

Theology Matters

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Living East of Eden

Pastoral Reflections on How Theology Matters

By James D. Miller

“The Gates of Hell shall not prevail against the church.” We heard this theme—the theme of this conference—brilliantly proclaimed last night in worship.¹ And we heard the text of Matthew 16 and the supremely important question that Jesus asks of his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?”

I remember an old joke that references this text—it goes something like this: Jesus asked his disciples, “What are people saying about me?” And they offered a few responses.

Then He became more specific. “How about you? What do you think? Who do you say that I am?”

After a long silence, Simon Peter stepped forward and said: “Rabbi, you are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of all Being, the ontological foundation of our very selfhood revealed, the kerygma of eternal proclamation.” And Jesus looked around at his disciples and said, “Does anybody else have an idea?”

My son, Jonny, is working on becoming a commercial pilot and I’ve learned that the language they speak in the cockpit would not often be understood by any non-pilot. But when the pilot speaks to the passengers in the cabin, a plain and simple language is needed and is spoken. Every preacher, every academic, needs to remember this. The fact that the New Testament is written in *koine* Greek—the common street language spoken by the

people—is sufficient evidence, I think, that when it comes to the proclamation of the good news, the Lord takes seriously the importance of clear and effective communication. Without that—apart from clear and effective communication—the gospel message can easily get garbled and lose its cutting edge.

In his memoir, *The Pastor*, Eugene Peterson tells the story of establishing a new congregation in Bel Air, Maryland. He writes:

One of the attractions for me ... was the prospect of forming a church of disciplined and committed Christians, focused and energetic. I think I had the image of a congregation of Green Berets for Jesus. No half-Christians, no almost-Christians, but the real thing.

I had imagined that when word got out that a new congregation was being formed, it would attract men and women who were willing to take risks, who were prepared to make sacrifices, who weren’t interested in comfortable pews. I went through the neighborhoods, knocking on doors, introducing myself and asking if I

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could talk to them about this new church. ... After six weeks ..., I wrote a letter to everyone who had expressed an interest inviting them to worship with us in the basement of our home the next Sunday. Forty-six people showed up. And still no Green Berets. ...

What I wasn't prepared for was the low level of interest that the men and women in my congregation had in God and the scriptures, prayer, and their souls. Not that they didn't believe and value these things; they just weren't very interested. ...

The lack of common cause resulted in what seemed to me was a lot of religious clutter, much of what struck me as an accumulation of trivia. My imagination had been schooled in the company of Moses and David, my congregation kept emotional and mental company with television celebrities and star athletes. I was reading Karl Barth and John Calvin; they were reading Ann Landers and *People* magazine.²

Peterson goes on to describe the messiness of the church and to affirm that those of us who are part of the church, who love the church, know that the church is scrambled, mixed-up, and messy (another word for that is sinful)—primarily because each of us brings our own scrambled, mixed-up, messy, sinful selves into the church.

But I would like to add an addendum to Peterson's assessment of the church. Despite all the messiness, there is simply no place more important for theology to matter than in the local church, the visible expression of the Body of Christ.

Here, of all places, theology matters. And bad theology matters, too—for the implications of not getting it right are enormous. If the church doesn't rightly understand who God is, what He has done and is doing, who we are in Him, who He is in us, what we're called to become and to do by the indwelling power of the Spirit—well, it's the world that suffers. For the light of Christ has been placed under a bushel and the proclamation of good news is muted and often lost. And that's what brings us here this week.

You might remember the mission statement of this movement called *Theology Matters*: “to encourage, equip, and inspire the Christian community,” that is, the church, “and the Reformed-Presbyterian family,” that is, the church that speaks with a certain Reformed accent.

How is this done according to *Theology Matters*? “... by articulating theology in a clear and coherent way that is reformed according to God's Word,” that is, by bearing witness to the truth of Jesus Christ, by relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, by drawing scattered Presbyterians together, by solidifying Reformed theology and proclamation.

The mission statement continues: “The task of theology is to evaluate the church's proclamation of the gospel according to Scripture and as attested in the catholic creeds and the Reformed confessions and catechisms of the church, in order to ensure that it is an authentic proclamation of the gospel and not something other. This urgent work must be done afresh in every age.”

“*In every age*”—such as our own.

