

Christ the Centre. The Christological Centrality of the Barmen Declaration¹

By Heinrich Vogel

I must begin with a confession. It is something of an adventure for me to give this lecture in English. My name, Heinrich Vogel, when translated into English means “Henry Bird”. And now I sit before you as a bird arrayed in alien feathers. I must thank my daughter, whose feathers I’ve plucked this time, for the translation. Unfortunately I have only been able to take over her English words, not the English pronunciation, much less the American. What you will hear is a sort of Berlin English. I hope the eventual hilarity of my mistakes will not distract from the seriousness of the matter.

Well, let’s start. I begin with the question which is probably uppermost in the minds of those of you who fifty years ago were yet unborn. What was the Barmen Synod all about, this Synod which was so decisive for the Confessing Church’s struggle against National-Socialist totalitarianism? Let me illustrate this by describing the emblem which characterized the Church-party of the “German Christians” and their aims. It was a synthesis of Cross and swastika, symbolising the “coordination” of the church with the National Socialist government! The emblem depicts a cross – and at the point where the beams of the cross meet, there in the middle is draped the swastika! Cross and swastika! The very sight of it was esthetically disgusting. And what it signified was the denial of the first Commandment: “I am the Lord Thy God. Thou shalt not have other gods before me”. God in Christ, His self-revelation solely in Jesus Christ, the announcement of God’s salvation in Christ, the Lord, who for the sake of the world was crucified and has risen, this was the Church’s sole message. This was the confession to which the Barmen synod heard itself called. Convoked in a circumstance of great distress, it was, I must add, a somewhat motley group which was here welded together.

The Word of God which, as we can hear in the Epistle to the Hebrews, is sharper than any two edged sword, sent asunder the synthesis between the Word of God and myth, the myth of the self-election of the German race. The word of God struck down this “and” between cross and swastika, between the rule of Jesus Christ *and* the rule of this “Führer”.

In place of “both – and” there was now “either – or”. God in Christ, solely in Jesus Christ, this was the point!

Dear sisters and brothers, this is the point of what I have to say today in response to the question: What does the declaration of Barmen mean for us today? I can well imagine that some of the younger people here might think: “But in view of the first commandment that is completely clear and self-evident. The Church cannot serve two Masters!” The theologians among you may agree when I say that the synod, accepting this confession to Jesus Christ as the ONE word of God, is revelation, to whose propagation the Church is commissioned. The synod simply repeated in a new situation of temptation the “solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide” of the Reformation. Jesus Christ alone as mediator, grace alone, which justifies the godless in faith alone! At the time of the Reformation all agreed on this “alone”, the Lutherans and the

¹ This paper was the opening lecture given at the International Symposium on the *Barmen Declaration* at the University of Washington, Seattle, April 1984. Heinrich Vogel was one of the 139 delegates to the Synod of Barmen. He was a pastor from 1927-1932 and became a member of the Confessing Church at the beginning of the Church Struggle. One of the first pastors to speak out about anti-Semitism in 1933, he was periodically arrested and detained by the Nazis, and, finally, in 1941 he was forbidden to publish. In 1944 he became a lecturer in the illegal *Kirchliche Hochschule* (seminary) in Berlin, and then, in 1946 he became Professor of Systematic Theology at the Alexander von Humboldt University in Berlin, where he served until his retirement.

Reformed. Why shouldn't they in the Church's new hour of decision? How could the Church, which confesses its belief in the trinitarian God, the Church which confesses Jesus Christ, true God and true human being, which believes in him as the only mediator between God and humankind, which confesses the Holy Ghost as the only intercessor who appropriates salvation in faith, yes how could the Church faced with the national-socialist ideology's new and, indeed, ridiculous offer of salvation, say anything else but "Jesus Christ alone"? Did there not arise at that time in the Catholic Church too, a deep spiritual consenses with the Confessing Church? Indeed, all who called themselves Christians, whose name derives solely from Jesus Christ, should have been bound to confess their belief in this "God in Christ", "solely in Christ".

