Confession Church and Barmen Declaration

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Background

A brief visit to the Logos Bookshop in recent months will confirm that there is a continuous display of books written before, during, and after the Yellow Umbrella Movement. Political Theology has become a popular subject, in particular, how it will relate to the situation in Hong Kong. One book in particular caught my attention - A Winding Path: the Church and the Power (《仄徑舛途》 edited by 張慧嫈) - in which the history of the Christian Church flourishing under different political systems in the past 2000 years was reviewed, with two chapters devoted to the German Church’s struggle with the Nazi state, as well as a chapter on the Church in modern China (1). Likewise, there were many articles in Christian Times on the same subject and in particular, a feature article by Pastor Kwok (2/11/2014) when he proposed a much sought after answer - namely, an answer to what / how should the Church in Hong Kong act in the circumstances with reference to the Political Theology of Barth. It was therefore a most welcome opportunity when ABS offered a class on this subject this semester and led by Pastor Kwok. I trust that this is the sentiment shared by the whole class. We came with a desire to learn.

A very good way to learn is participation / ownership of the learning process. Each group was required to make three presentations in the class and everyone was involved. We learn much more this way, under the guidance of Pastor Kwok. We cover areas like the Barmen Declaration, the Political Theology of Barth and the Political Theology of Bonhoeffer, in particular, how we could take references and apply the principles to the situation in Hong Kong. However it is not my intention to reproduce what have been said in the classes in this essay, but to focus on areas which were not covered in the presentations because of the constraint of time.
The 1st 50 years of the 20th Century was critical times for Germany and the German Protestant Church. Literally, in one generation, they witnessed two world wars, a change from a monarchy government, to a democratic republic and then a totalitarian government under Hitler and the Nazi Party. The country was in turmoil. Milestones important to this essay are listed below. It is important to take note of the changes, both the magnitude and the pace.

The WWII officially began on Sept 1st 1939 with the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany. The Nazi war machine won rapid and dramatic victory after victory in the initial years with the use of a military strategy /method frequently described as the “Lightning War” “Blitzkrieg” - . These techniques were pioneered by well-known German Commanders, like Guderian, Rommel, Manstein, to name just a few. I do not expect Hitler to know them as he received no officer training in his brief military career, serving only as a Corporal in WWI. However, a similar technique was used to gain control of the German State and the German Church and managed to achieve similar results, as reflected by the rapid changes of milestones listed below. While Hitler was elected democratically, he was able to gain total control within a very short time and became a dictator. Unless one could read his intention and his method and well-prepared, with adequate resolve and resources, it is doubtful that anybody or any institute would be able to withstand his aggression. For it happened so rapidly and most if not all were surprised. Before one can react properly, it was over. Through clever political means / methods, the church administration was hijacked by the state with the administrative power and control in the hands of Nazi supporters. They were able to gain huge popular support within the protestant Church, among laymen as well as church leaders, pastors and theologians, even though their message was clearly heretical. However, conscientious members of the church, led by Martin Niemoller, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hans Iwand and many others, made a stand against the errors that were happening inside and outside the German churches, leading to initially the formation of the Pastors Emergency League and eventually the Confession Church. It was against such a background that the Barmen Declaration was made in May 1934, the details and theological interpretations are well documented and will not be repeated verbatim here. It was not a political challenge to the government, but a theological declaration, and indirectly addressing the issues. Essentially the message was timeless and based on Scriptures, and can be used as a
reference for churches elsewhere under similar circumstances. It contains 6 propositions, each quoting from Scriptures, stating its implications for the present day, and rejecting the false doctrines of the “German Christians” (2). It proclaims the church’s freedom in Jesus Christ who is Lord of every area of life. And the Church obeys Him as God’s one and only Word who determines its order, ministry, and relation to the state. Nonetheless, even such a gentle voice was not tolerated and triggered counter-measures and persecutions. Many were arrested and even sent to concentration camps. Their courage to speak up (ie confess their faith in the Lord Jesus) and suffered the consequence is much respected and commended world-wide.

The Lightning War Against the Churches in Germany

It is useful to have a brief note on the methods of lightning war (3), for it helps us appreciate what the Churches in Germany in the Nazi era had gone through.

Nazi Germany won battle after battle in the first years of WWII, not because they got more manpower or better equipment / military technology but through the skillful application / execution of well-known military principles. It was so well conducted and victory won so fast that it was called lightning war. The same method did not do well in later years because by then everybody knew their methods and Germany was hard pressed on multiple fronts lacking the minimum resources required for this kind of warfare. This was well presented in the Oscar winning film – Patton, who was the only one on the Allies side who master this concept of warfare and succeeded in stopping the last lightning war on the Western Front (winter of 1944) – the Battle of the Bulge, which was another well-known film from Hollywood.

The essential components of lightning war are:-

a. Surprise – Total surprise if possible, including tricks or disguise to misinform and mislead the enemy.
b. Lightning strike at the most vulnerable points – It is understood that these points were found and carefully studied.

c. All weapons integrated and focused on these focal points – A kind of total war and by focusing they achieve numerical superiority at these focal points.

d. Take and keep the initiative and speed is critical – Must be fast, one or more steps ahead of the enemy, and do not give time for the enemy to recover / regroup / re-organize

e. Once breakthrough achieved, go deep rapidly, aiming at the heart of war machine, namely the command centres, the logistics, so that the ability of the enemy to fight as a team is lost.

f. Training, drill and exercise – the attacking force must be well prepared and led by able and daring commanders.

Skeptics may say that these are all common sense and no big deal. But history demonstrated that the German Army was the only one capable of doing it in the initial years. Russia suffered most to this technique and the German army was at the doorsteps of Moscow, a feat which only Napoleon had achieved.

It is not difficult to imagine what would happen when the German Churches were not prepared, stagnant for years, not aware of the danger coming, vulnerable and divided, were then suddenly confronted with an enemy who came in disguise as an angel. They were tempted, charmed, and then rapidly overwhelmed, leaving no time to act or react. If we extend the discussion further, instead of a lightning war, it was a slow but methodical infiltration by the enemy, attempting to winning over the mind and hearts, the result would be the same. The later approach perhaps is more dangerous and perhaps is faced by the churches today. Ie The values and systems of the world gaining a foothold in the mind of Christians (4).

It is therefore prudent to study the Barmen Declaration, as history may repeat itself. To quote Dr Chan W. O. (Christian Times – 31/5/2015, page 9), if Hitler should come today, he would definitely not wear a moustache. He would be using a different and more sophisticated disguise.
The message for the church today is she must be more alert and watch out.

Timeline leading up to the Barmen Declaration (5-7)

**1919** – Hitler founded the National Socialist Party in Germany

**Jan 1933 (30/1)** – Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany

**Feb 1933 (27/2)** – Hitler issued an emergency order virtually abolishing civil rights

**April 1933** – 1st national convention of “German Christians.” Slogan: “The State of Adolf Hitler appeals to the Church, and the Church has to hear his call.”