Karl Barth, although he had a complicated relationship with the teachings of John Calvin, would agree with this. When he was twenty-three years-old, serving as an assistant pastor in Calvin's old church in Geneva, he became much more fully conversant with Calvin's writings.

Twelve years later, when teaching courses on Calvin and Reformed Theology at the University of Göttingen, Barth wrote a letter to his friend, Eduard Thurneysen, a theologian in his own right. It includes this paragraph:

The little bit of ‘Reformed theology’ that I teach is really nothing in comparison to the trumpet blast which needs to be blown in our sick time [1922]. ... Calvin is ... a primeval forest, ... something directly down from the Himalaya, absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological; I lack completely the means, the suction cups, even to assimilate this phenomenon, not to speak of presenting it adequately. What I receive is only a thin little stream and what I can then give out again is only a yet thinner extract of this little stream. I could gladly and profitably set myself down and spend all the rest of my life just with Calvin.³

Theology Matters is clearly committed to this. And there's much good that comes from receiving the spiritual blessings embedded in this Reformed tradition.

If there is anything I have learned from parish ministry, it is that life brims with collisions that require well-anchored theological reflection.

A personal example: it happened on Christmas Eve, 2012. I was finishing up some preparation in my study at the church when I received a phone call. It was 4:15 p.m., just forty-five minutes or so before the first of our Christmas Eve services would begin.

I answered the call. A longtime friend and member of the congregation said, “Jim, I'm calling about our son—he took his life today. We're just coming home from the hospital.”

Their boy was a bright and gifted eighteen-year-old senior in high school. I simply could not believe what I

had just heard. “What do you mean?” I asked. What happened?” And then the story tumbled out.

It was now 4:30 p.m.—and I did not really know what to do. Two dear friends had just lost their beloved son to suicide. And I was headed into a beautiful candle-lit sanctuary ready to speak these opening words:

Friends, hear the good news: Once upon a night, God poked His face into our benighted world, wrapped Himself in baby clothes and came and lived among us—undertaking a rescue operation of untold proportions. And in the darkness of that night shepherds were watching their flocks when an angel suddenly appeared to them and said: “Fear not for behold I bring you good news of a great joy that will be to all the people: for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And a host of angels appeared...and began to sing: “Glory to God in the highest—and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!” (Luke 2).

It was one of the worst theological collisions I have ever experienced, like two trains coming from opposite directions, one bringing great good news and the other bringing unspeakably bad news. Joy and anguish intermingled.

What do we do with this? How does the Christian community address this? The great apostle tells Timothy: “I want you to do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). And there’s no better place to grow in theological understanding than in the real time events of life within the Christian community.

When I was a second-year student at Princeton Seminary, I took a systematic theology course on John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* taught by Dr. Edward Dowey. I still remember his opening words at the beginning of the semester: “John Calvin wrote the *Institutes* when he was twenty-seven years old; I challenge you to read them by the time you’re twenty-seven!”

Well, I was twenty-four at the time and I remember thinking: “I’ve got three years. I can meet that challenge.” But I didn’t even get close. In the intervening years, though, I’ve learned why Dr. Dowey would charge his students to read Calvin, to embrace the insights of the Reformed tradition. It’s time-tested, spiritually enriching, nourishing, and has the power to awaken us to the Spirit’s presence in our lives.

So, here’s my second story. I was invited to speak at a retreat hosted by a longstanding Sunday School class at the local Methodist Church in downtown Tulsa. There must have been close to a hundred people in the class and they had been meeting together week by week, Sunday by Sunday, for over thirty years. They knew each other well and were comfortable being transparent with each other.

In preparing for the weekend, the leader of the class said to me, “Why don’t you just get us thinking a bit about John 3:16-17. Let that text serve as your theme.”

So, I did. And while I was preparing, I decided that a Presbyterian minister headed to a Methodist retreat should bring John Calvin with him and offer a Reformed insight or two. This is what I found in Calvin’s commentary on John 3:16: “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*” Calvin writes:

Christ shows the first cause and as it were source of our salvation. And this He does that no doubt may be left. For there is no calm haven where our minds can rest until we come to God’s free love. The whole substance of our salvation is not to be sought anywhere else than in Christ. ... *For men [and women] are not easily convinced that God loves them*; and so, to remove all doubt, He has expressly stated that we are so very dear to God that for our sakes He did not spare even His only begotten Son. God has most abundantly declared His love toward us and therefore whoever is still doubtful and unsatisfied by this testimony does Christ a serious injury, as if He had been some ordinary man who had died accidentally. We should rather consider that God’s love for His only begotten Son is a measure of how precious our salvation was to Him, that He willed that the death of the Only Begotten Himself should be its price.⁴

This is an amazing statement—and not least the line: “For men [and women] are not easily convinced that God loves them.” And it is the gospel truth. It is not easy to convince the world that God loves the world.

