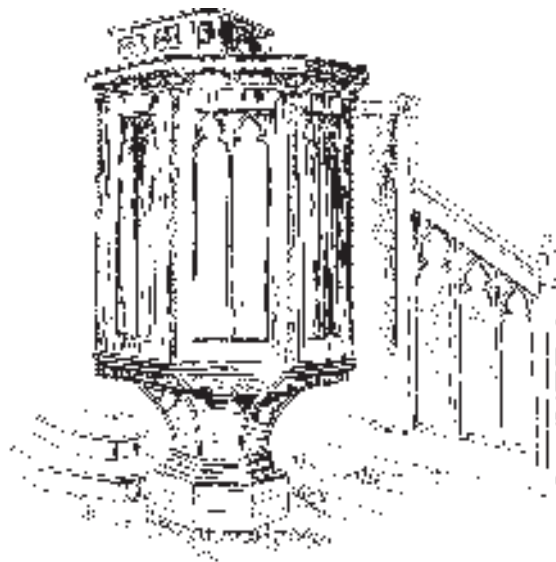


May 24, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Fearing God and Honoring the State by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Ephesians 4:14, 15

This month marks an important anniversary. You'd think that the media would have paid some attention, for many think the event that occurred 75 years ago this month was the bravest act of the institutional church in the 20th Century. And yet, I haven't seen it mentioned once in the New York Times or National TV news. You'd think that our presbyteries and the General Assembly would have celebrations. I haven't seen any.

Seventy-five years ago this month representatives from 18 German provincial churches met in the industrial city of Barmen. They met to take a risky stand—to protest the interference in the life of the churches by the Nazi government. The action of the delegates at Barmen proved so important in its time, and so useful as a warning for Christians at all times, that we have included their declaration in our Presbyterian Book of Confessions.

On the weekend when we remember those who have given the full measure of devotion to our country, I think it's appropriate to take some time to recall an event worth dying for.

With the horrors of the Third Reich embedded in our minds, it is easy to forget that Germany before Hitler was a nation of deep religious piety and of the highest artistic, scientific, industrial, philosophical, and theological achievements. It was historically as Christian, as civilized, as fun loving, as rich in

family life as any of its neighbors, including the United States.

Yet, the majority of the people of Germany in the 1930s supported the National Socialist regime as the only hope for internal stability and national security. Both communism and democracy were condemned. Protestants and Catholics made up the masses and the elite who joined the roar of "Heil, Hitler!" The current Pope, Benedict XVI as a boy joined the Hitler Youth. The Vatican signed a concordat. One of the saintliest of protestant leaders was for a time Reich Bishop under Hitler. Eminent theologians concocted Nazi-Christian ideology, and a theology faculty world famous for scholarship and conservative orthodoxy underwrote the exclusion of Jews from public life and of Jewish converts from church offices.

Traditional harmonizing of "throne and altar," fatherland and church, gospel and patriotism, Christian hope and national destiny, had robbed the church, so it seemed, of critical perspective and prophetic power. The gospel was absorbed in the culture. The salt lost its savor, and the leaven its power to change the lump. The distortion of cross into swastika, which seemed obvious to the wise from afar, was clear in Germany to relatively few.

Pastor Martin Neimoller was one of those few. From his pulpit Neimoller spoke out against the Nazi regime. For his efforts he was seized by the Gestapo in 1937. He spent seven years in concentration camps. Yet speaking for all of those who could have done more and could have done it sooner, he said,

In Germany they came first for the communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionist, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.

The truth is that the vast majority of Christian Germany coalesced to the power of Hitler. In 1935 they joined together as the German Christian movement and adopted this resolution: A Statement of Faith for *their* times.

