiny. With prestigious figures like Kittel, Althaus and Hirsch promoting these ideas both in church and academy, the *German Christian* movement flourished. It gave explicit voice to what everywhere was implicit in German culture: the mystical link between nationalism, spirituality, and militarism which energized the German *Volk*. It was not a big step to link this with race. If the spirituality of Germans was embedded in its racial DNA, church was the natural place where soldiers could feel at home, where pastors would not obsess about doctrine. Instead, familiar and supportive religious rituals would bring strength and solace to the *Volk*.⁴⁴

There is a further complication: to be fair to the Nazi apologists, the use of *Volk* as a missiological category had a resume that reached to the center of international missionary strategy, including that of American evangelicals. It began with Gustav Warnack (1834–1910), perhaps the greatest German mission theorist of his era, who advocated an ethnic strategy for

41. *Ibid.*, 119.

42. *Ibid.*, 135.

43. *Ibid.*, 147.

44. Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 8–11. The failure of postwar Allied justice was never more evident than with Hirsch. No theologian of stature gave greater allegiance to the Nazis and yet he not only avoided imprisonment through early retirement, but was not required to undergo the rigors of the denazification program. Hirsch never acknowledged his embrace of Nazism as an error. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler*, 176.

all missionary efforts. Later Afrikaner theologians in the Dutch Reformed tradition referenced Warnack to legitimize separate ethnic, economic and church development in South Africa. It became the grounds for rejecting mixed-race congregations. Even Donald McGavran, the American founder of the church growth movement, shared this approach. With his "homogenous unit principle" he virtually elevated ethnicity above catholicity in the church's witness to the nations.⁴⁵

For Barth this strategy erred in elevating a particular human community or *Volk* as a revelation of God within the historical process. Nationality became an organizing principle of human life *revealed from nature*, not from Scripture.⁴⁶ In contrast to Barth, Ericksen identifies Hirsch's error *not* as his belief in historical process as revelation, but rather in his "bold act" to align himself with German nationalism, thus undervaluing the liberal, democratic tradition within history.⁴⁷ Ericksen even accuses Barth of lacking any sense that God has a role in the historical process.⁴⁸ But surely the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is sufficient sign that God has indeed engaged fully in human history? For Barth, in the light of God's engagement, the imperial aspirations of Germany were idolatrous identifications of one nation's historical journey as divine revelation. In his critique of Barth, Ericksen finds the source of what he calls Barth's "lack of engagement in history" (lack, that is, compared to Hirsch?) as due to "irrational premises." What Ericksen censures as "irrational" is that Barth had the audacity to reject the Enlightenment definition of "reason."⁴⁹ However, rather than use "reason" and "irrational" in such a polemical way, historical theology is better advised to remain as descriptive as possible. The fact is Barth refused to allow the plausibility structures of the Enlightenment to dictate what can or cannot be considered a rational approach to theology. Barth's insight has recently been forcefully corroborated by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* where he argues that it is illusory to suppose that a pure kind of rationality is available in a tradition-free, disembodied

45. The repudiation of this racist missiological strategy became a central conviction of the leading South African missiologist, David Bosch. Cf. Yates, "David Bosch," 72-78. In fairness to McGavran, he never justified post-conversion segregation. Nevertheless in Bosch's opinion, an "obsession" with numbers led him to endorse Warneck's *Volk* strategy.

46. Quoted in Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 21.

47. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler*, 191.

48. *Ibid.*, 191, 183.

49. *Ibid.*, 16.

form, capable of passing judgment on all the various ways of grasping truth developed in particular socially embodied traditions of rational discourse.⁵⁰

Barth found one other German Christian agenda malevolent: their brusque rejection of most of the historical doctrinal debates between Calvinists, Lutherans and Roman Catholics as simply unnecessary. Doctrines, they claimed, divided Germans; ritual and ethnicity united Germans. However, the emphasis on *national* identity apart from the worldwide Christian community, in fact was divorcing Christians in Germany from Christians everywhere else. It even lent a kind of pious credibility for Germany's preparation for war.