– State commissioner of the Evangelical Church appointed.

- Ludwig Muller given the responsibility of creating a “Reich Church”

**July 1933** - All political parties outlawed except the National Socialist Party.

**July – Sept 1933** – Church elections and “German Christians” won control of the new “Reich Church.”
- Muller was elected Reich Bishop at the General Synod of the Prussian Church.

- German President died (Aug 2). Hitler proclaimed himself Reichfuhrer.

Aug 1933 – Bethel Confession drafted by Bonhoeffer and Sasse.

Sept 1933 (21/9) – Martin Niemoeller and others established the Pastors’ Emergency League in response to the heretical views of Reich Bishop and “German Christians”, leading to the eventual formation of the Confession Church in 1934.

Nov 1933 – Demonstration staged by “German Christians.”, and declared that the “German Christian” movement was the next stage of the German Reformation; ….. to get rid of the Old Testament “with its Jewish morality...and also to purge the New Testament of all “superstitious” passages. This was promptly denounced by the Pastors Emergency League.

Jan 1934 (3-4/1) - 1st Free Reformed Synod meeting, attended by 320 pastors / elders from 167 Reformed Churches. The 1st Declaration of Barmen was prepared .

– (4/1) - Reich Bishop Muller issued a “Muzzling Order” forbidding any public criticism of church administration or discussion of church controversy.

– (25/1) - Hitler met church leaders to shore up Muller. Niemoeller continued to assert the primacy of God. This angered his supporters, who felt his outspokenness had ruined the last chance to patch things up, withdraw in protest and denounced Niemoeller.

April 1934 - Legal Administrator of the Reich Church appointed.
May 1934 (29-31/5) - Barmen Declaration. Meeting attended by 139 representatives of the Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches. This served as the Founding Document for the Confession Church. Barth personally mailed a copy to Hitler.

Churches in Nazi Germany (8-10)

Did Hitler manage to win total control of the churches in Germany? I think he had great success with the Protestant Church, as illustrated by the timelines listed above, but lesser success with the Catholic Church and a total failure with the Jehovah’s Witness. Different churches “performed” differently and it is useful to study the reasons why.

The message from Hitler

Hitler was not an atheist. He was brought up as a Roman Catholic and served as a choirboy in a local cathedral. But after leaving home, he never attended church or received communion. He was in WWI serving as a Corporal. It was rather ironic that many of the distinguished commanders of WWI would serve under him in WWII when he was their Fuhrer and Commander in Chief.

Despite his Christian background, he later developed a non-Christian philosophy based on Nietzsche, Darwin and Gobineau. Nonetheless, his early speeches often mentioned God and emphasized the pivotal role of Christianity in German Society. Some of his sayings include:
the Nazis “tolerate no one in our ranks who attacks the ideas of Christianity… in fact our movement is Christian. We are filled with a desire for Catholics and Protestants to discover one another”.

“Today Christians … stand at the head of [Germany]. I pledge that I never will tie myself to parties who want to destroy Christianity … We want to fill our culture again with the Christian spirit … We want to burn out all the recent immoral developments in literature, in the theatre and in the press. In short, we want to burn out the poison of immorality which has entered into our whole life and culture, as a result of liberal excess.”

Naturally these statements would be warmly received by many. They were also persuaded by the statement on “positive Christianity” in Article 24 of the 1920 Nazi Party Platform, which read:

“We demand the freedom of all religious confessions in the state, insofar as they do not jeopardize the state’s existence or conflict with the manners and moral sentiments of the Germanic race. The Party as such upholds the point of view of a positive Christianity without tying itself confessionally to any one confession. It combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit at home and abroad and is convinced that a permanent recovery of our people can only be achieved from within on the basis of the common good before individual good.”

Despite the open anti-semitism of this statement and its linkage between confessional “freedom” and a nationalistic, racialized understanding of morality, it is tragic that many Christians in Germany at the time read this as an affirmation of Christian values.

Hitler believed that race was a biological substance in the blood which determined a person intellectually, spiritually, and physically. He believed the supreme race was the Aryan race, which was destined to rule over all the other races, for the only purpose of the other races was to serve the Aryans.

Somehow he blamed the Jews for all the troubles of Germany, for starting the First World War, for making Germany lose this war, for being the force behind the Treaty of Versailles which
caused Germany so much suffering, and for being behind the two forces that most threatened Germany at the time: Communism and Capitalism. He believed that Germany needed to be changed into a powerful military state, but individualism and democracy were not compatible with this new state. Once the state was militarized, the armed forces would move to the east to create living space (Lebensraum) for the German people.

Many Germans shared with Hitler the bitterness and resentment that resulted from World War One, and so they were very receptive to his ideas — especially the idea of German superiority. Nazism was readily accepted because it filled a vacuum left in the hearts of countless Germans after World War One. Nazism offered in emotional and semi-religious language a dynamic political creed and a plausible explanation of Germany’s post-war predicament. **Nazism was not just an alternative political party; it was, in Hitler’s own words, “a form of conversion, a new faith.”**

A new faith that used a lot of Christian terminology and ideas and heritage but distorted by adulterations, additions, subtractions, substitutions, misinterpretation, selective interpretation and so on, and coupled with massive propaganda and popular support. Ie The message is much more dangerous than one that is frankly anti-Christian and the errors much harder to discern, especially to those not grounded in the true Gospel.

The population and the Churches in Germany

The Christian churches were in decline in Germany in the early 1900s, weakened by World War I and the secular values and left wing politics of the Weimar period. Church rolls show a sharp drop in religious attendance during the Great Depression; rolls from 1932 show that 186,000 Germans stopped attending Christian churches that year. Nevertheless the vast majority of Germans still identified as Christians (according to the 1933 census, 52 per cent Protestant and 33 per cent Catholic).

The vast majority of German Protestants (40m) were politically conservative and nationalistic in their conviction. Not keen about democracy but were looking for a great leader to bring Germany and the German people out of the ashes of WWI. They loathed Communism and tended to view Jews as alien members of society. They wanted to see Germany return to the military glory of the past.

The Roman Catholics (20m) were much more skeptical about the Nazis. They had been persecuted by Bismarck in the early years of the German Empire (2nd Reich) and it maintained
allegiance to power outside Germany, the papacy. There was a massive infrastructure of schools, youth organizations, journals, political parties, like a state within a state.

In general, Protestants who were more susceptible to the Nazi temptation tended to be more theologically liberal or nominal. In fact even those who disliked the “German Christians”, they often also avoided the Confession Church because of its biblical fundamentalism. In contrast, theologically conservative Christians were much more resistant by virtue of their commitment to orthodox Christian teachings. Nazi ideology seemed very appealing to the theologically liberal Christians.

