

Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Barth's 1933 Advent Sermon as Christian Response to National Socialism

When Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, he was determined to impose Nazi ideas on every social and political institution in the country. Nazi thinking was to be the foundation and governing principle of every group in the Reich. Everyone was expected to conform to the Nazi view of the world. This massive effort to stamp out opposition, individuality and independent thinking was not only publicized in the press and on the radio, but had the full force of the law behind it. Every corner of Germany was to be painted in Nazi colors. There were to be no exceptions to this total conformity and everyone from small children to farmers in distant parts of the Reich were to fall into line without question. Total Nazification was the new rule, with police and prison used to enforce the idea.

Among the institutions that Hitler expected to conform to Nazism were the various churches in Germany. While the Catholic Church has its own history to evaluate in regard to Hitler, the Protestant Churches have their history to deal with as well. As an institution that enjoyed government oversight and even financial support from previous governments, the Protestant Church in Germany was simply expected to follow the Fuehrer's lead. Not all reacted passively to the new situation in Germany. Indeed, historians call the story of the Protestant Churches in Germany the "Church Struggle," because there was literally a struggle or battle in every parish over control of the congregation and the message from the pulpit.

Roughly speaking, the Church Struggle had two major players: the Confessing Christians and the German Christians. "German Christians" was the name of a particular pro-Nazi group who thought the Christian faith could be outfitted in Nazi clothing.

According to them, Jesus was not Jewish, Hitler was a part of God's revelation in history, and Germans were a special people called by God for greatness after the horrible defeat of 1918.¹ For these Germans, the Old Testament was too Jewish to have real authority and even many parts of the New Testament had to be rewritten in Nazi language. Luther, the great German religious reformer, was now the hero of the day and a forerunner of Hitler whose task it now was to complete what Luther had started. For this group of Christians, the Jews were the eternal betrayers of Christians. What they had once done to Jesus, they would forever do to Christians. The theology of the German Christians was filled with extreme nationalism, racism, hero worship and hatred. But underlying it all was the determination that the church in Germany do its part in building Hitler's kingdom on earth, a kingdom that was to last a thousand years.

Standing in the way of the German Christians and their pro-Nazi program for the churches was a group of opposition pastors and laity who called themselves the Confessing Church because they were determined to hold fast to the historical confessions of faith in the reformed tradition. They were particularly interested in the confession of Christ as the only Lord of the Church (hence no room for Hitler), and in the received canon of scripture, both the Old and New Testament as the divinely inspired Word of God.

This brief background is needed if we are to understand an aspect of the Third Reich that has been largely overlooked in the United States, and to a large extent in Germany as well. Unlike the Catholic Church, whose worship centers in the mass, the heart of protestant worship is the reading of scripture followed by the sermon. Preaching from scripture rather than on a topic or event is understood as the proclamation of the Word. For the congregation, the sermon is never a speech or a political statement. It is rather an event like

Pentecost whose center and force is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the preacher and through him on the congregation.

While much of the Church Struggle can be told in traditional historical narrative (meetings, statements, actions of individuals, etc) I believe the real story lies in the sermons that preachers preached in Hitler's shadow. These speech events either challenged or failed to challenge the rhetorical conformity of the German Christians and the massive propaganda raining down on Germans every day of the week.

If the Nazis had their own arsenal of words and expressions, so too did the Christian faith. If the Nazis were able to use language for their ends, the Christians in Germany had their own vocabulary as well. Hitler had established the Third "Reich," but for Christians Jesus had established God's "Reich." Between 1933 and 1945 these two empires clashed. While many of us have heard the major themes of Nazi language, we are far less familiar with the use of language by Confessing pastors.

This paper will examine one example of Christian rhetoric in opposition to Nazi rhetoric as it occurred early in the history of the Third Reich .

The preacher, Karl Barth, was a young professor of theology from Switzerland whose recent book on Paul's letter to the Romans had made him famous enough to be in demand as a lecturer and writer on theological topics. He was also gaining fame as a preacher whose sermons were worth hearing. Wherever he preached in Germany, the pews would fill. Afterwards, his sermons would be quickly published and widely distributed. What Barth said, either in book or sermon, was valued highly by Christians and overheard by Nazis.