God has created me a German. Germanism is a gift of God. God wants me to fight for my Germany. Military service is in no sense a violation of Christian conscience, but is obedience to God. The believer possesses the right of revolution against a State that furthers the powers of darkness. He also has this right in the face of a Church board that does not unreservedly acknowledge the exaltation of the nation. For a German the church is the fellowship of believers who are obligated to fight for a Christian Germany. The goal of the Faith Movement of 'German Christians' is an evangelical German Reich Church.

The Barmen Declaration is a response to such beliefs that would subordinate the church to the state and would elevate the emperor above Christ. The affirmations in Barmen all center on the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, declared in the Nicene Creed to be both divine and human in one integral person, was, at Barmen, proclaimed to be one Word, a revelation of God, Lord of the church and of the world.

In Reformed theology, atheism is not the problem; idolatry is. The Reformed faith argues that every person knows God. That knowledge of God, which is implanted in all human hearts, is suppressed by

human sin. Some choose not to acknowledge God as their creator, and so they create idols. An idol is any humanly created thing to which people give their ultimate allegiance. Idolatry is giving our highest commitment to something in the creation rather than to the Creator alone.

From the time of Moses the people of God have been tempted to worship other gods. The ancients made idols of gold and stone. Of course, we are more sophisticated. We don't mold idols of gold, instead, we put our worldly possessions or our favorite political party or our family or our nation or our career, above our allegiance to God. It is idolatry nonetheless.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen responded to the errors of the "German Christians" by confessing six evangelical truths. In each case, a passage from Scripture was offered, a theological affirmation was made, and an error of the "German Christians" was rejected. Specifically these Christians risked their lives to say it was idolatry to give ultimate loyalty to any idea, person, institution, or purpose. Christ not Hitler; the church not The Third Reich! Many of those who signed the declaration were sent to the concentration camps. Some died there.

The Reformed tradition has always attempted to honor God as the Lord of all life—as real to the believer on Monday morning as on Sunday morning. John Knox is said to have reflected that the best servants of the state are those whose highest loyalty is not to the state, but to God. When humans attempt to fulfill their deepest desires for meaning in anything other than God the Creator, they commit idolatry. When human beings put their trust in the work of human hands rather than the Creator, they end up, as the Nazis did, by destroying humanity.

It takes little imagination to see what Barmen may teach the church in America 75 years later. Or what for that matter it could teach the religious leaders of militant Islam. The atmosphere of the world is even more widely polluted with politico-religious myths of race, blood, soil, and national destiny now than it was in the 1930s. And, Christians in America are tempted to put loyalty to America over loyalty to God.

Since the American Bicentennial, some interesting shifts in religious attitudes have taken place in the United States. Fundamentalist Christians who traditionally took the attitude of Christ against culture have now changed dramatically. Strong currents of American patriotism have been blended with conservative religious beliefs.

Especially since the 1980 presidential election, many conservative Christians have shifted to a stance of Christ endorsing culture. America is seen as God's chosen nation with a special calling from God to Christianize the world and make American governmental and economic institutions the norm for all.

Even in our own congregation back in February of 2003, I heard push back after I preached a sermon before the current war in Iraq that pointed out that the "proposed war" did not begin to meet the "just war" theory that has guided Christians for decades. Many of you were offended - and perhaps still are - with the notion that biblical standards should trump political ends.

Twenty-five years ago in recognition of Barman's 50th anniversary, at a General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Dr. Arnold B. Come, retired President of San Francisco Theological Seminary, asked his audience, "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, were determining 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 is the truly Godly and Christian way and values, and that other nations and their governments are the instrument 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?" It's a good question. What would you do?

Albert Einstein, in reaction to the witness of the Confessing Church at Barmen said, "Only the church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing the truth...I am forced to confess that what I once despised, I now praise unreservedly."

Let us pray: O God, we remember and give thanks to those with the courage at Barmen to stand up to say Jesus is Lord – to say that no human being or institution is divinely ordained to have ultimate authority in our lives – to say that no human ruler or party or government may be followed uncritically.

Help us to live with the knowledge that only Jesus Christ is the Lord of the church and all of life. Amen.