The two kingdoms doctrine was used in conflicting ways, both to support allegiance to the Nazi and to oppose it. Supporters regarded the realm of politics and the state is separate from the realm of the gospel. Those opposed would regard the two kingdoms doctrine functioned in the context of a higher allegiance to the Lordship of Christ over all of life, as shown in the Barmen Declaration. Ie The authority of scripture must always be the ultimate judge in matters of justice, political ideology, or politics.

The Jehovah Witness was the group most hostile to the Nazi. They were committed to faithful witness to the point of suffering and seemed immune to the pressure of imprisonment or death. They numbered 15000 in 1933. Their religious beliefs prevented them from swearing allegiance to government or secular powers; they also refused to submit to military conscription or perform the Nazi one-armed salute. Persecution promptly took place. By the middle of 1933, they were formally banned in most parts of Germany. Individual Witnesses were sacked from jobs and others were refused access to state welfare or pensions. They could restore these rights by renouncing their religion and pledging allegiance to the Nazi state, though few did. The Gestapo began compiling a register of all Jehovah’s Witnesses in 1936. By 1938 several thousand had been arrested and transported to concentration camps. Inside the camps they were identified by a triangular purple patch on their uniform. About 10,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses were detained in camps between 1938 and 1945. Around one quarter of this number were either murdered or succumbed to starvation or disease. 10000 out of a population of 15000 means that just about all the adults were arrested at some point. One quarter succumbed means that just about every family had lost a family member. The numbers spoke for itself. They were outnumbered but put up a good fight.

Summary
The Nazi ideology in a way was more than just about politics but a new religion / an idol. It happened over 80 years ago. It is tempting to wonder why the German Christian could accept this kind of ideology which is clearly heretical and human folly to us. But it is a good reminder that it could happen and if people are not careful, they may fall into the same trap. By appealing to nationalism and patriotism and offering hope, the Nazi gospel was able to attract a large followings but mainly among those “theologically liberal” Christians – the “German Christian Movement”. It had less success with the Roman Catholics who were more united and had a very clear leadership structure and support from outside Germany. It had no success with the “theologically conservative” Christians such as Niemoller who went to the concentration camp, and Bonhoeffer who gave his life for his faith. The Nazi ‘gospel’ was not able to deceive those who really know the Lord Jesus Himself, and correctly understand the teaching of the bible and the gospel. It also did not manage to destroy the Jehovah Witness. These are useful lessons for churches today.

Chapter 2 – Confessions / Declarations – The Barmen Declaration

While the Barmen Declaration is the most well-known among the confession literature, and served as the Founding Document of the Confession Church, there are others confessions / Declarations. For instance:-

a. Altona Bekenntnis (11/1/33), led by Hans Asmussen

b. Die Bochumer Bekenntnis (4/6/1933), led by Hans Philippe Ehrenberg, which had a strong message against anti-Semitism.

c. Die Bethel Bekenntnis (Bethel Confession) (Aug 1933), drafted by Bonhoeffer and Sasse

d. The 1st Barmen Declaration by the Reformed Churches (Jan 1934)- Drafted by Barth

e. The Barmen Declaration (May 1934) – Drafted by Barth
The Bethel Confession (11-14)

Bethel is the name of a biblical town and it means ‘house of God’. It is also the name of a small German town in Westphalia. In late spring / summer of 1933, the German Church was in turmoil with the "German Christians" just won control of the Church Synod on 23/7/1933. Bonhoeffer considered it essential to issue a doctrinal statement to counter the heresies of the day. He was supported by his friend Hans Sasse. A preliminary meeting was held in August, between Bodelschwingh, the director of Bethel, Gerg Merz, an instructor in theology at the school there, Bonhoeffer and Sasse. The 1st draft was prepared by Bonhoeffer and Sasse. There were two crucial points – the doctrine on scripture and the doctrine of the cross. In particular, Bonhoeffer was the driving force and he convinced the team to accept his treatment of the Jewish question. The team also received a copy of the Tecklenburg Confession for reference. The draft was then taken up by a committee. However, when it returned, Bonhoeffer could not even recognize it was his own. It was gutted of its most significant elements, a mere shadow when it was released to the church, after editorial revisions / omissions. The excuse given was the need to dilute it to accommodate people in the Union and the Reformed Churches, and also to make it less controversial and confrontational, especially its criticism of anti-Semitic racism. According to Newell (12), the draft was reviewed by 20 eminent theologians and “every bright line was blurred, every sharp edge of difference filed down, and every point blunted”.

Bonhoeffer and Sasse were grieved and angered, withdrew their support of the so-called Bethel Confession and refused to sign it. However, copy of the earlier version was privately circulated.

As commented by Webber (13), one essence listed in the article – ‘fellowship… is not determined by blood, therefore not by race, but by the Holy Spirit and baptism. ……. Object to the attempt to make the German Protestant Church into a Reich Church for Christians of the Aryan race …….’

On a minor point, apparently, Barth considered it ‘too Lutheran’.
However, the Bethel Confession is significant because, according to Carter (14), it was an attempt to restate the "classic loci of Reformation Theology" in a way relevant to the contemporary problem of the influence of Nazi ideology. It was the 1st full theological confession of the church struggle. It was eventually replaced by the Barmen Declaration in May 1934. Bonhoeffer was not physically involved in the Barmen meeting because he left to pastor a church in London. He was very sad and disappointed as he discovered even his friends did not listen to him and he left in protest.

The Barmen Declaration (2, 5)

As pointed out in the Introduction chapter, the Barmen Declaration is so well documented and discussed and presented in the class, it is not my intention to dwell over the details in the essay. Instead, I would like to focus on the link between the Barmen Declaration of 1934, the Stuttgart Declaration of 1945 and the Berlin Confession of 1950, and the Darmstadt Statement of 1948 in passing.

But it is important to point out that the issue of public confession / declaration in critical times is an important way to make known clearly the position of the Church to the state and to the congregation. However, as pointed out by Metaxas (15), it is not easy to come up with a consensus among Christians and produce a statement and in such a short time. There were so many theological and political points of views in the Confession Church. But it was made easier on this occasion because they had expert like Barth who could prepare a draft in no time, and after substantial deletions by others, they have leader like Niemoller who could engineer support and consensus and eventually the passage of the revised-draft. It was always hard to overcome theological issues between different denominations and quite a few Lutheran theologians were not happy. They were willing to compromise because of the critical situation. Somehow the question on the treatment of Jews was left out of the declaration, to the great disappointment of Bonhoeffer. This was not rectified until after the war, in the Darmstadt Statement of 1948 and the Berlin Confession of 1950.

The Barmen Declaration serves as a reminder of the ongoing need for the Church to remain true to her own identity under the Lordship of Jesus Christ (16).
It illustrates the importance for the Church to speak up. However, many would conclude the German Evangelical Church in general did not speak up enough, was too ‘silent’ to crimes committed by the state. The same mistake repeated in history since then? In recent years, the relative silence to US Militarism since 911 has been regarded as another example.