Barth's Early Response: The Barmen Declaration

The decisive moment for a clear theological protest against the German Christian (*Deutsche Christen*) movement came on May 29–31, 1934. But with three-quarters of Protestants already “coordinated” into the new Reich Church, the possibility of any serious challenge to the German Christians was already improbable.⁵¹ Nevertheless, 139 delegates of the Protestant church from eighteen different *Landeskirchen* (regional churches) gathered at the Barmen-Gemarkte Reformed Church in Westphalia, in the suburb of Wuppertal in the Rhineland, and issued their famous declaration.⁵² While others took a well-deserved Saturday afternoon nap, Barth has testified that “fortified by strong coffee and one or two Brazilian cigars,” he drafted the now famous six points of the document.⁵³ The main order of business was simple: to discuss and formulate an appeal to the Protestant churches of Germany to resist the German Christian marriage of Christianity to National Socialism which now threatened its very existence. The declaration's format was also simple. It consisted of six positive theses, with each thesis introduced by a text of Scripture and ending with the rejection of a competing German Christian teaching. It is worth considering each briefly in turn.⁵⁴

Article 1 begins by quoting John 14:6 (“I am the way, truth and life”) and John 10:1, 9 (“He who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but

50. Cf. Newbiggin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 84.

51. Scholder, “Crisis of the 1930s,” in *Requiem for Hitler*, 85.

52. Cochrane, *Church's Confession*, 148. Cochrane notes the average age of attendees was a surprisingly youthful forty-one. For a detailed study of the events, see Scholder, *Churches and the Third Reich*, vol. 2.

53. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 245. For more details, cf. Scholder, *Churches and the Third Reich*, 2:137–38.

54. The summaries which follow are indebted to Niesel, *The Gospel and the Churches*.

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.") The positive affirmation follows: "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." Having spoken a clear yes, there follows an equally clear no. "We reject the false doctrine as though the church can and must acknowledge as sources of her proclamation, except and beside this one Word of God, other events and powers, forms and truths, as God's revelation." Instead of Hirsch's devotion to the *Volk*, the first article begins with devotion to a person: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture." Article 1 rejects as "false doctrine" the idea that history or nature reveals a decisive role for the *Volk* beside and apart from "this one Word of God." To welcome the events of 1933 politically is one thing; to welcome them as part of the church's proclamation, as if God had raised up Hitler for the redemption of the German people, is false doctrine.⁵⁵ Simply put, this article asserts that the church does not have several different sources of revelation which it must somehow coordinate. It has one source of knowledge and proclamation, namely, Jesus Christ as he is witnessed to in Scripture.⁵⁶ If the church adds the voice of the German nation as another source of revelation alongside Jesus Christ, a false god is introduced into the church's proclamation. The corruption of the *entire* church follows.⁵⁷

Article 2 details the nature of the one Word's authority: it is that of one who grants forgiveness and whose rule over us is a gracious, joyful sovereignty. It is the opposite of a totalitarian claim that demands the whole person without first granting wholeness.⁵⁸ It also rejects the notion that there are spheres of life that do not belong to this gracious authority. The reference here is to the German Christian distortion of Luther's two kingdoms, by which the sphere of God's left hand, the state, aspires to an autonomy that effectively annuls and usurps Christ's kingship. When preachers are accused of "meddling in politics" it is frequently a sign that the church has dared to speak outside the box of "personal spirituality" assigned to it by a political system seeking total power.⁵⁹

The third article describes the church as a communion in which Jesus is present as Lord in Word and sacrament by the Spirit. Moreover, it recalls the church to its profound connection to the world, which is the opposite

55. Cobham, "Significance of the Barmen Declaration," 36.

56. Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace*, 20-21.

57. Busch, *Barmen Theses*, 31.

58. Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace*, 34-35.

59. Littell, "From Barmen (1934) to Stuttgart (1945)," 46.

of a false solidarity that assimilates itself to the teachings of current ideologies and politics (such as the Aryan paragraph). The church's true solidarity shares with the world a *solidarity in sin* as it also witnesses to the world that sin does not have the last word. The last word is the strength of the church's life and message.

Article 4 set a clear boundary against Hitler's authority in the church by applying the third article to ministry as the *servant* rule of Jesus in contrast to the domineering, secular *Führerprinzip* (leader principle). A year earlier Barth had already rejected the idea of applying the pattern of Hitler's leadership to the church. "Let it be clear that the German church has the 'leader' it needs in Jesus."⁶⁰