I brought that single thought to the retreat and invited the group to reflect on whether there had ever been a time in their lives when they were not convinced that God loved them. And people started to stand up and tell their stories—as I suspect many of us could do just now.

Said one, “I was in the fourth grade when a policeman came into my elementary school classroom and walked up to the teacher’s desk. Then both the teacher and the

policeman came to where I was seated; they asked me to come with them to the principal's office. When I got there, they sat me down and told me that my father had been murdered. Even as a fourth grader, God's love suddenly seemed very far away. How could He allow this to happen to my dad?"

Another voice spoke up: "I prayed for years that the Lord would bring a faithful, loving Christian man into my life. And when I was married, I was certain that my husband was the answer to my prayers. Less than five years later I learned that he had been unfaithful—and our marriage ended in a train-wreck. For the next twenty years, I never spoke to God, not one time."

It is not easy to convince the world that God loves the world.

Many of you know the name Bart Ehrman. He is a gifted professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He was a student at Wheaton College when I taught there in the Greek Department. We occasionally had coffee together and he was asking about which seminary might be a good place for him.

He went on to Princeton Seminary, gained his Ph.D.—but he lost his faith along the way. As he describes it, it was the suffering in the world—the wounds, and the hurts all around him—that caused him to question everything about God—even His existence. For Ehrman, the most searching question became: How could a loving God allow such tragedies?

Ah, theology matters.

And the question comes straight to the local church, the visible expression of the Body of Christ on earth. What would you say to a Bart Ehrman? How do we the followers of Jesus enter his questions, walk with him, listen to him, challenge him, encourage him? Ah, theology matters.

In his commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther invites us to grow in humility and faith. He writes:

Therefore let no one boast or glory in his own righteousness, wisdom, and other gifts, but let him humble himself and pray with the apostles (Luke 17:5): Let us humble ourselves and pray with the apostles, "Lord, increase our faith!"

And then he writes:

I am making such a point of all this to keep anyone from supposing that the doctrine of faith is an easy matter. It is indeed easy to talk about, but hard to grasp,

and it is easily obscured and lost. Therefore let us with all diligence and humility devote ourselves to the study of Sacred Scripture and to serious prayer, lest we lose the truth of the Gospel.⁵

Can that really happen? Can we lose the truth of the Gospel? Well, the historians among us, I think, would offer an undoubted and emphatic, "O Yes!" Without devoting ourselves to the study of sacred Scripture, to prayer, and to cultivating Christian community, we can lose the truth of the gospel.

An obvious example would be the scrambled church in Germany living under the Nazi regime—a subject that Martha Burnett will speak to in one of our breakout sessions.

Or, closer to home: Is the church in our day losing the truth of the Gospel? Is the Presbyterian Church (USA)—the expression of the church many of us serve—at risk of wandering from the apostolic and historic faith? I don't believe it's being an alarmist to say, "Yes—in many respects, we have—and we are."

I'm reminded of the cautionary word we find in the Letter to the Hebrews: "We must pay the greater attention to what we have heard—lest we drift away from it" (Heb. 2:1).

You don't have to do anything in order to drift. You just take your oars out of the water and the current takes you where it's headed. If you row your boat to the middle of the Mississippi and fall asleep, when you awaken, you'll find yourself in a very different place than where you started. So too, with the spiritual currents in which you and I swim. We must pay closer attention to what we have heard.

I would encourage you to take up Dr. Burnett's essay, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" It's a brilliant assessment of where we are in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and how far the currents of our age can carry us off course. I stopped reading when I came to this sentence in Richard's essay: "Olympia Presbytery recently denied ordination to two candidates who refused to affirm that Christian marriage is anything other than a covenant between one man and one woman."⁶

I simply did not know that had happened. I suppose I should not have been surprised. But I am. The idea that a pastoral candidate in the PCUSA (in this case in the Olympia Presbytery) who holds to a sexual ethic that the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church has affirmed for more than two thousand years ... the idea that this candidate would be denied ordination on that count—should dismay us all.