It also reminds us the danger of corrupt forms of Christianity, as pointed out by B.B. Warfield (17)

“The chief dangers to Christianity do not come from the anti-Christian systems. Mohammedanism has never made inroads upon Christendom save by the sword. Nobody fears that Christianity will be swallowed up by Buddhism. It is corrupt forms of Christianity itself which menace from time to time the life of Christianity.

…Those who overlay the gospel with man-made additions, no less than those who subtract from it God-given elements, are not preaching “the gospel” in another form, but are offering a different kind of gospel, which is essentially no gospel at all.”

Events after the Barmen Declaration (May 1934) (7, 18)

Fall 1934 - Formal formation of the Confession Church

Ie The confession church had in effect declared the Nazi-sanctioned Reich Church heretical, and herself as the true Evangelical Church of Germany

Demographics of Germany – A population of 65 million. 45 million Protestant in Germany. 18000 pastors, with 3000 under the German Christian Church, 3000 under the Confession
Church, leaving 12000 not closely affiliated with either faction. And about half a million Jews in Germany.

March 1935 – the Confessing Church Synod announced:

“We see our nation threatened with mortal danger; the danger lies in a new religion. The Church has been ordered by its Master to see that Christ is honored by our nation in a manner befitting the Judge of the world. The Church knows that it will be called to account if the German nation turns its back on Christ without being forewarned”

Result – arrest of 700 pastors late 1935

Bishop Muller resigned / removed.

May 1936 – Written memo submitted by the Confession Church:-

- Objecting to the anti-Christian tendencies of the regime

- Condemning anti-Semitism

- An end to interference in church affairs

- A church envoy was sent to Hitler to protest.

But treated harshly by the Interior Minister – arrest of pastors, church funds were confiscated and collection forbidden.
July 1937 – Confession Church was banned.

Niemoller was charged but released by the court but immediately arrested by Gestapo and sent to concentration camp. Nonetheless he was regarded as a WWI hero by Hitler and instructed not to take his life. But many did not survive.

Aftermath

- Christians who did not agree to Nazi were without leaders.

- Resistance were largely ineffective

- Persecution of Jews was not mentioned in the Barmen Declaration. But a select few risked their lives to help Jews hiding illegally and some of them were caught.

- Some urged the need for more radical and risky resistance.

- The relative silence and failure of the church was noted during and after the war.

Oct 1945 - Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt (19/10/1945)  (War in Europe ended on 5/8/1945)

Aug 1948 – Darmstadt Statement
April 1950 – Berlin Confession of guilt over crimes against Jews.

The Stuttgart Declaration (19/10/1945) (19-21’)

WWII officially ended on 8/5/1945 and the Stuttgart Declaration was made on 19/10/1945. It was a public confession of guilt and was led by Martin Niemoller and signed by the 11 members of the EKG Synod Council. It stated that:-

“Through us infinite wrong was brought over many peoples and countries. That which we often testified to in our communities, we express now in the name of the whole church: We did fight for long years in the name of Jesus Christ against the mentality that found its awful expression in the National Socialist regime of violence; but we accuse ourselves for not standing to our beliefs more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently”.

Objectives / Importance:-

a. A response to the visit by a delegate of representatives from the Churches of Netherland, Switzerland, France, UK and USA where there was no lack of grievance / hatred towards Germany after the war.

b. Part of the justice to the victims

c. An act of reconciliation, and the return and acceptance to the world family / churches
d. Made it easier for churches elsewhere to help Germany

e. Very and very hard to confess guilt. No lack of examples. Similar confession from Japan to China / Korea etc still awaited. In a way, the war dragged on when reconciliation was not pursued.

Controversy:-

a. Not everyone of the EKD Council shared the sentiments to the same extent

b. Some observers present noticed the “lack of contrition”.

c. No mention of any particular atrocities committed, the Church’s support of Nazi in the early years, nor the treatment of Jews.

Sentiments on the German side :-

a. Some regarded it a further capitulation to the Allies

b. Only the German leadership responsible and most were dead or would face war crime charges
c. The Germans were victims also

d. The victors had committed wrong-doings especially in the East

Some examples – the senseless destruction of Dresden by bombing, behaviors of occupied troops were inhumane, treatment of POWs, using food as a weapon and refused to support the effort of the Famine Relief Committee to send food to civilians in Nazi-occupied countries during the war.

e. A pretext or justification to impose harsh treatment / punishment / charges upon Germany, like what happened after WWI, and render the Allied war effort a kind of “Holy War”.

f. Defeat etc were punishment enough already

g. Collective quilt not fair – all Germans bore all responsibilities for all Nazi crimes? They were helpless in the face of totalitarianism.

h. No doubt, some Germans were unrepentant, or they did not appreciate the nature and extent of the crimes yet or they were overwhelmed by their own sufferings.

Note – Although religious leaders did not do enough to resist Hitler, there was no lack of dissent among the population. Between 1933 and 1939 the ordinary courts sentenced 225,000 people to a total of 600,000 years’ imprisonment for political and religious offences. During the Nazi period of power, three million Germans were held at one time or another in prison or in the concentration camps on political and religious grounds (22).

Comment - The Stuttgart Declaration was significant. It was the first official confession of guilt from the Synod of the German Evangelical Church. The confession of guilt is no simple matter,
but a demonstration of tremendous moral courage.

The 1st EKD Confession of Guilt over Crimes against Jews (1950) (23)

At its session held in Berlin-Weissensee on 27th April 1950 the Synod of the German Evangelical Church passed a "Statement on the Jewish Question":

"We confess that we have become guilty before the God of compassion by our omission and silence and thus share the blame for the terrible crimes commited against the Jews by members of our nation."

It was initiated by Adolf Freudenberg, who was a lawyer in the German Foreign Office and had to resign because he married a Jewish wife. He studied theology and became a pastor of the Confession Church. He proposed to include the question of Jews in the Barmen Declaration but not successful. Eventually it was proposed to the EKG Synod in their Berlin meeting of 1950 by Heinrich Vogel, an ordinary member of the Synod.

Note - The Berlin Confession was preceded by the Darmstadt Statement of August 1948, which was drafted by Hans Iwand and Karl Barth, on behalf of the Council of Brethren. The Darmstadt Statement was more comprehensive and deeper.

Summary - From Barmen to Stuttgart and Berlin

Another way of looking at this is - It was from Confession of Faith, to Confession of Guilt, to Confession of Guilt over Crimes against the Jews.

This is just about the two hardest things for mortal men to do, namely to confess the Lord and to confess guilt. Without the grace and mercy of God, it is impossible for carnal man to believe in God and make a confession for the Lord Jesus. During very hard times when the Church was under persecution, the public confession could possibly lead to immediate persecution and
death. For the Confession Church, many became targets for persecution, such as harassment by the Gestapo, and even imprisonment and death. For members of the Jehovah Witness sect, they suffered a lot as described above. Therefore Bonhoeffer / Niemoller and others had tremendous courage to make a confession to the Nazi State.