The fifth article begins with an affirmation of the positive task of the state. "The state has the responsibility to provide for justice and peace in the as yet unredeemed world . . . by the threat and use of force." However the church is called to remind the state "of God's kingdom, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility of rulers and ruled." In the light of the fourth article, the fifth article declares that the state's authority is not autonomous, but stands within the rule of Christ and creates a proper responsibility for both citizens and elected officials (rulers and ruled). By reminding the state of God's justice, the church reminds the state that there are criteria for its actions which are not set by itself, but which are set by God's word.⁶¹ Barth would later develop this theme elsewhere but here is the beginning of what has been described as a "distinct advance" (Cochrane) or "a redefinition" (Scholder) of church/state relations from the confessions of the sixteenth century. With Barmen, Barth is moving toward a mutual interaction in which the state is neither an "order of creation" (Brunner) nor an event or power which the church must hear as revelation. The state exists by God's divine appointment to serve the church but also the church serves the state, helping it achieve its true calling, which is to provide for justice and peace.⁶² Here is a final, definitive *no* to the state's attempt to control or coordinate the church.⁶³ And yet here is also a divine permission for the state to attend to its appointed responsibility.⁶⁴

The sixth and final thesis further defines the church's task: to proclaim to the world the "free grace of God." But the church is misused and perverted

60. Barth, *Theological Existence Today!*, 45.

61. Scholder, *Churches and the Third Reich*, 2:153.

62. Cochrane, *Church's Confession*, 284-85.

63. Scholder, *Churches and the Third Reich*, 2:154.

64. But what if the state misuses or abuses its power to serve justice and maintain peace? This is not directly addressed by Barmen. Cf. Busch, *Barmen Theses*, 80.

when it is used to buttress the state. The church has but one mission which cannot be abandoned to serve other tasks.

The declaration was debated and adopted without amendment by the participants. As deliberations ended, the assembly spontaneously rose and sang together the third verse of Martin Rinckart's hymn:

All praise and thanks to God, the Father now be given,
 The Son, and him who reigns with them in highest heaven.
 The One Eternal God, whom heaven and earth adore,
 For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.⁶⁵

Many ink cartridges could be used up reviewing all the literature that has poured forth on Barmen. Since our concern is its relevance for the events of 1989 leading to German reunification, we should note that Barmen provided direction and invigorated the church to face the increasingly difficult challenges in the years which followed. We should also remember for better and for worse, that Barmen was not a political document; it was a church document that recorded "a struggle for the church against itself."⁶⁶ The logic here is that before the church can address other spheres, it must know its own identity. And this is where our survey of Pietism and Liberalism has revealed an absence. Hence the German Christian merger of Nazism and Christianity was the culmination of a long process of accommodating the gospel to German and European culture. The core of the message that emerged with such energy in the German Christians was not original. When its platform announced that they saw in "race, folk and nation natural orders by which God was revealing his will to the German people"⁶⁷ they were voicing a sentiment that had been implicit in the church for some time.

To no one's surprise, the German Christians counterattacked. Kittel remonstrated there was never a gospel apart from a historical moment, guided and shaped according to the soil God prepared in particular cultures for it to take root. This pattern was God's plan.⁶⁸ As already noted, Althaus signed a counter-document, the *Almsbacher Ratschlag*, which endorsed Hitler. More disturbing to Barth was the pamphlet published later that year by his fellow Swiss, Emil Brunner. The article, "Nature and Grace," criticized Barth for rejecting all forms of natural theology, which Brunner argued was tantamount to dismissing all evidence of God's nature and purposes apart from Scripture. That Brunner's tract was loudly applauded by the German Christians no

65. Scholder, *Churches and the Third Reich*, 2:146-47.

66. Cochrane, *Church's Confession*, 11.

67. Quoted in Cochrane, *Church's Confession*, 71.

68. Bentley, *Martin Niemöller*, 102.

doubt influenced Barth's "angry no" in response.⁶⁹ In Barth's view, Brunner's essay was an appeasement position at the very moment the church faced a crisis. It was another chapter in the three-centuries-long story of European Protestants blending Christ with culture, nature with grace. Again and again, the church's biblical foundation had been compromised by cultural, *Volk*/ethnic and nationalist agendas. With Barmen, Barth sought a fresh start; an intentional rejection of such mergers, grounding everything in the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*. The time was urgent for the church to refuse any attachments to mystical Christs fashioned from personal experiences, national experiences and historical trends. No! The church's life depended on grounding itself simply on Christ "as attested in Scripture."