But the devil – and I don't mean this mythologically – the devil is a wizard, with all sorts of surprises and disguises. The programme of the "Nazi party" confesses in its final paragraph a "positive" Christianity, but with an Aryan Christ — and all that would mean for the discrimination and excommunication of Jewish Christians. Many German Christians heard in this an offer of benevolence for Christianity by the new power which was taking the heart of the nation by storm. They thought they saw a great missionary opportunity which they must grasp. Both sides, we theologians of the Confessing resistance and the propagandists of that synthesis, cited the Holy Scripture to support their position, just as in the account of Christ's temptation the tempter knows the scripture well. In the centuries following the Reformation, the Church, in particular the Evangelical Church in Germany had more than once joined in such syntheses with the ideological powers-that-be as they succeeded one another in the changing times. Think of the synthesis between Revelation and reason in the Rationalism of the 18th century the synthesis between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of human longing in German Idealism the syntheses between the truth of the Gospel and 19th century historical positivism and criticism. The body of the Church was contaminated by the traditions of these syntheses.

In this hour of decision we had to repent. But who realized this truly? Who understood the implications of the theological declaration to which we were called in order to avert the great temptation? Were there not many, even at the Barmen- Synod, who thought that it was only a matter of warding off the state's encroachment upon the freedom and the rights of the church?

I will never forget the evening before the beginning of the Barmen-Synod. We were sitting together, privately, in great excitement and tension. I was sitting across from Karl Barth. We heard remarkable statements, coming especially from Lutherans, whose spokesman seemed to look back to the Confessions which the Church must preserve rather than forward, as Barth and I wished, towards the now required new faith decision. I remember Barth's delight when he realized that his young friend in-the-struggle shared his opinion.

Here we must make a new decision, one which the Church had not yet formulated in this way. Up to now, the confession of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ alone and, consequently, the denial of all syntheses, especially that of natural theology in all its forms, had not been called for in this way.

Luther had foreseen that the question of the Church would arise again in time of great oppression. But at the time of the Reformation salvation was the central question. And for neither Luther nor Calvin was the question of Church put as it was for us, when the fateful history of syntheses had brought us face to face with the attempt to force the Church to coordinate the Word of God with the power and myth of human ideology.

None of us today, neither in the East nor particularly in the West, are safe from the temptation to enter into new syntheses with the ideologies prevailing here and there. We must not take it

for granted that the synthesis with its mixture of truth and lies will be seen through and cut through. What does it mean to say “no” to the synthesis of God’s word with socialism and collectivism, but also “no” to liberalism and individualism, “no” to the synthesis with common sense humanism, which so many people today think to be the essence of Christianity? Yes, we must see what very few recognize today, that the synthesis can also be an “Anti-ism”. I think of the ever-present relationship between anti-communism and Christianity which seems to follow from the synthesis between communism and atheism. No, whoever inquires into the meaning of the Barmen Declaration for us today will be called to reject every synthesis between the Gospel and ‘isms’ and ‘anti-isms’.

But now it is time to hear once again the theological Declaration of the Barmen-Synod, especially its first sentence, which sets my theme and is the fundamental statement for the whole declaration:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me.” (John 14,6) “Truly, truly, I say unto you: He that enters not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. I am the door: If any one enter in by me, he shall be saved.” (John 10, 1 and 9) “Jesus Christ, as he is revealed to us in the Holy Gospel, is the one Word of God which we hear, which we trust in life and in death and which we must obey. We reject the false doctrine, that the Church could and must acknowledge other events and powers, forms and truths as God’s revelation and source of proclamation besides this one word of God.”

God in Christ. With this one thesis the whole theological Declaration of Barmen stands or falls. The question of its meaning today can only be answered by emphasising this one central and fundamental truth. This truth is “personal”. It is neither an idea nor an ideal. It is not a concept. It encounters us in a name, in this *one* name, Jesus Christ. That is why before all else we should first heed the scripture text which illuminates the first sentence and the whole Barmen-declaration. Let me try to do this by emphasising a few points. The first two words are the most important: “*I am*”. “I am the way, the truth, and the life” ... At once we think of those words of Jesus which we hear in the gospel of St. John: “I am the light of the world” (John 8,12). “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11,25). “I am that bread of life” (John 6,48). “I am the true vine” (John 15,1). “I am the door” (John 10,9). Oh what tremendous, majestic, unique “*I am*”! “I am who I am” (“I shall be who I shall be”) this is the name of the God who reveals himself (Exodus 3,14).

