

Consider The Call
1 Corinthians 1: 26-31
Chris Clark

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote a piece titled Paul's "*Letter to the American Christians*."¹ His writing takes on the imaginative task of penning a letter in the words of the Apostle Paul, wondering what he might say to Christians living in America in his day (I highly recommend it). This imaginary letter speaks directly to the chaotic times, the economic inequality, and a particular admonition to Christians to remain faithful to the call of the gospel of Jesus Christ, despite temptations to compromise. Today we explore the final installment of our Creeds and Confessions series: The Barmen Declaration. Like Paul's letter to the Corinthian Church or King's letter to American Christians, Barmen is a sort of admonishment of the Church in Germany struggling to hold its identity.

87 years ago, a sect of the Reformed Church in Germany known as the Confessing Church would put its livelihood and existence at risk in its opposition to submitting the ministry of the Church to the ideology of the State - many would pay with their livelihoods or even their lives. In 1934, between two world wars, 139 delegates from the Confessing Church joined together in Barmen-Wuppertal, Germany to sign the Theological Declaration of Barmen. Their opposition to Nazi ideology within the ministry of the church was clear: Jesus Christ is the source and guide of life and ministry of the Church. No other "special leaders" (literally, "fuhrer") are to have control of the church, and its only loyalty is to the kingdom, the "reign" (literally, "reich") of God – not the Nazi party, not Adolf Hitler, not any prevailing ideology of the day.²

The history of Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler loom large in the consciousness of the world. The atrocities, destruction of lives, the hate filled ideologies, the imprisonment and violence enacted upon those seen as political enemies, and even the submission of a religious institution that should have recognized the incompatibility of such things with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

During this chaotic time, The Barmen Declaration was crafted particularly in opposition to the German Christian Movement (also a part of the Reformed Church in Germany), which ultimately embodied an ideology of German Christian Nationalism. So far had the Christian Church in Germany drifted, that this movement even appointed a Reich Bishop, Ludwig Muller, who would vow to enact the Aryan Paragraph within the church. He vowed to purge all those with Jewish ancestry from church membership and even went as far as to propose ridding the Bible of the Old Testament, because of its Hebrew roots. In seeking its own supremacy, the Reformed Christian church in Germany found an in-road through the rule of the Third Reich. What it perceived as its call to a new brighter

future, a call into power and domain ended up being a siren song, as the Third Reich ultimately used the Church as a pawn in its own game of domination and total power.

Paul's warning to the Corinthian church to consider its call resonates with this particular time in history, as well as today. The words of the Confessing Church in Barmen were a warning for the larger church body in Germany to consider its call. To consider the damage it was doing to the unity of the church as it exchanged its Christian witness for proximity to the halls of power. There's no doubt that many (though perhaps not all) in the German Christian church believed they were being faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. So the question becomes, what Gospel is being proclaimed and who exactly is being invoked through the name and title Jesus Christ?

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann answers this question quite simply: the Church is called to the gospel of the crucified Christ. Whether or not the Church is faithful to its call is determined by "whether the crucified Christ is a stranger to it or the Lord who determines the form of its existence."³ The form of the Church's ministry is to take on the self-giving nature of the One who gave himself, even to the point of death - for the sake of all, but especially the lowly, the least, and the last of the world. As much as we sometimes want it to, faithful Christian witness doesn't always compute with the prevailing economic, political, or even cultural ideologies of the day. But it is also not a witness that seeks opposition for the sake of opposition. The Church isn't a rebel without a cause. Through the words of Barmen, the Confessing Church affirmed that part of the church's responsibility is to remind the State – regardless of any particular political party affiliation – of its divine task of justice and peace. I would add, especially when it goes awry in forsaking or warping its duty to the result of oppression and injustice.

This is the prophetic nature the Church is called to embrace - speaking truth to power. Not a savior whose resurrection and glory give us reason to justify divinely ordained authority, power and dominion over others, but Jesus of Nazareth whose life, teaching and even death seem foolish to a world that elevates and seeks glory. Paul writes that in Jesus Christ, God actively **chose** what is considered foolish, what is considered weak, what is considered low and despised in the world, rather than what is considered powerful, wise and noble.⁴

Barmen raises the issue of how the church is to discern when the gospel itself is at stake - of when a situation in the world becomes so dire that the church must say "enough is enough" and make a confessional statement. You may notice that the banner representing the Declaration of Barmen has a swastika prominently depicted at its top. Though it's crossed out in red, it's a symbol that is still revolting to us today (rightly so). Partly because we know the atrocities which were committed toward Jews, LGBTQ people, people of African descent, and others, but also because this symbol – and its various iterations - continue to be used in the 21st century.

As I was preparing my sermon this week, reading and writing, the news cycle gave prominent attention to hearings happening in regards to violent events of January 6th. It's not difficult to find images of that day and see an entanglement of Christian and

patriotic symbols on full display: crosses with American flags, t-shirts pairing political leaders with Jesus, alongside racist and violent rhetoric anointed in public prayer. Christian Nationalism – in both its violent and more subdued forms – has loomed large in our recent consciousness. Perhaps the urgent words of Barmen, penned almost 90 years ago, is a message the Church in America needs to hear again. We have some disentangling to do - to consider the call of the resurrected crucified Christ. The life and ministry of the body of Christ is more vibrant, more full, far more beautiful and filled with love when it can answer that call.

And we won't always get it right. One particular critique of the Confessing Church is that it never outright opposed the atrocities that were brought upon Jewish people. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a member of the Confessing Church himself, did not look favorably on the Declaration of Barmen for that very reason. How could the church claim Jesus is Lord and yet fail to speak and act on behalf of those who are oppressed? Because even the Church has blind spots. Hopefully those blind spots will lead us toward confession, repentance, and grace to act more faithfully in the future.

As we bring this series on creeds and confessions of the Church to a close, I want to end with something that Pastor Ann noted in her sermon a few weeks ago. The Presbyterian Book of Confessions is said to be without a back cover. There is more to be said. There will be moments in the world where the Church must say "enough". What must we say "enough" to today? Our hope is not in whether or not our particular religious institution remains until the end of time. Our hope and ultimate trust is not in the powers that be, but in the liberating grace of the Gospel that transcends all the walls, borders and divisions humans create. Our call and confession is to that Good News.

Amen.

¹ King Jr., Martin Luther, "Paul's Letter to the American Christians," *Strength To Love*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

² Summation of the main theological points of the Theological Declaration of Barmen.

³ Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Crucified God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1993, pg. 3.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:27-28.