And if there is any group that understand these kinds of challenges facing the church here in these United States, it would be this *Theology Matters* community.

Nevertheless! There is good news according to Jesus our Lord: “I will build my church and the gates of hell [Hades] shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Hades, of course, is the realm of the dead. So, we might take Jesus promise this way—whatever is deadly, lethal, life-threatening, whatever is part of the realm of the dead—none of this will ultimately prevail against the church.

One thing is for sure: Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, rules and overrules in every event and circumstance; He has rescued His flock, washing us from our sins and redeeming us in spite of them. His

power to bend evil to the good is infinite. How else might we refer to God-awful Friday as Good Friday?

This is biblical theology—and it truly does matter. And this is great good news, indeed.

This address was delivered on Oct. 10, 2024, at Theology Matters’ fourth conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

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¹ Lorenzo R. Small, “A Firm Foundation,” *Theology Matters* 30/4 (Fall), 2024: 13–14.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 104–106.

³ Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, June 8, 1922. *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth–Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914–1925* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964), 101.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. T.H.L. Parker (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), (John 3:16): 73–74. Italics added.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535) in *Luther’s Works* v. 26, trans. Jaroslav Pelican (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), Gal. 2:13, 114.

⁶ Richard E. Burnett, “‘Shall the Fundamentalists Win?’ Whether Christian Liberty Survives in the PCUSA,” *Theology Matters* 30/1 (Winter), 2024: 1–4.

Please help us to raise up a new generation of pastors!

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Matt. 9:38

“And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?” Rom. 10:14

We seek to identify, to attract, to recruit, to gather, to train, to educate, and to help raise up the next generation of pastors and leaders for the congregations where we all worship every Sunday morning. And we need your help.

Please recommend qualified students to us: students who have faith in Jesus Christ, desire to be his disciples, and seek to understand God’s Word; who exhibit intellectual and moral courage; are spiritually curious and eager to learn; have a solid Bachelor’s degree, strong academic record, serious work ethic, good recommendation from a teacher and pastor or church leader, and growing sense of call.

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Freedom for the Gospel, Freedom from Worldly Ideologies: The Barmen Declaration Today

by John P. Burgess

Forty years ago, in 1984–85, I had the remarkable experience of spending a year at a Protestant seminary in East Berlin. Those were still the days of communism. The regime was no longer sending Christians to prison camps, but it had pushed them to the margins of society, hoping that someday the church would just wither away. Christian parents knew that their children might be ridiculed by a schoolteacher. A Christian young person might not be admitted to university studies, even when he or she had the best grades. And wherever you turned—whether to the newspapers, television, art museums, or scholarly journals—you encountered antireligious propaganda. There was only one right way to understand the world and society, an ideology called dialectical materialism or, simply, Marxism-Leninism.

Several years earlier, just before graduate school, I had spent a semester in West Germany. One weekend I travelled with a group of students to West Berlin. To get from West Germany to West Berlin, you had to travel through East Germany. Our bus was not allowed to make any stops, and East German soldiers checked our passports both as we entered and as we exited the country. One afternoon in West Berlin, our guides took us to the Wall. I climbed a wooden observation tower and looked over the Wall into East Berlin. The Wall was actually two walls, with a no-man's land and guard towers in between. The streets of East Berlin looked grey and empty. But I noticed a church steeple against the horizon and wondered to myself: What is it like to be a Christian on the other side of the Wall?

Now, in the fall of 1984, I was there to find out, a guest student at what was only a half-legal theological school in an atheistic society. From the street, you pushed open two massive wooden doors and walked through a small dark passageway into a large courtyard. Around it was clustered a group of red brick buildings. They housed classrooms, a library, a dining hall, and dormitories. During breaks, students gathered under a tall elm tree in the courtyard. Here they chatted freely. They were not under the thumb of the ideological society. I wanted to know what that freedom was all about.

One of my first classes at the seminary was devoted to the Theological Declaration of Barmen. I learned that it had guided Christians during the darkest days of Nazi fascism, and that it was now a lodestar for the church under communism. In both situations, Barmen had taught Christians that they could be free even in a society that denied them freedom.

God calls his people to cultivate an inner, spiritual freedom that resists political and ideological manipulation. When I returned to the United States, I had become convinced that the Barmen Declaration has something to say also to Christians in America.

