

KUSA Study Guide Session #1
Handout #1

Karl Barth

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth is attributed to have said that theology must be done “with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” Born in Basel, Switzerland in 1886, Barth studied theology in Germany and Switzerland, and was a pastor from 1911–1921. During this time of the Great War, he was disillusioned to see so many of his theology teachers sign documents in support of the Kaiser. After the war, he taught in several German universities, until he was removed from his post in 1935 for his resistance to the National Socialist movement.

By “doing theology with the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other,” Barth could not avoid seeing the danger posed to the church when many Christians began to form a “faith party” of “German Christians” rooted in German nationalism and celebrating the Aryan people. In 1933, a new constitution established a single “Protestant Reich Church” with Adolf Hitler as the “Lord” (Führer) over the German Church. In response to this, Barth and other church leaders gathered in Barmen in the Ruhr in May 1934 to organize resistance and create a document, the Barmen Declaration.

The Barmen Declaration is thus an early example of a “kairos document,” and we can use portions of it to understand what the key elements are in a kairos document.

Selections from the Barmen Declaration, 1934

Reading the Signs of the Times (Social Analysis)

"We publicly declare before all evangelical Churches in Germany that what they hold in common in this Confession is **grievously imperiled**, and with it the unity of the German Evangelical Church. It is **threatened by the teaching methods and actions of the ruling Church party of the "German Christians"** and of the Church administration carried on by them...This threat consists in the fact that the theological basis, in which the German Evangelical Church is united, **has been continually and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles**, on the part of the leaders and spokesmen of the "German Christians" as well as on the part of the Church administration. When these principles are held to be valid, then, according to all the Confessions in force among us, the **Church ceases to be the Church** and the German Evangelical Church, as a federation of Confessional Churches, becomes intrinsically impossible."

Sense of Urgency and Need for a Collective Voice

"As members of Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches **we may and must speak with one voice in this matter today**. Precisely because we want to be and to remain faithful to our various Confessions, we may not keep silent, since we believe that we have been given a common message to utter in a time of common need and temptation."

Theological Reflection

Drawing on Scripture

"Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body [is] joined and knit together." (Eph. 4:15,16.)

Interpretation of Scripture

"The Christian Church is the congregation of the brethren in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit. As the Church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance."

Application to Current Context

"We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions."

Call to Action

"The Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the **acknowledgment of these truths** and in the **rejection of these errors**

the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a federation of Confessional Churches. It **invites all** who are able to accept its declaration to be mindful of these theological principles in their decisions in Church politics. It **entreats all** whom it concerns to return to the unity of faith, love, and hope.”