Barth's sermon on December 10, 1933 at the University Church in Bonn continues

to interest us because of the way Barth used Christian language to oppose Nazi language. The sermon text was Romans 15: 5-13, and the sermon centered on the Christian understanding of Jews. The so-called Jewish question was certainly the most important and urgent question of the day because Hitler had already begun persecuting German Jews through a series of laws enacted by the puppet parliament in Berlin. Any detailed chronology of the Shoah reveals not only the progressively more intense anti-Jewish rhetoric but also the growing anti-Jewish measures enacted by the new government. In April, 1933 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his essay on "The Church and the Jewish Question." On May 10 of that year there was a public book burning in Berlin of works by Jewish writers and others whom the Nazis considered dangerous. In the following September the Prussian General Synod passed a law that expanded the ban on Jews from the Civil Service to include pastors and church administrators.² This was the infamous "Jewish paragraph" that touched the church directly because Jewish Christians were suddenly second-class members of congregations. In order to counter this act of discrimination by the Nazis, the Pastors Emergency League was founded.³

Certainly these events were known to all who gathered in Bonn in December 1933 to hear Barth preach. This professor had already "become something of a star, attracting large numbers of students, even from overseas..."⁴ And during Barth's first year in Bonn, he offered a seminar on preaching.⁵ These lectures give vital insight into Barth's theory of preaching and they help clarify Barth's use of the Romans text as well. For anyone wishing to understand the Church Struggle, Barth's lectures and sermons illustrate the kind of preaching Barth thought essential for opposing Nazism taking over of the Church.

In his lectures, Barth stressed time and again that preaching must be grounded in the Bible and not in historical events or political happenings. He confessed that when the Titanic sank, he had succumbed to the temptation to preach a "Titanic sermon" and in 1914, he had preached sermons against the war "until a woman in the congregation asked [him] to please talk about something other than this horrible war."⁶ He learned that preaching never should get so far off base that a member of the congregation had to remind the preacher what authentic preaching was.⁷ Barth insisted that the congregation did not need the preacher to inform them about the problems of the day, because they "know life very well and do not need directions from the pastor."⁸

Barth rejected emphatically any kind of preaching other than exegetical. Indeed, he often referred to the "lordship of the text"⁹ and insisted that the "text is our master and not the other way around."¹⁰ By starting with the text, the preacher allowed God the freedom to make the text relevant to the congregation's life without interference from the preacher. Exegetical preaching, as opposed to thematic preaching and topical preaching based on current events, allowed the Biblical text to speak as the authentic Word of God rather than the world's word.

While Barth viewed thematic sermons as evidence that the Nazi Christians had betrayed Christian revelation, he was convinced that God would address contemporary themes through the text, not in spite of it.¹¹ Toward the end of his lectures, Barth warned his students that every biblical text had a contemporary word to say to the congregation, and that the preacher must have the courage to let that Word be spoken. This "obedience to the text" was for Barth the "civil courage" demanded of the preacher in dangerous times.¹² No matter how dangerous life may become or how perilous

persecution may be, the preacher must allow the biblical text to address the moment in the way that the text demands to speak. So it is not surprising that Barth sent a copy of the sermon we will consider to Adolf Hitler.¹³

Not only did Barth send the sermon to Hitler, he published it in the new journal "Theological Existence Today!" In an essay acquainting his readers with the background of the sermon, Barth assured his audience that he had not gone out of his way to preach on the Jewishness of Christ, but rather the assigned text for that Sunday had lead him to the subject.¹⁴ In this essay, Barth underscored the importance of such textual sermons as opposed to thematic sermons. In these comments Barth is simply underscoring for his readers what he had emphasized to his students; the text and not the preacher sets the sermon's agenda.

Barth's sermon ¹⁵ falls into three sections, each dealing with the concept of receiving those who are different. This ability to receive those who are not like us is made possible in the very nature of the church as opposed to the state or society. Certainly the Germans in Hitler's Reich were not hearing a lot about receiving those who were not like themselves. Barth begins his sermon by reminding the congregation that the nature of the church is not at all like the Third Reich. In Hitler's Reich blood and Nazi ideology may be key, but these have no value in the Christian community, for the Church is held together by the "the Word of God." ¹⁶ At the sermon's outset Barth challenges the Nazi concept of "blood," "race," and "national identity." These were Nazi terms that would have resounded like thunder claps in the sanctuary. Here Barth is intentionally making use of Hitler's words to bring

them under God's judgment. He tells his congregants that the Church is not a community of people held together by common blood, race or national identity as the German Christians are preaching but rather the Church is the community of faith held together by God, and thus membership in this community transcends nation, race, or heritage.