Do we really hear this? It is not written, “I will show you the way”, not, “I will teach you the truth”, not, “I will give you directions towards the blessed life”, but, “*I am*”. We do not hear, “Love is God”, but rather “God is love!” We hear from Jesus, whom the Scripture reveals as the Christ, not only words *about* God, but God himself. This is the Word which was made flesh (John 1,14) and therefore the one word which we must hear. Unlike, indeed in opposition to all the words *about* God we are encountered here by the one word of God in person, in the person of one who speaks to us as a brother, as one of us, with the mystery of his divinity fully hidden. It is the majestic mystery of the Truth of God in Christ which is revealed to us in the word of Holy Scripture, indeed, which makes itself heard in this word. This says everything! If we were to hear this again – and it can only be heard ever anew in its truth – then we would not only be free from the relativism of truth which today pushes us into all sorts of religious and atheistic, philosophical and political forms of the abyss of nihilism, but we would also be free from all the pious talk which preachers spew from thousands of pulpits today *about* God and *about* the so-called divine problems. *But God is not a problem, God is God!* He is not a subject for discussion. He needs not to be protected by our tolerance. He is the one, who, like nobody else, no creature and surely no religious prophet or philosopher, says:

“I am”.

This is the confession made in the first sentence of the Barmen-declaration. The simple statement: “Jesus Christ is the one word of God which we must hear!” If we are concretely to explain this first sentence, which includes all that follows, we will think at once of the words which I omitted when quoting the last sentence: “As he is witnessed in Holy Scripture”. We do not hear his voice directly but in, with and through the human voices of the prophets and the apostles who witness to him. The revelation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ establishes the unity of the writings of the Old and New Testament and makes them the Holy Bible. Its ‘Christ centre’ makes of this heap of books the Book of Books. This must always be heard anew and believed anew. No theory of verbal inspiration, no hermeneutic principle provides the key to this secret. Just as it is ever again the work of the Holy Spirit when we hear the one word of God in the name of Jesus Christ, it is not enough to declare that the holy letters are God’s Word by once and for all recognizing their literal inspiration. While it is true that God’s own word encounters us in, with and through the human words and letters of Scripture, it cannot be objectified, not even in such a respectful theory! Please do not misunderstand me. Personally, I dare to confess that I am a practising fundamentalist. I dissociate myself, however, from a theory which, as we find it outside the canon in the fourth book of Esra, omits the faith which today is so necessary to heal our deafened ears, a theory which puts everything under that fatal “habemus, habemus, habemus” which is the real temptation of all orthodoxy. This, of course, does not spell approval of the liberty with which Reason has dealt with Holy Scripture in the last two centuries and recently, in the historical-critical method. Granted, it is not forbidden to question and to explore in a human way the human words which we find in the bible.

The Word was made flesh. Correspondingly, the word of God is made audible for us in human words. How else could it be audible? But if we subject the truth, which is audible for us in the Holy Bible, to the measures, norms and methods of our reason and its understanding of truth, then out of the “measuring measure”, the “norma normans”, in which our fathers believed, we have made a “norma normata”, a norm which is determined by our understanding of the truth! Who could deny that this determines and contaminates our relationship to the Bible to this day? Therefore we must speak anew the simple sentence: “Jesus Christ, as he is revealed to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we must hear.”

