

The Theological Declaration of Barmen

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.

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 Hans Asmussen, Karl Koch, Karl Iraruer, and Martin Niemoller, and theologian Karl Barth. Following a number of regional meetings, these men assembled representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches in Gemark Church, Barmen, in the city of Wupperthal, 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.

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.