In the coming years, Barth would add both detail and scope to the Barmen theses. But as the Nazi years marched into a second world war in twenty years, followed by a Cold War of iron curtains and nuclear threats, Barmen remains the most significant refashioning of church and state relations since the Reformation.⁷⁰ Essentially, Barmen declared that the state did not have the right to prescribe the meaning of Christianity.⁷¹ The power of Barmen lay in the sheer simplicity with which it refocused the church on its sole foundation: Jesus the Christ. Cochrane was correct: Barmen confined itself to the religious realm. And Barnett is also correct in saying, "its words contained the theological seeds of broader resistance."⁷² Certainly Cochrane's description of Barmen as essentially a church document may be used as a ploy to head off criticism that Barmen's apolitical tone was erroneous. However, it was commonly understood from the beginning that Barmen was a different kind of theological document, one with a political edge. When Barmen says, "We repudiate the false teaching that there are areas of life which do not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we do not need justification and sanctification through him," there were few readers so uninformed that they failed to discern the challenge being put to the current regime.

As Cochrane put it, whenever the church concerns itself only with itself, it forgets that Christ died for the world "and the church has been called to serve the world with its message of God's grace for all peoples."⁷³ This was of course the ongoing temptation for the Confessing Church. At Barmen the Confessing Church wrestled with the paradox that at the core of its message

69. Cochrane, *Church's Confession*, 71.

70. So Scholder, quoted in Barnett, *For the Soul of the People*, 56.

71. Bettis, "Barmen," 151, 156.

72. Barnett, *For the Soul of the People*, 55.

73. Cochrane, *Church's Confession*, 206.

was a Word that *in its essence was for others*, not simply a private possession of the devout. It remains true that Barmen as a church document did not seize the wheel of the Third Reich. Neither did it build an autobahn leading inevitably to the Leipzig prayer meetings and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. When after the war Niemöller began to speak of the church's guilt, Barmen was included in his rebuke. Barmen was a flawed first step toward faithful witness, but it was a genuine step nevertheless. It insisted that the Word of God declared by the church was not a private word reserved for likeminded church folk. The Word it declared could not be silent in the face of other powers or principalities which claimed a final independence or authority apart from this Word. But there is yet something more precise to say about the flaw in Barmen.

A Time to Speak, a Time to Be Silent

Barmen was not the last time the Confessing Church spoke forthrightly about the crisis facing Christianity in Germany. At its next synod, meeting at Niemöller's parish in Dahlem (October 30, 31, 1934), it declared that, given the role of the German Christians in the Reich Church, the Confessing Church had become the sole legitimate church in Germany. As such, they were now entitled to educate and ordain their own pastors, and govern their parishes under *Notrecht* (emergency laws).⁷⁴ Later, on June 4, 1936, its governing council sent a private memorandum personally to Hitler, which directly challenged the pagan notions of the Nazi state, condemned its record, naming in particular anti-Semitism, racism, concentration camps, secret police methods, ballot violations, the destruction of justice in the civil courts, and the corruption of public morals.⁷⁵ One can debate the wisdom of voicing this only in a private correspondence but we should not fault the intention. In this way the Confessing Church urged Hitler to change course and did so without the complicating ingredient of public censure. Publicity, they reckoned, might provoke unnecessary public posturing in order to save face. However, once the contents of the document were leaked to the press, a follow-up pastoral letter to church constituencies softened their protest considerably. All mention of concentration camps or anti-Semitic behavior vanished. It is hard to defend such public reticence. Was it not a failure of nerve?⁷⁶

In a reflection published in 1944, Julius Rieger, Bonhoeffer's colleague at the German Protestant Church in London, distinguished the silence of the

74. Barnett, *For the Soul of the People*, 65.

75. Cochrane, *Church's Confession*, 208.

76. Conway calls it politically naïve (*Nazi Persecution*, 163-64).

church caused by unbelief and fear from the silence due to being muzzled as the state took draconian measures against it. Persecution renders a victim mute. When the Gestapo whisked away a local pastor who is not heard from again, when concentration camps locked away pastors such as Niemöller, the resulting silence bears testimony not to fear but to fidelity to the gospel.⁷⁷ But how should we interpret the silence of the vast number of pastors who refused to follow Niemöller's example and publically challenge the corrupt practices and abuse of state power? Moreover, how should we interpret Barmen's own silence regarding the Jews or the Confessing Church's public reticence concerning the incident surrounding the Hitler memo?

In recent years another silence has been broken by Jewish scholars. Drawing on the evidence compiled by Raul Hilberg, Hannah Arendt brought to light the extent to which Jewish leaders were complicit in cooperating with the Nazis, even down to the details of arranging deportation, transportation and confiscation of the property of fellow Jews.