At Barmen 50 years ago we were well aware that these words, “as he is revealed to us in Holy Scripture”, stood in contradiction to another Christ to whom the Scriptures do not witness, a Christ conceived and composed according to people’s own desires, especially that “Aryan” Christ whom the National Socialists had programmed according to the norms of their racist ideology. Today, this has vanished. But let us not imagine that the temptation to put an ideologically determined image of Christ in place of the Christ revealed in the Holy Bible has been done away with, once and for all. The tempting power of such temptations consists ever again in their attempt to hide their lies behind a mask of truth. Whoever fails to resist such syntheses from the outset will concoct an image of Christ according to his own synthesis. Nature *and* grace – isn’t Catholicism still the most grandiose form of a synthesis between the Gospel and religion? Revelation *and* reason, philosophy *and* theology, Christian faith *and* culture ... isn’t it so that even such a consciously christocentric Theology as Paul Tillich’s falls prey to these syntheses which by means of the concept of symbol make his thinking in correlation into an impressive system.

Let us not be led astray! The “Either ... Or” of the Barmen Declaration cuts through every “both ... and”. I must say that this makes it impossible for us to put our questions, arising as they do from philosophy, religion and culture, in such a way that the lid of the revelation will

always fit on this pot.

This may be the right point to retell an anecdote from amidst the work on the theological declaration of Barmen, a conversation with the theologian most responsible for its formulation, Karl Barth. During one of the plenary sessions I was sitting next to him in the pew. I heard him say quietly, more to himself than to me, “May we do it? May we really do it?” I can’t swear to the exact wording of this question which arose from the depths of temptation. Nor do I know whether the answer of his young neighbour, “Yes, we may! we must!” (or words to this effect), reached his ear. Whoever has had to write Church texts, whoever knows that the crime of war will not weigh as heavily in the last judgement as one heretical sentence which leads the flock of Jesus Christ astray, that person can imagine that the author of the Barmen confession was subjected to great temptation. And this the more, as the necessary decision became clearer and clearer to him, though it clearly appalled a large part of the synod who did not understand it. Was it otherwise in Nicea, or Chalcedon, or Augsburg?

Let me try to explain how the first fundamental thesis of Barmen is the basis of the whole theological declaration, indeed, the real centre of all its assertions. I shall attempt this not by explaining, sentence by sentence, but by taking up the decisive questions as they arise in the one word, “*hören*”, “to hear”. German can express this better than English. In German the root of the word “*hören*” (to hear) evokes the word “*ge-hören*” (to belong to) and also the word “*gehören*” (to obey). That means, therefore, if Jesus Christ is really the one Word of God which we have to hear (*hören*), then He is the one, to whom we belong (*gehören*). And therein is already decided that he is the one whom we trust in life and in death and whom we have to obey (*gehören*). This implies that we, who belong to him, belong together, and even that through him, who belongs to all people, we belong to all humankind. This encompasses God’s whole creation, I must limit myself however, to underscoring a few aspects of the Barmen theses.

First: If we hear him, the voice of the good shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep, then we *belong* to him. We belong to him as to no other, because he belongs to us. He took our place and he it is who takes our part. That is the whole Gospel! In his self-sacrifice God’s self-revelation occurs. Of what other human being, be it Buddha, Mohammed or whoever, could this be said? But this, and nothing else, is what the Church has to say. “We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and must acknowledge, as God’s revelation and the source of her proclamation other events and powers, forms and truth besides this one word of God.” The last thesis says: The Church’s freedom is based upon this mandate. “In Christ’s place”, in the service of his own word and his deeds, the Church must announce in sermon and sacrament the message of the free grace of God to all people.

Second: If we are allowed to hear Jesus Christ as the one word of God, then trust and obedience, justification and sanctification belong inseparably together. Then the “consolation of all our sins being forgiven” implies immediately “God’s strong claim on our life”. Then we will not with false respect for the hard realities of this world think that there might be times and places in which we belong not to Christ, but to those other masters of the world’s autonomy.

The truth of Luther’s Two- Realms-Teaching, which is based on the justification of the sinner, must be respected. But it should not be corrupted into a theory of two spheres according to which our Lord Jesus Christ has nothing more to say in the sphere of our world which is threatened by nuclear destruction. I do not imply that the Sermon on the Mount could serve as the basis of a code of civil or penal law. But what I do imply is that the Lord is the Saviour of the world, that in prison he is the Redeemer and Lord of the prisoners and of their guards as well.