Who Is Your Lord, Really?

Now, let's fast forward. Barmen had its ninetieth anniversary last year. In these forty years since my stay in East Berlin, I have learned a lot more German and a lot more about Barmen and its nuances, which easily get lost in translation. I have discovered that Barmen is posing nothing less than the question: Who will be your Lord? You will always serve some master, so which will it be?

Bob Dylan was just channeling Barmen when he sang:

You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You might be a socialite with a long string of pearls
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the Devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.
And Barmen adds this: Only one Lord will set you free,
and that is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us begin with Barmen's historical context. Germany had suffered a crushing defeat in World War I. A quarter of a generation of young men had been killed or maimed. In 1918, the German Kaiser abdicated. In 1919, the Treaty of Versailles imposed massive reparation payments and the dismantling of Germany's military.

The following years brought hyperinflation and political paralysis; members of different political factions fought each other in the streets. Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist party began winning elections. On January 30, 1933, Hitler was appointed the nation's chancellor. He immediately moved to control all areas of society, including the church.

Here, I will review not the Catholic Church but rather the Protestant Church, known in Germany as the Evangelical Church. The Evangelical Church was largely Lutheran but included Reformed and United congregations. A political ethic of the so-called two kingdoms doctrine guided the Lutherans. There was, on the one hand, a spiritual kingdom, for which the church was responsible; on the other, an earthly kingdom, in the hands of rulers, who had been appointed by God. Church and state had different commissions but were loyal to each other. When Hitler came to power, many Protestant Christians regarded him as the legitimate ruler, and he for his part assured the church that he would honor its ministry.

However, one group, which called itself the German Christians (*die Deutschen Christen*), went further. They argued that the church could be relevant to German society only if it fused the gospel and Nazi ideology. Hitler was not only a legitimate ruler; he was also a savior figure who was revealing God's will to the German people. The church should join the state in preaching the natural and historical superiority of the German people, especially over Jews and Slavs. As one German Christian leader declared, "The God of love dwells as a sacred spirit among us and endows us with the power to believe in the freedom and honor of the German nation, the readiness to serve the worldview of blood and earth, and the will to be faithful to the Third Reich. Thus flows the spirit of Jesus through Germany. The kingdom of God is again to be experienced in the National Socialist movement."

As Hitler moved to put the Evangelical Church under control of the German Christians, an opposition group arose, which called itself the Confessing Church. Led by the pastor Martin Niemöller, the Confessing Church asserted that the German Christians were guilty of deep theological errors—indeed, errors that threatened the very existence of the church. In 1934, 139 representatives of the Confessing Church met in the town of Barmen. Fifty-three were laymen. A small committee that included the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth drafted a Theological Declaration. On May 31st, the synod adopted the Declaration by acclamation. Barth later called its adoption a miracle, a turning point in German theology.

The Theological Structure of Christ's Lordship

The Theological Declaration consists of a brief introduction, six theses, and a short conclusion. The introduction clarifies that the Declaration is directed against the theological errors of the German Christians; it is not addressed directly to Hitler. The six theses have an identical structure: short biblical citations that point us to Christ, a positive theological affirmation drawn from these Scriptures, and a corresponding negation of false teaching. The Declaration's brief conclusion calls the church back to theological unity.

Barmen's cornerstone is its first thesis. Two of Jesus' sayings from the Gospel of John stand at its head. The penultimate draft of the Declaration had placed the words, "Jesus Christ says," prior to these verses. Even though those prefatory words disappeared from the final draft, Barmen wants to make clear that the Jesus who once spoke to his disciples is the resurrected Christ who still speaks to us today. Scripture is not just ancient history; it is God's living Word. The thesis then draws out a positive affirmation: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."

The corresponding negation speaks directly to the German Christians: "We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation." In other words, those who proclaim that Hitler reveals God's will are committing a theological crime; their equation of National Socialist ideology and the gospel is a heresy. The church's ultimate loyalty is to Jesus Christ alone.

Barmen's second thesis is directed against the Lutheran two-kingdoms doctrine. The opening scriptural passage from Colossians points us to Christ, as did the first thesis. He is our wisdom, righteousness, justification, and sanctification. What follows, the theological affirmation, clarifies that Christ is both the "assurance" of our forgiveness (justification) and the "mighty claim" by which we grow in holy living (sanctification).

