

10-1992

The Legacy of the Church Struggle in Contemporary Germany

Albrecht Schönherr

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schönherr, Albrecht (1992) "The Legacy of the Church Struggle in Contemporary Germany," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 12: Iss. 5, Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol12/iss5/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

THE LEGACY OF THE CHURCH STRUGGLE IN CONTEMPORARY GERMANY

By Albrecht Schönherr

Albrecht Schönherr was a bishop of the Federated Evangelical Church of East Germany. He delivered this speech at the 22nd Annual Scholars' Conference, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, February 29 - March 4, 1992. His articles appeared previously in OPREE.

Let me begin with a small experience which relates the person of Martin Niemöller to that of my teacher and friend, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Niemöller was a submarine commander in World War I. His memoirs, published in 1934, were titled From U-Boat to Pulpit. Now it takes more than a few steps to get from a submarine command bridge to a pulpit. The stairs you have to climb up are quite steep. At the very beginning of the church struggle in Germany, in the early months of 1933, the rumor went around that Martin Niemöller wanted to join the German Christians, the Nazis' church party, in order to explode the group from within. Dietrich Bonhoeffer set out to see him with some of us young candidates from the Confessing Church, and he told Brother Martin a parable: "If you board the wrong train, you can walk down the aisle in the opposite direction from that which the train is moving. But you will still arrive at the wrong destination." In September the same year, Martin Niemöller helped found the Pastors' Emergency League, the heart of the Confessing Church.

It was a special gift of grace for us Christians in the GDR¹, that we were able to assume the legacy of the Confessing Church. It helped us not to worry about our survival, even though Marxist dogma expected the demise of religion. We were not always preoccupied with ourselves. We knew that our freedom did not depend on the space granted us by the state. Thus, our churches did not experience moral disintegration after the SED-State² itself collapsed.

I speak from the perspective of a Christian who himself lived through the time of the Confessing Church with its particular faith experiences. And I speak as a theologian who had

¹ Acronym for German Democratic Republic, official name for East Germany.

² The SED, Socialist Unity Party, was the formal name for the ruling communist party in the GDR.

belonged to the leadership of the church since 1963, thus, from a different perspective than that of a "grass roots" parish member.

The most valuable legacy the Confessing Church bequeathed us is the Theological Declaration of Barmen, 1934. I will base my presentation on its theses. Doing so is an act of gratitude. Barmen was for us in the GDR not only an admirable theological achievement, rather it was for us law for our lives, perhaps even law for our survival. This does not mean that in all things we acted according to it. Barmen was the staff in our hand, which gave us assurance. But we had to do the walking ourselves.

Thesis 1: The one Word of God

Jesus Christ--the one Word of God: This is the unconditional bond but also the unconditional freedom of a Christian. In this bond and freedom, Martin Niemöller met the dictator Adolf Hitler on that memorable 25th of January, 1934. An eyewitness reported: "Niemöller was not silent about anything." In the same freedom and obligation of our faith, the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR declared again and again, that it was willing to cooperate with such strength as it had wherever in our society human life was preserved and improved. But wherever damage was done, it had to warn against it and to resist it.

The fact that the churches had to conduct their mission in a society so dominated by an atheist party forced us to reveal over and over where the mandate to do so came from--not from our having power, or our claims of importance, not from the other side of the borders, but from the center of our faith. To mention one example, that we repeatedly became involved in international peace and reconciliation and that we worked hard on those issues is the commandment of the Prince of Peace, who blesses those who make peace. Whoever preaches God's justice cannot avoid interceding for earthly justice.

Confessing Jesus Christ as the one Word of God protected us from equipping earthly realities with divine glory. It kept us from glorifying the nation, and from glorifying socialism, although there was less temptation to do the latter. It was not a divine law for us that we lived in the GDR and wanted to stay there. But it was a conviction of our faith that the division of Germany was the just consequence of the insane German claim of dominion in the Nazi time. Now God's providence had placed us in the part of Germany which bore the main burden of that evil legacy. That was where we had to acquit ourselves in God's service.