To admit guilt is also very difficult, even for forgiven sinners, who should know very well the meaning of guilt and forgiveness. Indeed there is much to learn from the example of Daniel who humbled himself before God and confessed to Him the sins committed, not by him, but by his ancestors and the nation of Israel. His prayers were heard, as recorded in the Book of Daniel. In contrast, the Japanese Government has performed badly in this regard. They still do not have the courage to acknowledge guilt and apologize to the people of China and Korea and the rest of Asia.

Chapter 3 - Political Theology of Karl Barth and Hong Kong

Introduction

Karl Barth (1886-1968), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) and Hans Iwand (1899-1960) are regarded as the three leading theologians of the German Confession Church, of the Reformed and Lutheran tradition. They were in critical times / historical moments around WWI & WWII:-

- When they spent their formative years

- Had training and development in theology
- Went through trials as individuals / families / church / nation

- Fulfill their duty and callings as Christian / Pastors / Theologians / Teachers

They are unique as much of their major works were conducted or completed in these circumstances

**Barth** - Epistle to the Romans (1919 / 1921). Church Dogmatics (13 Volumes, 1932 - 1967)


**Iwand** - Theological Explanations for Martin Luther’s On the Bondage of the Will (1939), The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther (1941), On the Primacy of Christology (1956), Concerning True Faith (1959), Sermon Meditations (1963)

The question is can we take references from their writings and deeds for the situation in Hong Kong? And starting with Barth.

**Political Theology of Barth (in Action)**

Barth was a prolific writer. It will be quite a challenge to go over his writings in a short time to study his political theology and see how it could be applied in the situation of Hong Kong. As deeds would be an illustration or confirmation of belief / teaching, it may be easier to understand the Theology of Barth by looking at his deeds.
Participation in politics – membership of political party

1915 - Joined Social Democrat Party of Switzerland

1917 - Resigned from SDP of Switzerland

1933 - Joined Social Democrat Party of Germany (Nazi came to power in Jan)

- Complained by students of his membership of SDP and his teachings tainted with communism

1934 - Was informed no member of SDP could be a professor. And allegiance to Hitler required for the appointment.

- He resigned for he believed allegiance to the constitution was expected but not to an individual. Went back home to Switzerland.

Comment :-

1. He was already well established as a professor in theology and famous for his Epistle to the Romans.

2. He was no politician but had serious interest in politics during critical times, even membership of political party
3. Resigned from party when there was conflict with his core values.

4. Did not join a party in power but a party which was being marginalized.

5. Paid the price for not following the establishment. Lost his job. Left Germany for home.

6. Strongly against anti-Semitism as a matter of principle and made himself unpopular

7. He had discernment and was ahead of his peers, pointing out the danger of Hitler and where the German state was heading.

Barmen Theological Declaration

Question - A political declaration?

No – as it was about Theological Declaration only and carefully worded as such.

Yes – because it was so obvious who /what it was addressed. It should be quite clear to Hitler and the Nazi party they were the targets. The message was unmistakable because Barth personally mailed a copy to Hitler. Ie This act could be regarded as very political. The results confirmed it was treated as political. I suspect the outcome was not unexpected to Barth.

Comment - While the church was hoping to focus on theology only, it was quite impossible to control how it would be perceived in the outside world & by those in power.

- Every danger, whatever the church said, it would be treated as political, especially
by dictator and in a totalitarian state.

- How we see the world and how the world see us are equally important.

- Inevitably, the church leaders including Barth would be considered politicians and even as a threat to the ruling party. Speaking up would expose oneself as a political target.

There is this tendency to keep silent especially when the state would use terror tactics?

Church Politics (Part I)

Barth was a scholar and it was alleged that he drafted the Barmen Declaration (May 1934) during a ‘tea-break’ while the other two members were taking an afternoon nap. It was reported that he considered it was ‘his draft’ (28). He also drafted the ‘1st Declaration of Barmen’ by the Free Reformed Synod in Jan 1934.

The draft was amended by others and presented in the Barmen meeting. He remained more or less behind the scene. It was well done because the declaration was generally accepted by the conference and by Christians elsewhere ever since. However, some regarded the dilution of Lutheran theology unacceptable but supported the document primarily because of their opposition to the ‘German Christians’. Ie There was less support after the crisis was over.

Comment – Barth really ‘knew what he believes and why he believes’. He was able to produce such an important document in such a short time all by himself. Very modest and chose to stay behind the scene, allowing others to present the paper and so on, one reason he was respected. It was very hard to achieve consensus among theologians. Some gave qualified support because bigger issues were at stake. In a way, crisis and common goals could unite people better. Need to keep striving.
Testimony / Moral Integrity

He resigned from the Editorial Board of a journal which was about to publish an article defending the Aryan paragraph.

He resigned from his professorship when he was required to swear allegiance to Hitler.

Comment - He compromised his career and position for his moral integrity.

- But he got a choice and he could go back to Switzerland. Many got nowhere to go.

- Some therefore considered it unfair for Barth, in a meeting after the war, to criticize the leadership of the Confession Church for not trying hard enough because ‘we couldn’t all run to Switzerland like you did’. This was an insult but Barth took it well.

- Bonhoeffer got a choice also when he left for USA in June 1939 but returned after one month because he wanted to share with his fellow countrymen in sufferings and secured a better position to contribute after the war.

War & Peace

When he returned home in 1935, he was asked if he supported national defense. His answer was ‘yes, and especially on the northern border’ (ie against Germany).
He also wrote in 1938 to his Czech colleague Josef Hromadka when he declared that soldiers who fought against the Third Reich were serving Christian cause.

He was expelled by the Confession Church soon after. This was inevitable as any association with Barth would become very embarrassing and dangerous.

Comment – While Barth advocated peace, he was not completely against the necessity of war. He regarded the Third Reich no longer a legitimate authority, and endorsed the war against Germany as a righteous war.

- He attacked the Western powers’ appeasement policy towards Hitler and did not resist strong enough. If they did, Hitler would have backed down. It was then too little too late. Likewise Bonhoeffer was upset when the international church community did not stand up enough to the Reich Church. Paradox – the willingness to fight may prevent war.

Church Politics (Part II)

Barth continued his solidarity with the Confessing Church after the war. He had a hand in the Stuttgart Declaration of 1945, the Darmstadt Statement of 1947 and the Berlin Confession of Guilt in 1950.

Comment - He was among the earliest to visit the Confessing Church after the war and strived to help as described above.

- However, there was tension in his relationship with the Confessing Church. In particular he was gracious even when insulted. In one of the meeting, a large group was prepared to leave
as soon as they heard he was coming.

- Over the years, it was not easy to relate to the Confessing Church because she was divided politically and theologically over its relation to the Nazi state, with reformists on one hand, and the conservatives on the other (29). There was conflict within the Church. Barth was expelled in 1938. It was not easy to manage conflict / hurts / misunderstanding and love each other.