Here, however, an English translation does not capture the nuances of the German. "Assurance" and "claim" have the same German root: *sprechen*, "to speak," or *Spruch*, "saying." The one living Word who is Jesus Christ (thesis one) speaks to us both with an assuring Word (*Zuspruch*) and with a demanding Word, a "mighty claim" (*Anspruch*). The corresponding negation, like that of the first thesis, makes clear that we belong to this Word, Jesus Christ, alone. Indeed, every

part of our life belongs to him—our religious life, our political life, our sexual life, our family life, our work life. The world is not composed of many different kingdoms, each with its own little lord. Nor are there two kingdoms, one that is spiritual, and another that is earthly. Rather, God has established one kingdom over which the one Lord Jesus Christ reigns.

This theme of lordship resounds throughout the rest of Barmen. The third thesis for the first time in the Declaration explicitly calls Jesus Christ “the Lord.” Christ asks the church to witness to him in two ways: through its message and through the way it orders its life together. The corresponding negation warns the church against replacing Christ with “prevailing” ideological and political convictions—translating more literally, we could say, ideological and political convictions that “lord it over” us.

The fourth thesis then speaks to the question of just how the church will order its life. The opening biblical citations note that political life is characterized inevitably by the principle of some “lording it” (exercising dominating power) over others through the use of force. But church leaders will not exercise “dominion” over others—the German word for “dominion” is, more literally, “lordship.” A variation on “lording it” and “lordship” comes up again in the sixth thesis, which rejects human “arrogance.” The German here for “arrogance” is, literally, “making ourselves lords”—as though we could lord it over the Word of God, rather than submitting gratefully to it.

Barmen uses several key words to indicate how we faithfully respond to the Word who is the Lord Jesus Christ: hear, trust, obey, and make witness. But the word that Barmen uses more than any other is “serve.” The emphasis on serving becomes even stronger when we understand that the standard English translation sometimes substitutes “ministry” for “service.” If we translate consistently, we find that Barmen mentions service or serving six times. And this serving has two aspects: that we serve one another in the church, and that we freely serve the gospel. Thesis four, in particular, makes clear that the church is based on the principle of serving others rather than “lording it over” them.

Other theses lift up the relationship between service and freedom. In the third part of the third thesis, the negation, Barmen warns the church against ideological and political convictions that try to prevail [“lord it”] over us. Barmen notes—and we know from our own experience—that ideological and political programs are constantly changing and finding new ways to try to seduce us. That is why the Theological Declaration of Barmen was so important to Christians in Nazi Germany

and communist East Germany. In both cases, the rulers tried to impose an ideology on its citizens.

The Nazis and their German Christian supporters propagated an ideology of German superiority and Aryan purity. In the struggle for survival, the German people would prove themselves to be, by nature, the fittest. The communists and their Christian supporters promoted an ideology that makes history our God. History, they claimed, is inexorably developing to save us from capitalism, which exploits the working class, and to rescue us from religion, which Marx calls opium.

Barmen’s second thesis tells us that Christ “delivers” us from the godless fetters of this world. Translating again more literally, God “frees” us from these fetters. But, according to Barmen, freedom is never simply freedom *from* an enslaving power; rather, freedom is also always *for* a positive purpose. So, after telling us that we are free from false lords, the second thesis proceeds to tell us that Christ frees us for “a free grateful service to his creatures.” Here, Barmen is surely alluding to Galatians 5:1: “For freedom God has set you free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” When we are free from the ideological and political programs that try to manipulate and control us, we are free to see humans as they really are, children of God who, like we, are lost but whom God calls back to himself. God sets us free to tell others the good news of Jesus Christ.

Barmen’s sixth and last thesis confirms this point. One of the opening biblical quotations is 2 Timothy 2:9, “The Word of God is not fettered.” Christ is able to set us free from the godless fetters of this world (thesis two), because Christ himself, the living Word, is free from these fetters (thesis six). He is the one Lord over all other so-called lords. The last part of the sixth thesis, the negation, admonishes us not to try to fetter Christ, as though we could lord it over him by making him serve our own “desires, purposes, and plans.”