Having brought into question the basic sources of Nazi identification, Barth turns on its head the prideful image of the Nazi as a powerful figure by saying that to God we are only "beggars on the street" or "orphans;" not the elite of Nazi propaganda. This identification of Christians in Nazi Germany with the outcasts of society is a stark contrast to Nazi boasting of the elite nature of their "race" and "blood."

In this sermon on the reception of the stranger, the first example then is Christ receiving or taking in these German "street beggars" or "homeless orphans," who have no particular claim or worth or dignity. It is pure grace – not merit. While the pro-Nazi Christians were trying to make Christ acceptable to the Nazis as a non-Jew, Barth tells his listeners that the real dilemma is that Germans do not merit God's attention, much less God's love. It is not a question of Christ being good enough for the Nazis but just the opposite; will God accept Christians in Germany? The focus shifts from the Jew as stranger in Germany to the Germans as strangers before God. No longer superior merit (as Nazis supposed), but grace becomes the key that opens the doors of the Kingdom or Reich of God.

Now Barth turns up the heat and talks directly about the "Jewish question" in Hitler's Third Reich. This Christ who receives the German orphan "belongs to the people

of Israel,¹⁷ and not to Germans. Using the exact words found in Nazi racial teachings about "blood" and "*Volk*" (people), Barth turns such terms inside out: "The blood of the Jewish people was in his veins, the blood of God's Son. He took on the nature of this people when he took on humanity."¹⁸ Barth is telling the Germans that the Blood of Christ is 100% Jewish. For Germans in 1933, hearing hateful speech over the radio and reading about the supposed Jewish "crimes" in their daily newspapers, Barth's identifying Jesus with Jewish "blood" and "race" leaves no uncertainty in the minds of his congregants about their Christian responsibility toward Jews in Nazi Germany. The Messiah was as much a Jew as any contemporary Jew on the streets of Bonn or Berlin. Surely the congregation knew of efforts by "German Christian" theologians to prove that Jesus was not a Jew at all.¹⁹ Barth's frontal attack on such absurdity leaves no doubt that Christians in Germany have to come to terms with Jesus the Jew as well as Jesus the Messiah (Christ).

Although Barth here directs his remarks to the Jewishness of the historical Jesus, he knows that the "Jewish question" in Germany at the time has to do with the deteriorating situation of Jews in Germany. Nazis are attacking Jews based on their current status within the larger community, and many Christians are eager to adopt the ancient teaching that God has rejected Israel in favor of the Church. Because Barth is eager to explore the current relationship of Israel to God, he turns next to a discussion of Israel's refusal to live up to God's Torah. Here Barth treads on thin ice, for he is raising an ancient tenet of anti-Jewish thought. For centuries Christians have practiced the theology of replacement, which means that God has rejected Israel for its inability to live up to the covenant and has replaced the original chosen people with the Christian Church.

For Barth, the point is that God remains faithful to those whom He loves even when we do not remain faithful to Him. Barth emphasizes the unique relationship that God has with Israel; a relationship that continues into 1933 and in Nazi Germany. God's care for Israel is unique and God's covenant is with "this and only this" people, "a stubborn and evil people."²⁰ While it is admittedly disturbing to read Barth's reference to Jews as an "evil" people knowing how agreeable such rhetoric was to the Nazis, one must remember that Barth's point was that God had elected this people, regardless of their behavior, and this selection demonstrated the radical nature of grace in God's election of humanity, including Christians.

The thoughts expressed should not be regarded as anti-Jewish for in the next breath Barth declares that "Jesus Christ is a *Jew*" and this means "a closed door" for "us, who are not Israel" (emphasis in the original).²¹ So God's reception of the Jews becomes welcome news to all. The presence of the Jews in Germany is a living reminder that God can love even the non-Jews. Christians need Jewish presence as a living sermon of God's non-changing love for Jew and Gentile alike.

