

Out of Horror, Hope:
A Biblically Based Study of Torture's Ravages and
Potential Responses in the Reformed Tradition
from the
No2Torture Group (studyguide@No2Torture.org)

Fourth Session:
We Confess God Alone
(Total time: 50 minutes)

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“We...live in a time where Christians in the name of being socially responsible try to save appearances by supplying epistemological and moral justifications for societal arrangements that made and continue to make the church politically irrelevant.”¹

Objectives:

- To claim our tradition as Presbyterians by confessing God in our time and place.
- To understand our present situation relative to the historical context of *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*.
- To develop an understanding of the Church's role in the midst of our society's actions regarding our detainees.
- To confess the false doctrines of today, and to confess the truth of Christ in the face of torture.

¹After Christendom, Stanley Hauerwas, Abingdon Press, 1991, p.27.

Session outline:

- 1. Open with Prayer** (5 minutes)
- 2. Introduction to the Barmen Declaration** (10 minutes)
- 3. Small Group Discussion and Consideration** (23 minutes)
- 4. Graffiti Board Confession** (10 minutes)
- 5. Closing** (2 minutes)

Resources for this session; handouts NOT provided:

1. Optional in Segment 1: *A Brief Statement of Faith*, from:
the *Book of Confessions*, e.g. <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/boc.pdf>
2. *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*; see:
 - a. *Book of Confessions*, e.g. <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/boc.pdf>
 - b. Appendix 2: *Excerpts from The Theological Declaration of Barmen*

Facilitators should prepare for the session by:

1. Reading and contemplating the Barmen Declaration
2. Setting up newspaper pages with headings, if desired

Items needed for this session:

Newsprint

Marking pens

Book of Confessions or copies of *The Theological Declaration of Barmen* from it

We Confess God Alone

1. Open with Prayer (5 minutes)

- Create your own prayer or, perhaps, use words from *A Brief Statement of Faith*
- Briefly review the work of the past three weeks

2. Introduction to the Barmen Declaration (10 minutes)

Offer an introductory narrative based on Appendix 1, covering the Declaration's

- Historical context
- Major themes and principles
- Relevance for today

3. Small Group Discussion and Consideration (23 minutes)

Provide participants with the *Book of Confessions* or copies of *The Theological Declaration of Barmen* to read. Divide the group into smaller groups of 4 or 5 then ask them to discuss the following questions. If possible, write these questions on newsprint for all to reference during their discussions.

- Do you believe the Bible has the power to speak to issues in today's world? What does it have to say?
- How do you understand the relationship between the church and world in light of the Barmen Declaration?
- Based on what you believe about God and understand to be the Word of God for us today, do you disagree with any of the doctrines/policies related to prisoner treatment and interrogation used by the United States and its allies against prisoners of war and terrorism suspects? If so, which ones?
- Does the Church today proclaim false doctrines? If so, what are they? In what ways have you seen the Church (or yourself) co-opted, i.e., led away from Christ's message, by our country's government or the agenda set by its politics and values?

4. Graffiti Board Confession (10 minutes)

- Put two pieces of newsprint on wall.
- On one write, “This I Believe...” On the other write “This I Reject...”
- Have the group offer their own thoughts and confessions styled after the Barmen Declaration – a statement of faith followed by “We reject the false doctrine...”

5. Closing (2 minutes)

- As the closing prayer, have people say aloud one thing they believe and one they reject.
- You might want to go around in a circle to do this to give people who haven’t spoken a chance to speak.
- Allow people to pass if they want.

Appendix 1

The Theological Declaration of Barmen: Background and Significance

An integral part of the Presbyterian faith is its emphasis on the living Word of God. As Presbyterians, we believe that God's word is eternal, and yet has the power to speak to particular moments in history. Our *Book of Confessions*, half of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church, is our witness to speaking God's Word to the world and the Church at significant times in history.

“To confess means to openly affirm, declare, acknowledge or take a stand for what one believes to be true. When Christians make a confession, they say, ‘This is what we most assuredly believe regardless of what others may believe and regardless of the opposition, rejection, or persecution that may come to us for taking this stand.’” (from the *Book of Confessions*; preface, 2003).

Confessions make claims about God, Christ and humanity, which in turn make claims on our lives. There are eleven confessions in the *Book of Confessions* of the PC(USA), starting with the Nicene Creed in 325 CE and ending with the Brief Statement of Faith in 1983. The creeds, confessions and catechisms of the *Book of Confessions* are both historical and contemporary. Each emerged in a particular time and place in response to a particular situation.

One of the Confessions, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, was written in May, 1934. It was a time when Christians and church leaders believed they could no longer be silent about the atrocities in Nazi Germany. They were contesting the imposition of Adolf Hitler's National Socialist agenda on the church in Germany. They felt the institutions of the church were being co-opted by the state (or worse, that the current false doctrines of the church of Germany were supporting and fueling the state), and had lost their ability to stand with, and advocate for, those being persecuted by the Nazi party.

To oppose Nazism in 1934 was considered by many Germans to be, at the very least, unpatriotic and, at the worst, an act of treason.

The Barman Declaration was the result of a document circulated by Hans Asmussen in late 1932 called the Altona declaration. The basic point of this document was that when secular authorities violate their mandate to seek the good of civil society, then Christians, in turn, must decide whether to obey human authorities or God.

Under Hitler, most Christians took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. A number of pastors and theologians from Protestant denominations in Germany, however, believed that the church must take a stand against the atrocities committed by their own country and by fellow Christians.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen contains six propositions, each quoting from Scripture, stating its implications for the present day and rejecting the false doctrine of the German Christians. The declaration proclaims the church's freedom in Jesus Christ who is Lord in every area of life. The church obeys him as God's one and only Word who determines its order, ministry, and relation to state.

As Christian citizens, we have the obligation to participate in state affairs and to be a part of (take responsibility for) the government's actions, while always remembering that government is not the same as the church. They are necessarily different and hence there simply will be times when the church will need to challenge and correct its own government.

The church should never see itself as aligned with the state. They are not the same thing. The church will likely always have something to say to the state, just as Jesus had something to say to the leaders and rulers of his time.

Appendix 2

Source: *Book of Confessions*

<http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/boc.pdf>

Excerpts from *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*

8.08

“...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.”

8.17

”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.”

8.18

“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.”

8.23

“We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission (see 8.22), should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church’s vocation as well.”

8.24

“We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State.”

8.27

“We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans.”