If we turn ourselves into little lords, we simply enslave ourselves to our own egos. As the central part of the sixth thesis, the positive theological affirmation, makes clear, the church’s freedom is founded on proclaiming “the free grace of God to all people.” To put it simply, we as Christians are most truly free when we serve the gospel. And we serve the gospel most truly when we proclaim it to others both through our words and through the way we order our lives together (referring back to the third thesis). God calls us to set forth his free and freeing grace both within and beyond the church.

Christian Freedom in an Age of Ideologies

I hope that this detailed explication of the Barmen Declaration helps you understand how carefully Barmen constructs its theology. Its references to lords, lordship, lording, and the Lord are a steady drumbeat. Who is our Lord, really? I have asserted that the Declaration is calling us to be free in the One who is the only true Lord. I have mentioned along the way how much Barmen meant to Christians in Nazi Germany and communist East Germany. Even when they were not free politically, even when they experienced social opposition and hardship, they knew that they were still free spiritually. The gospel had set them free from the principalities and powers of this world and had set them free for declaring the gospel. And, as I said, I came home from that year in East Germany convinced that Barmen has something to say also to us.

So, let's turn to that question: Just what does Christ set us free from in twenty-first-century America, and how specifically will we American Christians be free for the gospel? Some Christians worry that the day is coming, or perhaps has already come too close, when our government or other social authorities will persecute us for our beliefs and moral values. But I think the more likely scenario is what Christians experienced in East Germany in the 1990s: not arrest or imprisonment but rather indifference and marginalization. Presbyterians were once accustomed to thinking of themselves as the center of society. Reports about our General Assemblies once appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*. Our moderators and stated clerks met with the President, and many of our congressional and government leaders were themselves Presbyterian. We did not need a Presbyterian parochial school system; we Presbyterians sat on the school boards that controlled public education. For better or worse, those days are gone. As some sociologists now say, not entirely in jest, the mainline has become the sideline.

We Americans do not live in a totalitarian society such as Nazi Germany or communist East Germany. Whatever the deficits of our democracy, it still has checks and balances for which the Nazis and the communists had no place. But that does not mean that we Americans are free. Totalizing ideologies and political programs compete for our loyalty: "wokeism," xenophobic nationalism, anticolonialism, American isolationism, and more. Some Christians are seduced. They equate their political values, whether conservative or liberal, with the gospel. Liberals like to accuse evangelicals of Christian nationalism, but a wise mentor of mine, himself a political progressive, once criticized his denomination, the United Church of Christ, for being nothing more than "the Democratic Party at prayer"—

and it seems to me that the PCUSA is subject to the same temptation.

Other Christians just feel disoriented. In a world in which politics and the media thrive on exaggeration and distortion, we are not sure what to believe or whom to trust. Society seems to reduce our religious commitments to matters of personal taste, and personal taste is unstable, always subject to the latest social cause or publicity campaign. We live in a time of many gods, but where there are many gods, we soon wonder whether there is any God at all. We become nihilistic.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche embraced this nihilism. He thought that "the death of God" was good news. Humans could finally determine their own destiny. But Barmen warns us that neither the many gods nor a dead God set us free. The nihilism of our time leaves us with nothing more than what the sixth thesis calls our own "arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans." When that happens, we end up just trying to make ourselves God—and that is the deepest form of enslavement, the condition that the Scriptures call sin.

Like Christians in Nazi Germany and communist East Germany, we American Christians need Barmen's first thesis: Jesus Christ alone is the source of the church's proclamation. The church does not preach salvation through politics. The church does not regard military or economic superiority as a sure sign of God's grace. And today Barmen's first thesis will teach us to resist nihilism. God is not dead, he reveals himself, and he still comes to us as the living, resurrected Jesus Christ.

East German Christians also taught me how important the third thesis is: The church "is solely [Christ's] property" and lives "solely from [Christ's] comfort and [Christ's] direction in the expectation of his appearance." As the opening biblical passage, Ephesians 4:15–16, tells us, "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, Jesus Christ, from whom the whole body is joined and knit together." Barmen is telling us that only when we are certain that we belong to Christ and to him alone, will we be truly free, free from and free for: free from the world's "events and powers, figures and truths" that want to capture and enslave us, free from our own "arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans," and free for the gospel, free to serve God's creatures.