Without Jewish help in administrative and police work—the final rounding up of Jews in Berlin was, as I have mentioned, done entirely by Jewish police—there would have been either complete chaos or an impossibly severe drain on German manpower. . . . In Amsterdam as in Warsaw, in Berlin as in Budapest, Jewish officials could be trusted to compile the lists of persons and of their property, to secure money from the deportees to defray the expenses of their deportation and extermination, to keep track of vacated apartments, to supply police forces to help seize Jews and get them on trains, until, as a last gesture, they handed over the assets of the Jewish community in good order for final confiscation. They distributed the Yellow Star badges, and sometimes, as in Warsaw . . . the sale of armbands became a regular business; there were ordinary armbands of cloth and fancy plastic armbands which were washable. . . . To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story.⁷⁸

Not surprisingly, many in the Jewish community have not welcomed the attention to its failures cast by the reports of Hilberg and Arendt. But Arendt's refusal to remain silent is a sign of hope. Denial repeats the past; it cannot heal it. It is better to pay careful attention to moments when

77. Rieger, *Silent Church*, 43–45.

78. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 116–17. Evans seeks to mollify Arendt's criticism, noting that Jewish room for maneuver was minimal. However, he confirms that Jewish councils were recruited by the Nazis to police themselves and in fact largely complied. Evans, *Third Reich at War*, 774.

unexpectedly the truth was spoken. For example, out of a fearful silence, in March 1937, the Roman Catholic Church smuggled into Germany the papal encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* (*With Burning Concern*). It was read from every Catholic pulpit on Palm Sunday before a single copy fell into Nazi hands. In it Pius XI called on the church to resist the idolatry of race or people, state or constitution, and to resist the perversion of doctrine and morality. Hitler was furious at this public act of defiance.⁷⁹

Even at Barmen there was an uneasy sense that the Confessing Church was silent about something that needed to be spoken publically. We have already noted Barth's letter to Bethge, in response to his gift of the Bonhoeffer biography, in which he praised Bonhoeffer for facing and tackling the Jewish question "so centrally and energetically" as early as 1933. The same letter also tells Bethge that had Barmen attempted this it would not have been acceptable to his fellow delegates. Indeed, Barth blamed himself for not making this question "a decisive issue." There was no excuse for not trying.⁸⁰ Much earlier in June 1945, with the carnage of war displayed on all fronts, Barth lamented how partial was the church's resistance. Yet even this limited resistance must be set against a backdrop of the cultural surrender of both the liberal and the conservative church. Regarding the Confessing Church's limited resistance, Barth wrote this assessment:

In 1933 and the years immediately following—at the time the National Socialists "seized power"—there was no struggle of the German universities and schools, of the German legal profession, of German business, of the German theater and German art in general, of the German Army, or of the German trade-unions. Many individuals, it is true, went down to an honorable defeat. But in no time at all, those large groups and institutions were subdued and made to conform. On the other hand, from the very first months on there was a German Church struggle. Even it was not a total resistance against totalitarian National Socialism. It restricted itself to repelling the encroachment of National Socialism. It confined itself to the Church's Confession, to the Church service, and to Church order as such. It was only a partial resistance. And for this it has been properly and improperly reproached: properly—in so far as a strong Christian Church, that is, a Church sure of its own cause in the face of National Socialism should not have remained on the defensive and should not have fought on its own

79. Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 165. However, Lewy points out that even though the pagan teachings of blood and soil were specifically mentioned as contrary to Christian faith, the letter was silent about anti-Semitism *per se*. Lewy, *Catholic Church*, 296.

80. Barth, *Karl Barth Letters, 1961-1968*, 250.

narrow front alone; improperly—in so far as on this admittedly all too narrow front a serious battle was waged, at least in part and not without some success. At any rate, the substance of the Church was rescued and with a better understanding of it than it had had before. If at least as much had been done in other areas as was done at that time in the Church, National Socialism would have had a hard time of it in Germany right from the start. In proportion to its task, the Church has sufficient reason to be ashamed that it did not do more; yet in comparison with those other groups and institutions it has no reason to be ashamed; it accomplished far more than all the rest.⁸¹

In this context we should recall the unexpected commendation of the church's resistance by Albert Einstein, hardly a church insider.