Third: We belong together in him whom we are to hear as God's one Word, through him alone and in him. This is the reason why we had then to reject the leadership principle (the "Führerprinzip"), by which Hitlerism would have been forced upon us. This is why the Church will always have to reject a hierarchy which subordinates it to a human will-to-power. If we belong together in Christ, our brother and saviour, then we belong together as brothers and sisters. We cannot achieve anything more precious. In this context I add a warning: one ought not to replace hierarchism with a false understanding of democracy which would deny all spiritual authority in calling.

Fourth: (though this is the third point of the Barmen Declaration) We must stress that our belonging together in Christ will determine the Church's whole life, not only its preaching, but also its structure and order. It was precisely at this point that we were faced with temptation at that time. "Of course", we were told, "the preaching and the praying we will leave to you." The spiritual life of the church remains undisturbed. But the other things, the problems of structures and Church order, these we will take over. We will relieve you of these problems. Thus they tried to coordinate the Church with the state, which meant that they tried to achieve the submission of the Church to the will of the state. Do we really suppose that there are not such cases today where governments attempt to coordinate the Church to their policies?

Fifth: If we are to hear Jesus Christ in all our life and death as the one Word of God, then we will resist the "coordination" of the government's power and the Church's service precisely at the point where we acknowledge "with thanks and reverence" the role of government as a gift of God. This perception is directed not only against all governmental totalitarism, but also against the totalitarian tendency which the church itself has practised appallingly often in its history.

In this context I think it is my duty not to remain silent on the point where state and church responsibilities stand today in such sharp contradiction, the question of world peace; in brief time available let me say just one thing: if He, whose voice we ought to hear, really is the *one* Word for every human being, then he really is our *peace*. According to the New Testament He is the peace between God and us, first of all the peace between Israel and us Gentile Christians whose Saviour for the sake of all peoples became the Messiah prophesied and given to Israel. This we should not forget in definitive solidarity with Israel up to and including the present situation!

Concerning the question of world peace in the face of the present atomic threat to the whole of humankind, let me say very simply: if we stand under the cross of Christ, then to my right there stands a Japanese peasant and a Russian student of the Lomonosov university in Moscow. On the other side stands a coal miner from the Ruhr and a Black from New York's Harlem. Even to think of these, my neighbours, as the targets of instruments of mass destruction, as vermin which have to be exterminated is sin. Yes, that is *sin!* And, whoever thinks that the demonic evil of an atomic war might be prevented by threatening with such instruments of the devil only shows that he has not yet realized how demonic is the phrase "The end justifies the means".

Enough, dear friends! I want to conclude with something positive, yes, with a great hope. Our subject, the Christ-centre of the Barmen-declaration and its significance today, inspires great hope in our world which is so filled with despair, hope in the *future* of this one Word of God in its promised splendour, the one Word which we are to hear in life and death. The last sentence of the Barmen-declaration points to the fact that He who is with us every day is the one who is *coming*. Not the devil but *God* will have the last word over this world and humankind.

Is it not true that hope for the future is awakening again not only among us Christians led by the Son of God, but that something of a longing for this Jesus Christ is arising throughout the whole world? The forms this longing takes may often enough be confused and repulsive. But are we sure to know what He who is and is to come thinks about them? I say this, truly, not to minimize the importance of all the heresies which are wreaking havoc in Christianity today. I myself confess to a *doxological* orthodoxy, that is, to the acknowledgement of the truth revealed to us in the Holy Scripture, the truth whose name is Jesus Christ. Even if we *fail* in our attempts to *recognize* this truth, unable to transcend our limitations, then and there, in our failure, we are called to *adoration*.

Let me conclude with a simple metaphor. When we with reason attempt to scale the cliffs of God's truth, we fall. We don't fall into a nihilistic abyss however, but into the arms of God as he opens them to us in his Word. Luther called this the "confident despair". Whoever in this "confident despair" dares to hope in God will hope not only for himself, but for all his fellow humans who today are so threatened. The significance of the Barmen-declaration for us today culminates at that point where we all, as Christians, are called to hope for humankind for Christ's sake.

Source: *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 47 (1984), p. 4-11.