

It's A Long Way From Barmen To Manhattan

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The Road To Barmen

Our story begins in Germany. In January of 1933 Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. In February of 1933 the Reichstag (German Parliament Building) was destroyed by fire. A local Communist and arsonist named Marinus van der Lubbe set the blaze, aided by plain clothes SS men who entered the Reichstag basement via a tunnel between the Chancellory and the Reichstag and used gasoline to feed the blaze. The Nazis blamed the fire on the Communists and used the event to suspend the Constitution of the Weimar Republic (see "Decree of the President of the Reich for the Protection of the People and the State," issued 28 February, 1933). Adolf Hitler became "Führer", his word became law, and the Nazis seized total control of Germany.

Most people, particularly Christians, are unaware that in addition to burning down his own Parliament Building in order to garner power, Hitler and the Nazi regime also engaged in open warfare against the Church in Germany. Hitler had scarcely risen to power when he began his persecution of the Church. According to papers from the Nuremberg War Crimes Archives, *"the destruction of Christianity was explicitly recognized as a purpose of the National Socialist movement"*. A movement of "German Christians" sympathetic to Nazi goals of racial purity (read "anti-semitism") was launched to co-opt the German Evangelical (Lutheran) Church. Churches were harassed. Pastors were intimidated. Government officials rigged church elections for a newly created "Reich Bishop" who would represent the Nazi government and bring the Church, its pastors and its teaching in line with Nazi doctrine. In response and opposition to the "German Christian Movement" Evangelical Churches throughout Germany formed the "Confessing Church" movement. In May of 1934 they convened the Confessional Synod of the Evangelical Church of Germany in the city of Barmen. The result was The Barmen Declaration, a statement of evangelical beliefs and convictions written to specifically refute "German Christian" teachings as well as to clearly articulate historic reformed doctrine on critical points.

The Barmen Declaration came at a price. Its authors and signers (who included Karl Barth, Martin Niemöller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and many others) paid a high personal price for their faith and defiance. Churches were closed. Pastors were fired or forced to flee their churches, and many were sent to concentration camps. Beginning with a personal confrontation with Adolf Hitler in 1933, Martin Niemöller was persecuted for several years, eventually arrested, tried and acquitted, only to be re-arrested as he left the courtroom and sent off to a concentration camp as *"the personal prisoner of the Führer"*. Barth would spend the war in Switzerland. But Bonhoeffer worked to smuggle Jews out of Germany and would be eventually hanged at Flossenburg Concentration Camp on April 9, 1945, only days before its liberation. Men who are "spiritual bronze walls" tend to suffer the wrath of fools and demons in an age of moral mud huts. You can read the text of the Barmen Declaration for yourself at: <http://www.criovoice.org/creedbarmen.html>

Enter The Manhattan Declaration

Back in November of 2009 when it was released, ***The Manhattan Declaration*** created a certain amount of "buzz" among some believers. Chuck Colson, one of its principle architects, described it as *"one of the most important documents produced by the American church, at least in my lifetime."* While I appreciate the gravitas Colson wanted to assign to the Declaration, I have to admit that the American Church isn't renowned for either gravitas or for publishing historically significant documents. This 4000 word Declaration (over twice the size of the Barmen Declaration) labors to make three points: 1) the sanctity of life; 2) the sanctity of marriage; and 3) the importance of religious freedom. I agree whole heartedly with all three, but I don't plan on signing the Declaration.

So, why not sign The Manhattan Declaration? Well, you should sign it if you feel so led. But here are my thoughts, for what they're worth. **First**, I agree with the three primary tenets of the Declaration and have labored diligently to uphold them over my 37 year Christian experience. But as presented in this Declaration

they represent the product of a growing “Christian nominalism”. Are these three points (life, marriage and freedom) the only three culturally relevant issues we can come to agreement concerning? Organized Christianity has become so fragmented, philosophically, theologically and spiritually, that our public unity has come to be based upon the least common denominators we can find to hold in common. As important as these three issues may be, they are not enough . . . woefully not. On a theological level, The Manhattan Declaration accomplished less with 4,000 words than The Barmen Declaration achieved with only 1,700. Nominalism isn’t a function of the number of words you use, but of the significance - or lack of significance - of the words you use.

Second, the Declaration is based upon a belief that, in addition to The Great Commission to make disciples, Christians have been given a “Cultural Commission” (which Colson develops more extensively in his book “The Faith”) to bring our culture into some form of submission to the demands of the gospel and the Scriptures. I disagree. I do not see a “Cultural Commission” in Scripture. What I see are “cultural consequences” of the gospel. Wherever Christianity is on the ascendency it tends to have a transforming impact upon the culture of which it is a part, simply because transformed people have an irresistible urge to transform the environment around them in the direction of their own personal transformation. England in the 100 year period between 1750 and 1850 is an example of this as the profound ripple effects of the Evangelical Awakening rippled their way through English society. Another example would be the American frontier and South east which was transformed into “the Bible Belt” by the impact of the 2nd Great Awakening between 1795 and 1812. But when and where Christianity goes into prolonged decline (as in Post WW2 Europe and North America) the opposite effect takes place. Cultures tend to retreat into pre-Christian paganism, manifesting in such things as the loss of the sanctity of life, soaring sexual promiscuity, abandonment of traditional marriage and, eventually, the loss of religious freedoms.

Third, like some other reviewers I have read such as Andrew Jones (aka TallSkinnyKiwi), I do not trust the political agenda which this Declaration could be used to promote. We have become a highly politicized and agendized society. We have allowed ourselves to be polarized and categorized into simplistic labels such as “conservative” or “progressive” or “libertarian” or to be given political labels such as “republican” or “democrat”. I choose to reject these attempts to label and define me. Instead, I choose to be defined by the calling of the God Who created and redeemed me: I am a Christian, a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, a worshiper of the Most High God. I do not want my agreement with these three tenets to be used to further ANY political agenda - especially one outside of my control. Been there. Done that. Won’t do it again.

Finally, there is no price to be paid for signing this declaration. The signers of The Barmen Declaration did so at great personal risk - risk which became reality in the years which followed. They knew (or suspected) this would be the case when they did it. In the year he had been in office prior to the Declaration, Hitler and his ilk had made it abundantly clear that they intended to persecute and destroy the Church in Germany - regarding it as a significant obstacle to their goals of total conquest and absolute power. The Barmen Declaration was a public “shot across the bow” of the Nazi juggernaut, a shot which did not go unnoticed or unanswered. The situation is somewhat different today. The signers of The Manhattan Declaration will be faced with . . . nothing in particular. Our postmodern culture doesn’t seek to destroy the church so much as it seeks to ignore it. When it comes to Christianity, our postmodern culture appears to have chosen irrelevance and oblivion over persecution . . . at least for now. And oblivion is a far worse fate than persecution. Persecution can be resisted, even fought. But how to you fight perceived irrelevance?

In his defense and explanation of The Manhattan Declaration Chuck Colson says that “Christians may have to choose between the demands of what St. Augustine called the ‘City of Man’ and the ‘City of God’. Sorry, Chuck, but I think this boat has already sailed. In fact, the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews says it sailed some 2000 years earlier when Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees in obedience to God’s leading, “for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). Abraham left all he knew behind in search of that city. The writer of Hebrews admonishes us to use this as an encouragement to our own faith and journey. Following the fall of Rome in AD 410, St. Augustine explained this pilgrimage to confused and questioning believers in his own day. And it appears that the Church at the beginning of the 21st Century needs a refresher course in what it means to be “the City of God”.