But who is this Jesus Christ? We were taught by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Christ is "the man for others." Thus, those who follow him cannot be anything less than "people for others." The church is "church for others," or it is not the church of Jesus Christ.

Thesis 2: Claim on Our Whole Life

From the second Barmen thesis, we learn that our faith includes the entire person with body and soul and all relationships. Again and again, we Christians were and are also today called upon to limit ourselves to the religious sphere and to have nothing to do with politics. Precisely because the majority of Christians in Germany had believed political responsibility to be sufficiently expressed in obedience to 'authority' and fulfilling duties in their profession, precisely because it was viewed as unpious to engage in politics, great numbers of them fell prey to Hitler's temptation. In the SED-State, every citizen was expected to participate politically, of course only in the sense of acclaiming government policies. The church as such was not granted the same right. For a long time, it was as good as silenced in the media. When it finally did begin to appear in the media, the reports were mostly as if there were intimate harmony between church and state. The pervasive notion, "Religion is a private affair," dominated their thinking. With small steps and great patience, it cost us a lot of effort to achieve somewhat greater space for the church to exercise its responsibility for society. We counted it a success when the GDR head of state, Erich Honecker, acknowledged the work of the church in diaconic institutions and for reconciliation among nations.

What should the political responsibility of the churches be like? No different than it knows from its Lord: He intervened on behalf of those pushed to the margins of society, of the weak. If the church follows its Lord, it must be a lobby for those who have no lobby. It is to be partisan, but not to be a party. Parties represent the interests of particular groups. The church must represent God's "interests," and they consist of protecting creation with all of the creatures in it. Thus, the church could not ally itself with a particular party, even though the political parties in Germany all too often offer such an alliance by using the adjective "Christian" in their names.³

We should not overlook the fact that the second Barmen thesis speaks of "joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world." I would like to emphasize the word *joyful*. Frequently from the West we now hear the expectation that all people in the GDR must have gone around full of fear and with bowed backs until the wall was opened, and they had now better be joyous without reservation about their liberation. This was not even true for non-Christians. The forms of state and society did not ordinarily control daily life. People did have their families. The "collectives" in which they worked were not only a group of slaves under the whip of the Stasi.⁴ For many people, their collective was their home.

³ Chancellor Helmut Kohl's ruling party in united Germany is the Christian Democratic Union.

⁴ Staatsicherheitsdienst, the East German secret police.

There was a lot of ridicule about "unemployment within the factory gates." Unemployment alone outside the factory gates is worse. For Christians, of course, the word about 'joyful liberation' was true in full measure. For example, when they came together in the *Kirchentage*, regional church rallies which were held in the GDR as well as in West Germany, they had celebratory, joyous days.

One of the most important experiences of those years was that those people who clearly and unambiguously acknowledged their faith were usually left alone. They could not be promoted into leadership positions. But they enjoyed a certain respect, especially from those Communists who had suffered together with Christians in the Nazi concentration camps. After one hundred years of struggle between Christians and Communists, they really encountered each other intensively for the first time in the camps. Both sides learned that the other was serious about its convictions and was willing to accept suffering and even death for them. There were more kinds of people in the GDR than just evildoers, injured victims, and those led astray. There were not very many, but some young people did reject the *Jugendweihe*⁵ and stayed away from the state's mass youth organizations. And they were not only pastors' children who did so. Often they were the only ones in their school classes. Now we worry whether these brave young people will fall victim to the general trend toward money and prosperity.

Of course--there were not very many. A new law permitting GDR citizens to review their own Stasi files took effect in January 1992. The revelations from the Stasi files since then have unveiled the terrible network of spying and unearthed much cowardice and meanness. The excuse, "I couldn't act any differently; I was forced," is widespread. It is not valid for the church sphere. Whoever went to their pastor or their bishop when they were under pressure, went free. This was a frequent experience. The church, as the only institution not dominated by the SED, was naturally an especially interesting field for the secret police. It does not look like they had so much success that it would be appropriate to speak of their "undermining" the church.

