

Wittenberg 1934

Pastor Zimmermann knew the hour had come to make a decision. He had served the parish church in Wittenberg for 2 years. Prior to that time he had served another village church for the previous 17 years. Since coming to Wittenberg, the entire world had changed around him. Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist Party had come to power in January 1933. The implications of Hitler's rise to power for the life of the church had become increasingly clear. The German Christians, that portion of the Lutheran Church in support of Hitler, had ensured that their candidate, Ludwig Mueller, had become Presiding Bishop of the Church. One of the first actions taken under Bishop Mueller's leadership was the implementation of the Aryan paragraph, whereby state officials could not keep their jobs if they were of Jewish ancestry. This meant also pastors of Jewish descent were to abdicate their offices. Recently the instruction came that the Evangelical Youth were to be incorporated into the Hitler Youth Movement. Pastor Zimmermann had followed these developments with great interest.

Heinrich Zimmermann was 48 years old. He and his wife, Uta, had three children, aged 17, 14, and 7. The oldest was to begin university studies in the fall. This was his 20th year serving as a pastor. His salary was paid by the Landeskirche and his family lived in parish housing. His social security in retirement depended entirely on his employment by the church.

Pastor Zimmermann had read the accounts of a meeting held by the German Christians at the Berlin Sport Palace on November 13, 1933. Actions taken at that meeting were to purge Christianity of the Old Testament and all Jewish influence in the New Testament. Jesus was portrayed as a heroic figure to inspire others to courage in their struggles. The German Reformation of Luther was now to be fulfilled in the Third Reich. A resolution had been passed in support of these views.

He had been following closely the developments in the national church. He was particularly interested in the reactions of prominent theologians to the so-called "Barmen Theological Declaration" issued after a meeting of the so called "Confessing Church" on May 29-31, 1934. Karl Barth had been a drafter of the document, along with Hans Asmussen and Thomas Breit. Barth was the most well-known theological voice in support of the Declaration but he was now teaching in Basel, Switzerland and not in Germany. The Barmen Declaration had been signed by 139 delegates to the meeting, 86 clergy and 53 laypersons.

Pastor Zimmermann, prior to reading the text of the Barmen Declaration, had already read and discussed with some of his colleagues the objections to Barmen raised by some of the most prominent Lutheran theologians. Werner Elert and Paul Althaus of Erlangen University had composed the "Ansbacher Ratschlag" on behalf of the Erlangen faculty. Althaus had also issued an additional statement objecting to the theology of Barmen.

Althaus and Elert viewed Barmen as inappropriate for criticizing the German renewal presently underway at the direction of National Socialism. Order was being restored, the economy was rallying, and at last there was emerging hope for the future after the crisis of the Weimar Republic. They wrote in the "Ansbacher Ratschlag":

"As Christians we honor with thanks toward God...every authority...as a tool of divine preservation ... In this knowledge we as believing Christians thank God that he has given our

people in its time of need the Fuehrer as a pious and faithful leader and the National Socialist political system as good government, a government with decency and honor.”

Their Lutheran theological approach stressed Romans 13 and the importance of a Christian's obedience to the state. The obligation of the state is to provide good order and the National Socialists were reestablishing the order that had long been missing from the public scene.

A second objection concerned the autonomy of the Lutheran church. The Erlangen theologians questioned the authority of the meeting at Barmen to establish church doctrine. The Lutheran Church had its own structure for addressing these matters. Was Barmen not an attempt to surreptitiously establish a united church, consisting of Lutherans and the Reformed, on the basis of a new confession of faith? Hermann Sasse, another theologian on the Erlangen faculty raised this argument, that only a Lutheran meeting for Lutherans and a Reformed meeting for the Reformed could make such decisions. Sasse wrote that therefore the conclusions of Barmen "whether they are true or false in content, can never lay claim to being obligatory." The authorship of Barth, a Reformed theologian, was an issue of special concern.

Paul Althaus added one further argument in opposition to the first Barmen thesis for expressing too narrow and too Christological interpretation of God's revelation. He agreed that God's primary revelation to human beings comes in Christ through the Bible. But he argued that God can be and is revealed to humanity through historical events, even though this secondary form of revelation can be properly understood only in light of the primary revelation in Christ. Barth's view of revelation was too narrow, even Christomonistic. Clearly the God of the Old Testament had been revealed in history apart from Christ. Christians are authorized therefore to continue to look for God's hand in historical events.

With reference to thesis 3 of Barmen, Althaus continued this line of thought by illustrating that many times the rituals and practices of the church have been adjusted to new historical events and circumstances. For example, the pope adopted the administrative style of Roman emperors and the early church gave Christian content to pagan customs and festivals. Althaus asserted that the outward forms of the Christian church should once again adapt to the times, thereby presenting a more attractive and relevant face to the German people. This is exactly what theologians in the 1920s like Paul Tillich had been doing in support of religious socialism.

Today was the first opportunity Pastor Zimmermann had himself been able to read the complete text of the Barmen Declaration. He pondered the theology of the text in light of the criticisms of the Erlangen theologians. Soon he would have to decide whether to continue his present course of cooperation with the leadership of the German Christians or risk losing his pastorate and career by affirming the Barmen Declaration and identifying himself with the Confessing Church.

For Discussion:

1. What are the personal issues facing Pr. Zimmermann in his deliberations'?
2. What are the ecclesial issues?
3. What are the theological and ethical issues?
4. How should he weigh the relative importance of the different arguments?
5. What course would you follow -- the direction of the State Church or the way of opposition proposed by the Confessing Church?
6. What are the issues of conscience today that challenge leaders in the Christian Church, especially in relationship between church and state?

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