Management of Conflicts / Difference in Opinions in Church

Church history confirms that sometimes very fierce dis-agreement can occur between Christians. This itself is already a big subject for there is no lack of examples. A few have been mentioned in this essay:-

a. Interpretation of the Two Kingdoms Doctrine. The same doctrine could be used to defend and support by the German Christian Movement and the Confessing Church, and came to a completely opposite conclusion.

b. Details of the Barmen Declaration which was drafted by Barth of the Reformed Church. It underwent much deletions (I have no access to the original draft) and it was still not that acceptable to some Lutheran theologians. But they were willing to compromise because of the dire situation.

c. The Bethel Confession which was drafted by Bonhoeffer was regarded as “too Lutheran” by Barth.

d. Likewise, the Stuttgart Declaration was not supported by everyone to the same extent but a compromise was made because of the dire situation.
e. Even within the Confession Church it was divided politically and theologically, with reformists on one side and the conservatives on the other side.

I would list a few well-known examples I studied recently for the class of church history:

f. The dispute between John Wesley and George Whitfield, founders of the Methodist Church. Wesley was Arminian and Whitfield Calvinistic. They could not resolve their difference and led to the formation of two wings of the Methodist Church. But they agreed to differ and respected each other. For instance, Whitfield invited Wesley to preach in his funeral and he did. The key paragraph from his sermon is extracted below (30).

“And, first, let us keep close to the grand scriptural doctrines which he everywhere delivered. There are many doctrines of a less essential nature, with regard to which even the sincere children of God (such is the present weakness of human understanding) are and have been divided for many ages. In these we may think and let think; we may "agree to disagree." But, meantime, let us hold fast the essentials of "the faith which was once delivered to the saints;" and which this champion of God so strongly insisted on, at all times, and in all places!”

g. The dispute between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli over church practices (31). The question was while the Protestant Church would reject Roman Catholic doctrine, how much Catholic procedure should be retained? Luther adopted the position that as long as a rite was not specifically forbidden in the Bible, it was permissible for the Church to practice, but Zwingli believed if a rite was not specifically commanded in the Bible, it should not be practiced in the Church. Luther’s position led to what is now known as High Church practice, and Zwingli led to the Low Church practice.

h. The dispute between Martyn Lloyd Jones and Billy Graham on how gospel crusade should be conducted. According to Murray, MLJ refused to join BG on the crusade platform because he invited Catholics and Christian Liberals on the platform (32). To MLJ, he could not compromise on the fundamental principles of the Christian faith for the sake of “unity” (33), for he preached
unity and real fellowship is meant for Christians who share the same faith and worship the same Lord. ie Indirectly the focal point is how to define a Christian.

i. The dispute between MLJ and John Stott in 1966 over the way forward for a “mixed church”. Ie A church consisting of members who truly believe in God and those who were more liberal and somehow very often, the former was a minority and was marginalized (32).

In summary, how to resolve conflicts and achieve consensus and unity among Christians? I always like to quote the example of Wesley and Whitfield. Perhaps I should add the example of Barth. When he prepared the draft for the Barmen Declaration, he was already very established and very much a leading theologian. However, his draft was subjected to substantial deletions, perhaps by people who were more junior and less qualified than him. The presentation was not made by him and he remained behind the scene throughout the process. This is not easy.

While he cared about the Confession Church, he could only observe from the outside as he was expelled by the Nazi state to Switzerland, and then by the Confession Church when he supported armed resistance.

He visited the Confession Church very soon after the war but he was not that welcome. Some wished to leave as soon as they heard he was coming. Some even insulted him in public. But he continued to help and do important strategic things for the Confession Church. He had a hand in the drafting of the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, the Darmstadt Statement, and the Berlin Confession of Guilt over crimes against Jews. Once again deeds speak louder than words – Theology very much in Action.

Conclusion - Lessons for Hong Kong

1. Importance of discernment / awareness / readiness

Are we in critical times? Future? Strategic views? - every danger that the Church in Hong Kong would become complacent and fail to adequately prepare for the future. Knowing the times is important. We need to strengthen our discernment / awareness / readiness /unity /leadership.
Barth was able to prepare important theological confession in no time. This reflected his competence in the knowledge of scripture. Indeed he knew what he believed and why he believed. This is an example for all of us.

2. To participate in politics? This is definite. Barth had set an example.

3. How to establish team work and consensus with fellow believers and how to manage conflict in the Church and even when insulted? I think Barth had set examples for us also.

Chapter 4 - Political Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hong Kong (15) (34-39)

The testimony of Bonhoeffer continues to touch many people. His life is amazing and has attracted numerous attempts to study his life, his writings and to determine how they could serve as a reference to the situations elsewhere. In my search of Bonhoeffer, one phrase came up repeatedly, namely ‘A Spoke in the Wheel”.

This is a phrase used to describe his life, used as a title for one of his biography (40). It was used to sum up his Political Theology (41). It was also used as a theme for a Bonhoeffer Conference of 2012 (42). In fact, it was one of his most quoted saying (43).

A Spoke in the Wheel

What is the meaning of this idiom?

In German - “dem Rad in die Speichen fallen”
In English - “to put a spoke in the wheel” or “to seize the wheel”

(i.e. To bring a wheel to a standstill by seizing its spoke)

- “Fall with the spokes” (Andreas Pangritz) (44)

(i.e. Throwing oneself into the spoke of the wheel to stop it)

The phrase has been in use since the late 16th century. Spoke is probably a mistranslation of Dutch ‘spaak’ meaning ‘bar’.

**Wheel** = meaning the state machine of Nazi Germany

**Spoke** = initially meaning the resistance in general, and eventually the resistance movement which Bonhoeffer decided to participate

It was a call for the German Church to engage the Nazi State

**Background** - there had been very rapid chain of events: Hitler came to power (30/1/1933), Reichstag burned and suppression of the left / communists, and emergency decree (Feb), abolition of civil rights for Jewish citizens, Aryan paragraph (April) starting with the civil service and rapidly extended to other areas including the church (Sept) ….
Bonhoeffer was troubled by the willingness of mainstream Protestant Christian leaders to consider adopting the Aryan Paragraph. In March 1933, Bonhoeffer published an essay - The Church and the Jewish Question - (Essay published in ‘No rusty swords; letters, lectures and notes, 1928-1936’), just before the Parliament could pass the Aryan Paragraph, but to no avail. He did not give up but chose to present his essay to a meeting of pastors in April.

Message / Proposal

He put forward “three possible ways in which the church can act towards the state.”

1. To question the state regarding its actions and their legitimacy - to help the state be the state as God has ordained.

2. To aid the victims of state action. The church “has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community.” (Everyone knew that he was talking about the Jews).