Thesis 3: Solely Christ's Property

In the third thesis, the Theological Declaration of Barmen draws the ecclesiological conclusion from the *Christus solus* (Christ alone) in the first thesis: Because the church is the "body of Christ," and, thus, Christ wants to do his mission in the world through the church, it must belong to him alone. Its word and order can only derive from this mission and be

⁵ State-sponsored rite of initiation into adulthood, instituted to replace the churches' confirmation.

directed back toward it. This thesis helped us to protect the autonomy of the church in a state which wanted to assimilate everything into its own power structures.

"Solely his property"--that meant a strict separation of church and state. This was already laid down in the constitution of the Weimar Republic but not consistently put into practice. The GDR state was more consistent: religious instruction was banned from the public schools; the churches' right to collect taxes was abolished; the church disappeared from the media for a long time. The party interpreted the principle of separation so broadly that the church was to be kept distant not only from the state but from society altogether. For example, it was impossible for a church representative to enter a factory building or a military base. After the famous meeting between head of state Erich Honecker and the executive committee of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR on March 6, 1978, it cost us great effort to organize orderly pastoral care in prisons and state-run nursing homes.

The church itself did appreciate some aspects of the separation between church and state. Because of it, for example, the state had no influence over who filled church positions. There were no agreements with the state required for a pastor to serve or a bishop to be installed. Whenever the state tried through other means, such as the smaller bloc parties or other organizations, to influence a selection, it almost never succeeded. Other churches in socialist countries had a more difficult time in this respect. In Czechoslovakia no pastor could be employed without a state license. And the license could be taken away again at the smallest excuse, even such as an uncomfortable remark in a sermon.

So the GDR churches affirmed a strict separation of church and state, in spite of all the limitations it involved. It also usually protected us from any police intervention in our church services. Thus, groups which the state viewed as highly suspicious could meet unhindered under the roof of the church. This was one contribution to the success of the October 1989 'revolution.' That the demonstrators in the church buildings began their meetings with prayers and scripture helps to explain why they remained nonviolent. The GDR churches are grateful that, guided by the model of the Confessing Church, they were able by and large to retain their freedom in a system of perfect dictatorship.

The Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR, which organizationally separated in 1969 from the Evangelical Church in Germany, has been accused of violating the passage in the third Barmen thesis, "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." In fact, *one* reason for our separation from the West German churches in 1969 was the increasing pressure from the GDR state, which demanded not only a separation but a categorical rejection of the West German churches. The GDR's new socialist constitution in 1968 with its laws of implementation left no room

for an organization transcending national boundaries, which the Evangelical Church in Germany then was. But the main reason for our admittedly painful separation was the fact that mission of a single church in two states with two contrary systems could not longer be carried out according to Christ's commission. Since we were trying to serve Christ, who entered into the world and sent his disciples into the world (John 17:18), his church had to "immigrate" concretely into the socialist world of the GDR. It could not float around above the surface of earthly reality; it had to be present and participate in the life of the people. The church saw its mission in accompanying Christians along their difficult way in a society which understood itself to be socialist and atheist but also in helping non-Christians to preserve their rights and their dignity. The church intentionally wanted to get involved in politics, in order to advocate for the weak.

The GDR church expressed this in a synod declaration as follows: "The Federation (of Evangelical Churches in the GDR) will have to prove itself as a community of witness and service in the socialist society of the GDR" (1970). "A community of witness and service in the GDR churches will have to consider its location carefully: *within* this socialist society, not *beside* it, not *against* it. The community will have to protect the freedom of its witness and service. For its mission binds it solely to him who came to us as the human incarnation of God's will" (1971). The short slogan "church in socialism" came from this citation. After the socialist system as we knew it collapsed, this formula became an inflammatory target. Admittedly, it is handy, but it is misleading. It was not trying to express a fundamental congruity between the church and socialism; rather, it did try to express the concrete reality within the GDR. It should not be understood as an endorsement of socialism. The GDR churches never used the formula "church *for* socialism"; they explicitly rejected it. Interpreting the short phrase "church in socialism" to mean that is to abuse it harshly. The context leaves no doubt how it is meant. Our congregations would never have supported such an endorsement. The slogan was concerned with the place we were given, and that meant not just geographically, but within this particular kind of society. As Bonhoeffer insisted, the church "in which Jesus Christ . . . is presently active as its Lord," cannot and must not be "placeless."