The most significant part of the sermon deals with God's acceptance of Israel at that moment where most anti-Semitic Christians find God's rejection of Israel -at the cross. Barth tells his congregation that Israel's treatment of the Redeemer was no different from the way every people throughout history would have treated Christ under the same circumstances. Barth assures his listeners that the prayer of Christ on Golgotha ("Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing") was said expressly for Israel.²²

Hence, reasons Barth, "God sees us as Jews in conflict with the true God and

as pagans at peace with false gods, but he also sees us both united as “children of the Living God.”²³

Here is the final aspect of receiving that Barth finds in his text from Romans 15. God in Christ has received us because God has received Israel and now because of the cross, Christians must receive the Jews. It is at the foot of the cross that Jew and Gentile are united both in sin and in the forgiveness of sin. The cross, rather than separating Jew and Christian, unifies them. The thrust of the sermon is God's unmerited election of both Jew and Christian in Christ through God's great mercy rather than through human achievement. So Paul's command to "welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you " (New Revised Standard Version) is a command for Christians to welcome the Jew as beloved neighbor in Christ and that "from this command there is no escape." ²⁴

Barth was absolutely convinced that God would address the times through preaching the biblical text without compromise. For the church to look outside the received scriptures for God's revelation, or for the church to speak from any context other than the Bible would be to fall into the same heresy as the Nazi Christians. Barth's sermon illustrates the ability of the textual sermon in Nazi Germany to address the situation facing Christians in the Third Reich. Barth's sermon that day in Bonn would set the tone for the preaching of the Confession Church pastors for the duration of the Third Reich. Many of these preachers would be arrested, killed or simply sent to the front, but the sermon remained the single most public event in the Third Reich where even a hint of opposition could be heard on a regular basis.

Yet one cannot read these documents today without being reminded of the Shoah, the extermination camps, and of the devastating effects of the Second World War that Germany started. Questions arise as one reads Barth's Bonn sermon as well as other sermons from the period. Was preaching alone enough of a response to evil? What else might the Confessing Church have done? Could the sermon with its subtle and sometimes not so subtle references to the contemporary scene rouse the Christian community to sacrifice itself for the rejected and persecuted? The evidence of Christians standing by or directly participating in war crimes argues that in times of crisis Christians are to be more than hearers of the word, to cite Paul. Today we have to wonder, too, at Barth's use of negative imagery surrounding the Jews in Germany. Was such language, even in a Christian context, too ironic to be helpful?

Of course these reflections come long after Barth preached in Bonn. We who know how the holocaust unfolded in the years to come must reflect on Barth's sermon and on those of other Confessing pastors as warnings for us as we turn from critiquing the past to confronting the present. We can take heart at their courage and learn from their failings.

Notes

- ¹ Geoffrey B. Kelly, F. Burton Nelson, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995) 544-545.
- ² J. S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1938* (Vancouver, Regent College Publishing, 1977) 48.
- ³ Conway, 49.
- ⁴ Clifford Green, ed., *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 19.
- ⁵ Karl Barth, *Homiletics* Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels, (Louisville, Westminster/ John Knox, 1991) 7.
- ⁶ Karl Barth, *Homiletik: Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt* (Zurich, Theologischer Verlag, 1970) 60.
- ⁷ Barth, *Homiletik*, 98.
- ⁸ Barth, *Homiletik*, 98.
- ⁹ Barth, *Homiletik*, 107.
- ¹⁰ Barth, *Homiletik*, 75.
- ¹¹ Karl Barth, *Predigten 1921-1935* Holger Finze, ed. (Zurich, Theologischer Verlag, 1998) 296.
- ¹² Barth, *Homiletik*, 57.
- ¹³ Eberhard Busch, *Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes: Karl Barth und die Juden 1933-1945* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1996) 165.
- ¹⁴ Karl Barth, "Die Kriche Jesu Christi" *Theologische Existenz heute!*, Vol 5 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1933) 3.

¹⁵ An English translation of the sermon is available at the Karl Barth - Archives (http://pages.unibas.ch/karlbarth/dok_letter1.html#top)

¹⁶ Barth, *Predigten*, 297-298.

¹⁷ Barth, *Predigten*, 299.

¹⁸ Barth, *Predigten*, 299.

¹⁹ Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 155-157.

²⁰ Barth, *Predigten*, 299.

²¹ Barth, *Predigten*, 300.

²² Barth, *Predigten*, 302.

²³ Barth, *Predigten*, 304.

²⁴ Barth, *Predigten*, 302.