3. If necessary, to put a spoke in the wheel itself. ie At some point the church must directly take action against the state to stop it from perpetrating evil. This, he said, is permitted only when the church sees its very existence threatened by the state, and when the state ceases to be the state as defined by God. Bonhoeffer added that this condition exists if the state forces the “exclusion of baptized Jews from our Christian congregations or in the prohibition of our mission to the Jews.”

Fundamental Issue = Not just about the Jewish Christians / Jews but this was the proof whether the Church is still the Church. A true church cannot be defined by racial identity and blood.

Result
Many of the gathered clergy left, before it was finished, convinced they he advocated sedition. Bonhoeffer was discouraged and accepted an invitation to pastor a church in London.

Bonhoeffer did all three actions himself, a very courageous man. Preaching, teaching, and secretly helping Jews escape. Later in his life, the necessity of corporate decision by church council as highlighted above would become unimportant to him, changing from a pacifist standpoint to taking a more active stance against tyranny.

Immediate Test / Trial

As it happens so often in life, big test / trial would come soon after a big statement was made, to test how far his words were kept. His twin sister Sabine married Gerhard Leibholz, a Jew and a Christian brother. His father died on 11 April 1933 and Bonhoeffer was invited to preach in the funeral of a Jew who was not a member of the Church. Bonhoeffer was in a dilemma for he with concern about the repercussion. He consulted the district superintendent and eventually turned down the request.

He would soon deeply regret and tormented by his action. He wrote a few months later to Gerhard and Sabine to apologize, asking them to forgive his weakness. The Leibholz family escaped for Switzerland /England Sept 1940.

Discernment

Poem by Niemoller (1946) (many versions in circulation)

First they came for the Communists. And I did not speak out Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists. And I did not speak out Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists. And I did not speak out Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews. And I did not speak out Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me. And there was no one left To speak out for me

This poem is frequently cited. It is a very good example to demonstrate the problem about the lack of discernment. It led to false security and complacency. If people knew Hitler and the Nazi ideology earlier and better, they would not be surprised by the chain of events and the disastrous outcome. However, even if they chose to react properly, it could be too little too late because of the rapid changes. History could be re-written if the changes were anticipated and if preparation was possible. It is prudent to know our own nation / political leaders /political system and what they stand for, as well as ourselves and the state of our Church, especially in critical times. Are we in critical times?

Was it possible to know Hitler / Nazi system earlier and better, and even before he came to power? According to Newell, Hitler believed that Nietzsche (1844-1900) prophesied his coming in his book “The Will to Power” in which Nietzsche wrote of the coming of a race of rulers “a particularly strong kind of man, most highly gifted in intellect and will.” Hitler believed that the Aryan race was this “race of rulers”. Therefore as soon as he came to power in late Jan 1933, he presented the Aryan Paragraph to take effect on April 7. It stipulated that all government workers must be of the Aryan stock. This requirement was then extended to other groups, and to the Church in September.

Bonhoeffer was 27 when Hitler came to power in 1933. He was ordained in 1931 and was therefore a young minister. Despite his young age, he was well ahead of his peers as far as discernment is concerned. Two days after Hitler came to power, he gave a speech on national radio warning people the need to distinguish between a leader (Fuhrer) and a misleader (Verfuhrer) who became an idol for the people. But midway through his speech, the broadcast
was cut off. He followed up his effort with the publication of his Essay –“The Church and the Jewish Question” – in March, before the Reichstag could pass its Aryan Paragraph. Bonhoeffer realized it was wrong to treat the Jews like that, and the fundamental issue was whether the Church was still the Church or not. However, his message was rejected. He had been very courageous to speak up and indeed it has always been dangerous since ancient time to be a prophet who told the hard truth.

Important Decisions Made by Bonhoeffer

According to Ramey, at the time of his death, Bonhoeffer was not seen as a great contributor to Christian thought and theology. However, it seems that he is more well-known after his death. Somehow his name is heard at regular intervals all the times. This is to prove that he has left behind a legacy because of his testimony / teachings. So much has been written about him. What more to say? I feel that a chapter on Bonhoeffer in this essay is not complete unless a few of his important decisions he made is reviewed.

In a way, men are known by the decisions they made. Great men made big decisions especially in critical times. Their decisions / acts speak louder than words. Likewise, theology in action speaks louder than theology in words. Actually the life of an individual can be summed up by one single decision he made, as shown in the book of Kings / Chronicles, where the account of each king began with the one decision he made in his life, namely whether he chose to follow the Lord or Baal. That one decision really would sum up everything he did in his life. For Bonhoeffer, he made many important and difficult decisions in his short life. Time and space allowed me to comment on just one.

1939 was an eventful year for Bonhoeffer and Germany. He was age 33. The WWII would begin in a few months. In Jan, all males in his age cohort had been ordered to register with the military. His friend Reinhold Niebuhr engineered an invitation for him to visit USA, to escape from persecution and impending draft. He left Germany on 2/6 and returned home on 8/7, after only 26 days, on the last scheduled steamer to cross the Atlantic. He was offered a job in the bible college and he could stay if he liked. However, he soon realized it was a mistake to come to USA. To quote his own words – “I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people…."

According to Wolfe (37), God spoke to him. Pangritz reported that he received a ‘concrete commandment’ from God (44). It was recorded in his diary of 26/6/1939, he read 2 Timothy 4:21 – ""
Do your best to come before winter

'... I In summary, he received a calling to go home, to suffer. He might or might not know he
would become a martyr. I believe his death provided a credibility words cannot give so much so
that his example and teachings were able to touch people. It is significant that his statue was
erected among the 20 Century Martyrs at Westminster Abbey, London.

Indeed persecution awaited him on his return. He was forbid to speak in public in 1940, forbid to
print or publish in 1941. He was already denounced as a pacifist and enemy of the state by
Bishop Heckel in 1935 and banned from teaching in theology faculty, and then banned from
Berlin in 1938. He joined Abwehr in 1941 but was arrested on 5/4/1943 and imprisoned until he
died on 9/4/1945.

He was offered an opportunity to escape by one of the guards Corporal Knobloch but he
decided for fearing the retribution on his family especially those who were in prison. Once
again, he cared more about others. The story was very sad because he was engaged three
months before his arrest and he could have escaped to a safe haven with her if he chose to do
so. His fiancée survived the war and left for USA.

While he chose not to escape himself, he helped Jews escape from Germany. One famous
example quoted was a project ‘Operation 7’ conducted when he was serving Abwehr. He
disguised a group of Jews as special agents of the Abwehr on assignment in Switzerland. He
managed to secure a letter from the President of the Federation of Swiss Churches to make this
escape possible.

Conclusion / Reflections on Bonhoeffer - His Life and Theology

a. The importance of discernment / awareness was demonstrated once again.

b. Role of a prophet - to point out errors to the Church and the State, despite risk and
opposition.

c. Confession of faith in difficult times, to help Christians and the public alike
d. Focus on preaching / discipleship earnestly in all seasons, despite difficulties and restraints, especially when prohibited. His method of training young pastors is noted.

e. Explore peaceful resistance if possible (Bonhoeffer considered visiting India / Gandhi, but Reinhold Niebuhr advised Nazi Germany was no place to attempt nonviolent resistance, and that Gandhi was successful because of British political liberalism) (45).

f. Need for leaders / leadership / unity.