Thesis 4: No Dominion of Some over the Others

I remember a pastors' assembly at about the New Year 1935-36 in Stettin in Pomerania⁶. Niemöller was there. The meeting was about the church committees which the Nazi minister for church affairs Hanns Kerrl had organized with "men from the center" and accommodating representatives from the Confessing Church and the German Christians. This presented an

⁶ Now Szczecin, Poland.

especially seductive situation--the deepest crisis of the Confessing Church. One of the supporters of the church committees began his speech with a form of greeting which was still quite common in those days, "Gentlemen and Brothers." Niemöller interrupted furiously, "Either we are gentlemen or we are brothers!" He was concerned about the Confessing Church's new "community of brothers" (and sisters, who had considerable significance in the Confessing Church). The Confessing Church put into practice the notion that there should be no hierarchy in the church of Jesus Christ. The leadership was provided by "Councils of Brethren." Looking back, I regret that they were not councils of sisters and brothers.

When we had to negotiate with representatives of the SED-State in the GDR, they simply could not understand that we did not have rigid command structures like theirs in the state and party. They expected from us that we could give commands from the church leadership, and they would then be carried out in the congregations. They thought we were making stupid excuses, when we refused to act that way. Of course, it is easier to rule with command structures. But a church which depends on a sense of responsibility at the "grass roots" is more protected from pressure and manipulation. Today some people want to discredit the church completely, as if it had been a slave of the SED-State. They accuse its leadership of cronyism. That charge is missing any sensitivity to the situation at the time and to the church's mission. But especially we owe a debt of gratitude to the Christians in their individual situations who remained faithful to their Lord, even though they often were not understood by their colleagues and friends. It would be dreadful, if, in our current easier circumstances, we were to forget that we are to be a "community of brothers and sisters."

This is especially true for the relationship between pastors and other colleagues in congregations. The pressures we were all under brought us more closely together. In the Lutheran tradition, which dominates in Eastern Germany, the pastor has predominant significance, which unfortunately was carried over strongly into social prestige. In the GDR we tried to level this social hierarchy somewhat. Since the unification of the churches (1991), the social hierarchy has reappeared. I hope that we do not forget what we once were.

Thesis 5: The Responsibility of Rulers and the Ruled

The fifth Barmen thesis takes the halo of divine 'order' away from the state. The traditional understanding of 'authority' as God's direct creation is replaced by the assertion that God has given the state its function of providing for justice and peace. This is the only state function of significance for us Christians. Back then that was a strong statement, as the Nazi state claimed to be the "executor of the will of the nation." The perspective in Barmen 5 led the synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany to say in 1956 (thus, long before the East and West German churches separated): "the Gospel includes the state under God's gracious regulation, which we know to be in effect regardless of the origin of the state's

power or its political form." This perspective helped us later, after the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR was founded, to stand up to the GDR state soberly and objectively. This was why the churches could not define themselves as an opposition party, which from the beginning would work for the state's downfall.

According to Barmen 5, the dignity of the state lies in the task God gave it "to provide for justice and peace." Dictatorships have all sorts of similarities with each other. In spite of that, it is not right to fully equate the SED-State with Hitler's Third Reich. The Ulbricht and Honecker regimes certainly perpetrated a great deal of injustice. But they did not undertake systematic genocide, and they did not work toward war. We were pleased to note that the GDR government pressed for convening a European security conference, as then came about in 1975 in Helsinki. In 1979 NATO announced plans to deploy Cruise and Pershing II nuclear missiles in Europe if a proposed four-year period of negotiations with the Warsaw Pact were not successful. After that NATO "two-track decision," the GDR government worked reasonably for "damage control." The churches opposed the endless domestic militarization in GDR society, from the kindergartens to the paramilitary instruction in public schools and vocational training to the national guard units in places of employment.

