

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
July 21, 2013

The Barmen Declaration Propositions 2, 3 and 5
“Hitler’s Church Unmasked”

Some of you told me how much you enjoyed the sermonic interaction last week when we found the so-called “hidden objects” in the symbol of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and discussed their theological and ecclesiastical significance. In the coffee hour after the service Lori Wood told me that she appreciated hearing the history behind the the symbol and The Brief Statement of Faith which formed the liturgy for the day. I decided then that I would speak about the confessions of our denomination in up-coming sermons.

We’re a confessional church. In other words, we like to communicate the best we can our thoughts about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and other aspects of faith pertinent to events and issues of the day.

The Book of Confessions forms the first part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA). There are eleven confessions in all: two ancient creeds, six Reformation confessions, and the three contemporary declarations. The contemporary declarations are The Theological Declaration of Barmen, The Confession of 1967 and A Brief Statement of Faith – Presbyterian Church (USA).

In the final Sundays before I take off on vacation my sermons will look at the contemporary confessions, a separate confession each Sunday. I begin today with the The Theological Declaration of Barmen. I like the contemporary confessions because they deal with issues most relevant for our day.

For instance, former President of San Francisco Theological Seminary, Dr. Arnold Come, asked over 1,000 Presbyterians at the 1984 General Assembly commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Barmen declaration:

“What would you do if your government were trying to dictate where and when and what your children might pray and by amending the Constitution and by the power of taxation, to determine how you shall act in matters reserved for the privacy of your Christian conscience?”

“What would you do if the leader of your government were declaring that the American way of life and values are the truly Godly and Christian ways and values, and that other nations and their governments are the instruments of the devil?”

“What would you do if you were condemned as anti-Christian when you raised your voice in criticism of some of our American values and the military exploits and armament policies of our government?”

These are the very questions raised by the Confessing Church in Germany before WWII. *The Book of Confessions* introduces the declaration with these words (and some of my own):

“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. (Hitler formed a “Reich Church” and appointed a Reich Bishop to moderate the German Christians).

(We know the story): “In January 1933, after frustrating years in which no government in Germany was able to solve problems of economic depression and mass unemployment, Adolph Hitler was named chancellor.

“By playing on people’s fear of communism and Bolshevism, he was able to persuade the Parliament to allow him to rule by edict. As he consolidated his power, Hitler abolished all political rights and democratic processes: police could detain persons in prison without a trial, search private dwellings without a warrant, seize property, censor publications, tap telephones, and forbid meetings. He soon outlawed all political parties except his own, smashed labor unions, purged universities, replaced the judicial system with his own ‘People’s Courts,’ initiated a systematic terrorizing of Jews, and obtained the support of church leaders allied with or sympathetic to the German Christians.

“Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. The German Christians exalted the racially pure nation and the rule of Hitler as God’s will for the German people.

“Nonetheless, some in the churches resisted. Among those few determined church leaders who did oppose the church’s captivity to National Socialism were pastors, (including pastor Martin Niemöller, and theologian Karl Barth. Niemöller was pastor in a wealthy Berlin suburb. As a German nationalist he initially supported Hitler, but as the Nazis began to interfere in church affairs, he moved into opposition. Karl Barth was one of the leading theologians at the time.)

“Following a number of regional meetings, these men and other pastors assembled representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches in Gemarkte Church, Barmen, in the city of Wuppertal, May 29–31, 1934. Among

the one hundred thirty-nine delegates were ordained ministers, fifty-three church members, and six university professors.

“The chief item of business was discussion of a declaration to appeal to the Evangelical churches of Germany to stand firm against the German Christian accommodation to National Socialism.

“The Theological Declaration of Barmen contains six propositions, each quoting from Scripture, stating its implications for the present day, and rejecting the false doctrine of the German Christians. 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. (No-one except God in Jesus Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit can control the church).

“The declaration was debated and adopted without amendment, and the Confessing Church, that part of the church that opposed the German Christians, rallied around it.”

Before the declaration was written, a Pastors’ Emergency League was formed by Niemöller to speak out against the way Hitler was trying to co-opt the church. They drew up statements to be read in their churches and this reached the global press. Hitler wasn’t a happy camper. He called a meeting of 40 pastors, including Niemöller, to essentially rap them over the knuckles and bring them into line.

Hermann Göring made an appearance to stir dissension and told Hitler about a tapped conversation between Niemöller and a young pastor. Hitler exploded in rage at the information Goring had shared and when Niemöller tried to explain, Hitler told him: “You leave the care of the Third Reich to me and you look after the church.”

As the clergy were leaving, Niemöller, a former commander of a German U-boat in Malta during WWI and a patriot, said to Hitler: “*Herr Reichskansler*, you said just now, ‘I will take care of the German people.’ But we too as Christians and churchmen have a responsibility toward the German people. That responsibility was entrusted to us by God, and neither you nor anyone in this world has the power to take it from us.”

Imagine saying this to Hitler! Niemoeller’s fellow pastors were not happy. They thought Niemöller had spoiled their opportunity for further dialogue with Hitler. Yeah, right!

Niemöller continued publicly to oppose Hitler until the Gestapo seized him in 1937. He spent seven years in concentration camps.

He is famous for saying after the war:

“First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out--
Because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out--
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me--and there was no one left to speak for me.”

I haven't gone into an exposition of the propositions stated in the worship bulletin. With this historical background, reread the propositions and see for yourself how they challenge the Reich Church and the German Christians and think how you can make contemporary applications. As you do this you will discover for yourself the good news of this sermon. Amen.