Indeed, to echo the message of a book published recently in Hong Kong (仄徑舛途 - A Winding Path: the Church and the Power), it is prudent to learn from the experience of others, especially from those in similar circumstances to ours.

**Chapter 5 – The Political Theology of Hans Iwand and Hong Kong** (46)

Hans Iwand (1899-1960) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) had much in common. Both were natives of Silesia, a province taken over by Poland after WWII. They had Jewish link in their families. Bonhoeffer’s twin sister married a Jew, and Iwand’s wife had Jewish blood. They were contemporary and their “track records” very similar. Because of the constraint of time and space, just a brief study of the political theology of Iwand will be made, and by a brief review of the Darmstadt Statement.

**Important Milestones of Iwand**

1924 - Doctorate

1927 – Habilitation
1927-34 – Asso Professor at U of Konigsberg

1934 – Professor of New Testament at U of Riga of Latvia

1935 (March) – Forced out of teaching post with his licence to teach withdrawn (Venia Legend) because of his support to the Confession Church

1935-37 – Headed illegal seminaries in East Prussia

1936 – Gag order was imposed on him

1937 (Dec) – Arrested and released on Christmas Eve

1938 – Open illegal seminary in Dortmund, and jailed for four months

1938 - Look after a parish in Dortmund until end of war

After WWII – Professor of Systematic Theology at U of Gottingen

1952 - Professor at U of Bonn until retirement

Council member of the German Evangelical Church
Principle author of the Darmstadt Statement of 1948

Found the “Home of Helping Hands” to help refugees from former Eastern Europe

Cofounder of the Christian Peace Conference of 1958

Helping Jews throughout the years, together with his wife who died in 1950

The Darmstadt Statement (1948)

According to Hockenos who wrote “A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past”, there were two statements from Darmstadt and reproduced in Appendix 6 and 7 of the book (47).

Darmstadt, August 1947 – Statement by the Council of Brethen of the Evangelical Church of Germany concerning the political course of our people. This was a brief statement and crimes against Jews were not mentioned.

Darmstadt, April 1948 – Message Concerning the Jewish Question, Council of Brethren of the Evangelical Church.

Many references cited Darmstadt Statement of 1947 was therefore not exactly correct. It should be 1948 (issued on 8/4/1948). Hans Iwand was the principle author of the 2nd statement from Darmstadt and Karl Barth was also involved. Therefore this should reflect the political theology of Iwand.
The 1948 Statement was much deeper and thorough than the official 1950 Statement from the Church Synod. It contained three sections. The underlying spirit of remorse and repentance can be easily felt. Salient details are listed below:-

Section I

1. In obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ the council of brethren has come together to study what the Holy Scripture says about the burning question of Judaism and the Christian Church, and we feel that we can no longer remain silent about this question, which lies on our heart like a stone.

2. .. after all that we allowed to happen in silence, we have no authority to speak now.

3. We have not forgotten that a number of pastors and churches did speak out, and suffered for doing so; we thank God for it, and we thank them.

4. In this perilous situation.. God’s Word speaks to us and helps us to find the right attitude to the Jews.

Section II

1. That since the Son of God was born a Jew, the election and destiny of Israel found its fulfillment in Him.

2. We all share the quilt for the crucifixion of Christ. Therefore it is not permissible for the Church to brand the Jews as solely responsible for the crucifixion.
3. It is not permissible for the Church to separate Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians. At the same time, the Church is waiting for the erring Children of Israel to resume the place reserved for them by God.

4. The fate of Jews is a silent sermon, reminding us that God will not allow Himself to be mocked. It is a warning to us and an admonition to the Jews to be converted to Him, who is the sole hope of salvation.

5. It is not permissible for the Church to regard the Jewish question as a racial or national problem.

6. It was a disastrous mistake for the Churches of our time adopted the secular attitude of mere humanity, emancipation and anti-semitism towards the Jewish question.

7. This is what the Word of God teaches us, so that we recognize with shame and grief what a great wrong we have done to Israel, and how deep our guilt is. As a Church we have failed to be the witness of salvation to Israel. Now we have to face the judgements of God which are coming upon us one after the other, so that we may bow beneath the mighty hand of God in sincere repentance, both as a Church and as a nation.

Section III

1. We therefore appeal to our churches and pastors, as members of God’s people, to be aware of their special relationship with Israel.

2. Refrain from all forms of anti-semitism. Manifest the testimony of your faith and the signs of your love towards Israel with special care and great zeal.

3. We will not grow weary in our intercession for Israel.
In summary, I find the message, the theology of Hans Iwand, very much evangelical.

**Summary – The Callings of Barth / Bonhoeffer / Iwand**

While all three were theologians but each seemed to have a different calling.

1. Barth was the senior and he lived to a good age of 82. He was given time to develop and write his theology. He is regarded as one of the foremost theologian of this century. He survived the war and lived in the relatively peaceful Switzerland. Perhaps his mission and calling is to be a theologian and he was given the opportunity to do a good job.

2. For Bonhoeffer, his calling was to be a prophet and as a martyr. His death was not a failure, but in many senses it was a victory. His message / testimony continued to touch the life of people worldwide. This was his calling. He returned to Germany from USA in 1939, to suffer with his fellow brethren and to die for his faith. One thing he constantly did, namely, to teach / train young pastors despite all the persecutions. This commitment must be among his top priority.

3. Iwand survived the war so that he could live to help rebuild the nation from the ashes of WWII. He led the drafting of the Darmstadt Statement, ie the reconciliation with the Jews. This was his calling. Like Bonhoeffer, training young pastors despite all sorts of persecution was his priority. The charge given by Paul to Timothy came to mind – to preach the gospel in all seasons.

One may ask why each of them have a different callings? Why Bonhoeffer should die? Why can’t he be given a chance to get married as he got a fiancée waiting? Etc. Etc. I think this is all a question of the Sovereignty of God. They were faithful to their callings.
Final Conclusion of the Essay

Pastor Kwok advised in his feature article on Political Theology of Barth and Hong Kong, in the Christian Times of 2/11/2014, that there are four things the Church in Hong Kong should do for the government. Namely:-

i. To pray for the government

ii. To set an example for the society. How we can respect / accept / love each other despite difference in opinion and political platform.

iii. To speak up on important issues, to provide feedbacks and to point out errors.

iv. To take appropriate political action / resistance if required.

To this perhaps I would like to add while the Church should strive to support the government accordingly, she should be vigilant and not to forget to do things for herself as described in the paragraphs above. Both aspects are two sides of the same coin. The teachings and examples of the Confession Church and the testimony of Barth / Bonhoeffer / Iwand are precious to us in Hong Kong.

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