The situation regarding justice was more difficult. The GDR was certainly not a state under the rule of law in the sense of a western parliamentary democracy. But it was not a lawless state, as many now assert. Such a generalization does not permit a more careful evaluation, and it labels the collapsed GDR as a great bankruptcy, which can now be taken over without inhibition. You can say that general civil and criminal law was dealt with rather "normally." What was different was the use of the law with respect to people who disagreed politically. The churches protested the increased legal restrictions of the 1970s. They tried to help the victims of the political judiciary, and in many cases they were able to help. But they were too inconsistent and too sporadic in doing so. They did not risk rejecting the state's fundamental mandate to be the state; they did not want to undermine the state as such. Leading politicians in West Germany repeatedly called for avoiding anything which might destabilize the situation in central Europe. The dangers of such destabilization are apparent today.

One day I was in Niemöller's study (I do not remember the occasion), just before he was going across to the church to conduct a service. Suddenly a messenger burst in with the news: "They just took Secretary So-and-so to the police station. During her interrogation they put a pistol on the table to raise the threat." Without even hesitating a minute to think about it, Niemöller said, "I will tell that from the pulpit!" And he did. That was the way Martin Niemöller was.

Thesis 6: The Message of the Free Grace of God to All People

Here we read: "The Church's commission, upon which its freedom is founded. . ." The church of Jesus Christ does not derive its freedom from some general idea of freedom, from the human right of freedom, from some need for self-sufficiency, or from trying to acquire power. It claims freedom for the sake of its mission. No one can take this freedom away from it. Jesus Christ's messengers have been able to give the clearest witness to their freedom whenever they were in times of trouble. In their letters from prison, Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer represent a magnificent example of such freedom.

The Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR understood itself to be "a community of witness and service." Witness to the resurrected Lord leads necessarily to service for people. Both tasks can only be done appropriately, if they are done in the freedom given by the Spirit. In this freedom, the GDR church spoke several times on topics tabu to the party and the government, most clearly in the last years before the GDR collapsed. In light of the arms race both military blocs pursued, the danger of a nuclear war, and our thorough domestic militarization, the Federation's 1987 Synod, meeting in Görlitz, proclaimed a clear confessional stance "against the spirit, logic, and practice of deterrence." The synod stated that the burden of proof is on those who choose armed military service, and not on those who reject military service, to show how their decision serves peace. To my knowledge, no other large church has ever dared to say that.

"To deliver the free grace of God to all people"--thus, even to an atheist bureaucrat. We knew that we were obligated to show our ideological opponents that the gospel included them, too. After 150 years of mutual vigorous abuse between Christians and Communists, we could not do this by quoting the Bible or by holding discussions. We had to stick with the preliminaries and try to offer some of the gospel's freedom and beauty through integrity, transparency, and agreement between our words and our deeds. GDR government files now reveal that they evaluated some of us as "trustworthy." In recent months this word has been used to discredit us. But the government clearly did not imply our unconditional agreement with the ideology and policies of the party. Instead, being "trustworthy" had to do with our credibility. We tried to act according to the scripture: "Let your yes be yes and your no be no" (James 5:12).

According to Barmen 6, the church stands "in Christ's stead." It cannot interpret itself any way it pleases. It cannot proclaim itself to be a national church. Nor can it permit tolerance, which is good, to deteriorate into arbitrariness. It also may not become primarily a service provider, as is happening extensively today. You pay your contribution, and the church is obliged to provide its ceremonies: baptism, confirmation, marriage, funeral services. Today the danger is great for our churches, that they will fall back to where they were before the church struggle in the Nazi time. The churches in eastern and western

Germany urgently need to remember one of the basic principles of the Reformation: "*Ecclesia semper reformanda*" (church always reforming). The question which accompanied Niemöller all his life needs to be asked over and over: "What would Jesus say about that?" or, in other words: What service does he want to do today through his church? And: How shall the church prepare itself to do his service?

Translated from German
by Barbara G. Green