Having always been an ardent partisan of freedom, I turned to the universities, as soon as the revolution broke out in Germany, to find there the defenders of freedom. I did not find them. Very soon the universities took refuge in silence. I then turned to the editors of powerful newspapers, who, but lately in flowing articles, had claimed to be the faithful champions of liberty. These men, as well as the universities, were reduced to silence in a few weeks. I then addressed myself to the authors individually, to those who passed themselves off as the intellectual guides of Germany, and among whom many had frequently discussed the question of freedom and its place in modern life. They are in their turn very dumb. Only the Church opposed the fight which Hitler was waging against liberty. Till then I had no interest in the Church, but now I feel great admiration and am truly attracted to the Church which had the persistent courage to fight for spiritual truth and moral freedom. I feel obliged to confess that I now admire what I used to consider of little value.⁸²

As Conway notes, when Barmen was unanimously endorsed by its 139 delegates in May of 1934, no one wanted a political resistance movement led by the churches—especially the churches themselves! The church much preferred to ride along with the recovery of German national pride. A majority of the church welcomed Hitler and hoped his rise would restore its special role in society, which had been tottering since the failure of the Kaiser's war. Given this cultural background, it is all the more remarkable

81. Quoted in Cochrane, *Church's Confession*, 41.

82. Quoted in Rieger, *Silent Church*, 90. Also quoted with a condensed and slightly different translation in Cochrane, *Church's Confession*, 40. Cochrane cites Wilhelm Niemöller, *Kamp und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche*, 526

that with Hitler's popularity only rising, the Confessing Church at Barmen steeled itself to resist the German Christian marriage between church and the National Socialist Party.⁸³ Barth's task at Barmen was not that of a political theorist writing a political manifesto to mobilize the people of Germany. He wrote as a theologian to his family of faith, the body of Christ, in the context of a family dispute among his brother and sister Pietists, Liberals and their traitorous offspring, the German Christians.

In a family crisis, one's tone and intent matter as much as one's actual words. "As a Christian I can criticize other Christians only if I am also in solidarity with them. . . . Further when I do criticize I do so not in a tone of harsh indignation but in a tone of sad dismay at a threat that somehow turned into a temptation for me as well."⁸⁴ Despite his irenic intentions, this did not keep Barth from asking the family if the time for a separation had come. As we have noted, what first evoked Barth's theological change of course was not Hitler's rise to power nor the German Christian heresy; it was twenty years earlier when the German Church endorsed the Kaiser's war. To give divine sanction to the "thoroughly sinful, godless enterprise" of the German war efforts in WWI, that is what made Barth wonder aloud if the time had come to be an atheist!⁸⁵

The tipping point in Barth's resistance to the war theologians also contains the source of his opposition to the German Christians: *it had to do with the church's task in the world*. That is, the church had a special service to render which was essential to its identity in bearing witness to the gospel. But only later did Barth see clearly that to render properly to God what belonged to God, one must also render to Caesar a service which the church alone can and must render to the state. Given its occurrence amid the Hitler years, the Barmen Declaration was an "astounding" affirmation of the state in God's purposes.⁸⁶ Existing within the polarity between Romans 13 and Revelations 13 the state exists not as an "order of creation" which the church *must* hear as revelatory by divine appointment, but by divine appointment the state is a body granted the *gracious* calling to provide for justice and peace. Moreover, the state as a body includes not just the rulers but also the ruled! Hence for the church to simply "keep out of politics" would fundamentally abrogate the church's witness to the gospel.⁸⁷

83. Conway, "German Church Struggle," 98.

84. Quoted in Busch, *Karl Barth and the Pietists*, 289.

85. *Ibid.*, 295.

86. Cochrane, *Church's Confession*, 284-85.

87. *Ibid.*

When we read Barmen today, its silence about the Jews is no doubt its most disturbing feature. Yet at the time, its author was hardly viewed by the government as a soft opponent or an irrelevance. A secret report of the Gestapo in May 1934 documents that for the Nazis, Barth and friends such as Niemöller were a serious threat.

Barth's following must be regarded as a real danger. With his theology he is creating islands on which men can isolate themselves, and so evade the demands of the new state on religious grounds.⁸⁸

Would that these little islands had made a further connection and become a landmass sufficient to unite dissent against the Nazis! But for Barth and those influenced by his initiative, Barmen was a beginning. In the face of extraordinary Nazi intimidation, the church's one foundation had been clearly declared; the implications would be worked out in the travail that would follow.

88. Quoted in Conway, "Political Theology," 529.