

“Idolotry” (The Barmen Declaration)  
Deut 10:12-13; Josh 24:19-23; Eph 4:11-16;  
Matthew 20:25-28; John 14:1-6

July 22, 2018  
Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

He was a U-Boat captain—the “Scourge of Malta” in WWI. And then he returned to Germany at the end of the First World War and found the situation difficult. He wanted to do something for his people to help them and to encourage them, and he felt the calling to be a pastor. So Martin Neimöller became a Lutheran pastor in Germany in the 1920s, in a time of inflation and struggle and social strife.

It was during that time that there was great concern about how the country would survive and thrive. There was concern about the communists and the socialists, the anti-God parties, and how they would influence the way forward.

As the 1930s came around, Martin Neimöller and many of the pastors of Lutheran churches supported a new leader coming up. They were trying to understand how to deal with the social unrest, and the worry about the communists, and how Germany would again become the country they took pride in. So in 1933, they elected Hitler to power. Neimöller had a meeting with Hitler, and he was told that Hitler would let the churches be, and in fact Christianity would be the central reason for what was done. There would be no ghettoizing or pogroms against the Jews.

Soon, that was not the case. Within a few months of Hitler coming to power, because of a fire in the government building he declared martial law and began taking away civil liberties. He orchestrated a way of putting one of his people in charge of the national church, and began to change the shape of the way the church was and what was important.

By 1934, because there was disagreement between the church and the state, Martin Neimöller started something called the Pastors’ Emergency League, a group of pastors who agreed to speak up and oppose some of the policies that were being put in place, to oppose the overreaching nature of the state and of Hitler.

Hitler wasn’t satisfied that the fellow he put in charge was doing a good enough job. Hitler wanted to create a Reich church, a state church, leader’s church, national church. So he put in a new guy who was basically anti-Christian. He decided that this new national church would get rid of the Old Testament—it was too Jewish. And anything written by that rabbi, Paul, was too Jewish. And too much of the New Testament was too Jewish. Then they downplayed the Passion and Crucifixion and began to think of Jesus mainly as a hero.

At that point Martin Neimöller and a number of church leaders met with Hitler and in that conversation, Hitler said to Neimöller, “Don’t worry about the people. I’ll take care of the people of Germany. You just do your church thing.” Neimöller said, “No. I am called by God to care for the people of Germany.”

Later in 1934, Neimöller was part of a group who recognized that there was a change going on. The state, from Hitler on down, was trying to change the church to simply be part of the apparatus of the state.

After that meeting with Hitler, I think there was probably a lot of soul-searching on the part of those pastors who would get together in May of that year. I think that they remembered things like that passage from Joshua that talks about if you want to be God’s people, you have to recognize that your God is a jealous God. That word could also be translated as ardent or zealous. What it is pointing to is a God that is not a far-off God, not a God that is distant from God’s people, but a God that cares about what’s going on in creation, a God that comes as fire in a bush. A God that cares about what is happening to God’s people. Joshua tells the people, “If you are going to serve this God, he’s not going to take it if you turn away. He’s going to let you go. It’s going to cause you problems if you go wrong instead of following the way.”

I think these German pastors were remembering that kind of thing. They were remembering some of the passages we read today. In Ephesians it says we are to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” Into Christ—not into a Führer, but into Christ. They recognize that in the church we are called not to be tyrants, but servants. It’s breaking down the hierarchy; breaking down the value of one over another. We have different gifts, and they are wonderful. They are to be used for the good of all, not to make one person or race better than all the others.

They recognized what it says in Deuteronomy 10:12-13: “What does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees.”

I think as they did that soul-searching, they came back together in May of 1934 remembering they were servants of God’s people. They came up with a clarification we now call the Barmen Declaration. Karl Barth was probably the main author. It declared the struggle they saw occurring and what they needed to do. First, the source of revelation was *only* the Word of God, and particularly, they were pointing to Jesus Christ as the Word of God. Any other possible sources—especially earthly powers, for example—wouldn’t be accepted. They saw the conflict between following Christ and following a Führer, a national leader. Who is it that we truly put our trust in and follow?

They saw the need to state the Jesus Christ is the only Lord of every aspect of personal life. There should not be any other authority. The question that Christians through the ages have struggled with is the authority in their lives. Who is the authority? What is the authority? The Barmen Declaration reminds us that it is the authority of Jesus Christ. There is only one Lord of our lives.

It goes on to say the message and order of the church should not be influenced by the current political convictions. The order of political involvement is stated here. What they are saying here is not that there is no political involvement, but that political convictions don't shape our faith; our faith might shape our political convictions. Our faith might shape the kinds of actions we take. Our faith might be what's behind how we live our lives, what we do (including voting). Our faith is behind whatever we do, not simply some other voice. Not that we don't hear those voices and try to understand what they are saying, but we understand them in the light of the Gospel, in the light of faith, in the light of grace.

Next, the church should not be ruled by a leader (a Führer). There is no hierarchy in the church. That's what they saw in the passage from Matthew 20: "There are tyrants among you... but the greatest of us are servants."

The state should not fulfill the task of the church and vice versa. The state and the church are both limited to their own business. Therefore, the Barmen Declaration rejects the subordination of the church to the state and the subordination of the Word and the Holy Spirit to the church. So what it's saying is the highest power is the Word and the Holy Spirit, then the church, then the state—not the other way around, which is what was happening at the time.

It was into this milieu that this statement was made, and Neimöller was one of those who carried it forward. He preached in his pulpit in an important suburb of Berlin. Because of his conflict with Hitler, he was arrested in 1937 and ended up spending the rest of the war in Sachsenhausen and Dachau. Towards the end of the war, there was a termination order that if the Allies got too close, they were supposed to kill him. It didn't happen and he made it through. He continued, then, to respond to God's grace and to be one who tried to understand what it means to have Christ as Lord and no other, because he saw the idolatry of allowing the state or any other to become our focus of faith, to become that which we put our ultimate trust in and allow to shape us, rather than God and God's grace in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

For those pastors who wrote the Barmen Declaration, it was an issue of idolatry. Who do we believe in? What do we let shape our lives? How do we lead our lives? Are we following Christ or are we listening to some other voice?

Neimöller went on to found the World Council of Churches and served as one of its first leaders. He's also one who gave us a famous poem. There is a

story of him going back to Dachau. His wife wanted to see where he had been interned, so they went back. He saw a plaque that said that Dachau had started terminating (killing) people in 1933. It shocked him because he had been there later, in 1937 or '38, and he knew at that point there wasn't much he could do. But when he saw the date of 1933, he realized that the evil he was fighting had started much earlier than he had realized. That's when he put this poem together.

*In Germany they came for the communists.  
I didn't speak up. I wasn't a communist.  
Then they came for the Jews.  
I didn't speak up. I wasn't a Jew.  
Then they came for the trade unionists.  
I didn't speak up. I wasn't a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Catholics.  
I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Catholic – I was a  
Protestant.  
Then they came for me.  
By that time, there was no one to speak up.*

His life is an example of one who recognizes that when we have faith in God, when our Lord is Jesus Christ, we don't just go with every whim of doctrine. We don't get tossed to and fro. We don't get tricked by every scheme and deceitful way. We hold fast to one who calls us to be his people, the God of all creation. We don't set up idols.

The question, perhaps, that comes out of Barmen is "Do I have any idols?" What idol might I set up today? What idol might be before me? What do I listen to before I listen to Christ? What does it mean to truly follow Jesus today? Amen.