The seminary in communist East Berlin taught me about this kind of freedom. The students and professors gathered as brothers and sisters beneath the Word of God. They worshipped together, lived together, and studied together. In every other school and university in East Germany, you were required to receive instruction

in Marxism-Leninism. If you studied physics or art or history, you were supposed to start from the foundations of Marxism-Leninism. But you never learned why. You just accepted it. You did not question it. The seminary was the only exception in the whole country, the only place where you were not forced to learn Marxism-Leninism.

So, I was astonished when I learned that the seminary freely chose to offer instruction about Marxism-Leninism—but in a totally different way. You learned about Marx and Lenin, where their ideas came from, how their followers invented an ideology, and how they used it for social control. The gospel set the seminarians free to think clearly and critically about the ideology that pervaded their society and to imagine a democratic alternative. Can you believe it? The freest place in communist East Germany to study Marxism-Leninism was in a Christian seminary.

But the seminarians learned not only to be free from ideology. They also learned to be free for the gospel, the gospel that calls people to trust in Jesus Christ and to care for one another. As social discontent with the communist government grew in the late 1980s, seminary students helped organize prayer services in churches. Many of the people who came were not believers, but they listened to the prayers—and perhaps learned to pray—lit candles, marched into the streets, and peaceably called for political reform. The church was there for them. It told them that God wanted their society to be more humane.

This witness, grounded in the gospel, helped to bring down the Wall on November 9, 1989. In the next months, pastors who had been educated at the seminary took a leading role in guiding the country into a new future. What impressed me most was their sense of hope. They were certain that Christ is living. He is breaking down the Wall between God and sinners, and the walls between us.

The Congregation's Freedom to Break Down Walls

Let us unpack Barmen's third thesis just a little more. It tells us that the Christian church is "the congregation of 'the brethren' ["brothers and sisters"]. In other words, the church is not a denominational structure, not a General Assembly, but rather the local gathering of people who love and care for one another because Christ has made them one. Further, the congregation is the place whereby the power of the Holy Spirit, the living Jesus Christ comes back into focus. You see, for Barmen, so much depends on our congregations. Is the congregation a place of freedom in the Lord? In the congregation do Word and sacrament free people from

ideologies and enslaving political programs? In the congregation do people learn freedom for the gospel and live out that freedom in word and deed?

When a congregation lives in freedom, it brings people together and gives them hope. Whites and blacks engage in the hard work of understanding what justice requires. Democrats and Republicans and Independents hold to their convictions but refuse to divide the body of Christ. Wealthy and poor people stand side by side to worship God. Men and women serve each other gladly. Together, we listen for God's living Word. And, then, we turn to the folks in our neighborhoods, because God offers his free grace to them, too. This is the freedom the world needs, the freedom that God alone can give.

Recall Bob Dylan's song. No matter who you are,
You're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the Devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

And, says Barmen, if you want to be free, you're gonna have to serve the one true Lord, Jesus Christ. Yes, it is a strange, wondrous, and paradoxical freedom. You belong to the Lord, but this Lord does not lord it over others. In Jesus Christ, you are free from the world in order to offer freedom to the world.

If you ever visit Berlin, please visit what is left of the Wall. It is now a memorial site. Tourists stroll quietly through what was once that no-man's land of barbed wire and armed guards. In the middle of that former death strip a church has been built. One of my East German classmates from forty years ago is its pastor. Behind the church, the congregation keeps a garden. People from sixteen different countries tend its flowers and vegetables, fruit trees and beehives: refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine; old and new immigrants from Turkey and Syria; longtime East and West German Berliners. It is a glimpse of Eden, a foretaste of the New Jerusalem—in the place where people once died trying to get to freedom. The name of that congregation is the Church of Reconciliation.

May every American congregation also bring people together and give them hope: to be free from ideology, and to be free for the gospel of Jesus Christ. May we honor the Barmen Declaration and pass on its promise of freedom to the next generations.

This address was delivered on Oct. 10, 2024, at Theology Matters' fourth conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

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Gender, Sex, and the Kingdom

1. Our New Life in Christ

See, I am making all things new. Revelation 21:5.¹

Gender and sexuality, like all human life, must be viewed through the lens of the Gospel, understanding that Jesus Christ is making all things new.

We affirm that life in Christ is lived forward in hope—not backward in longing, pain, or regret. The unremitting call of all women and men is to be reconciled to God in Jesus Christ, joining the kingdom he came to establish. We are promised, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”²

We affirm this not only as future promise but as present reality. This new creation is a free gift but not without responsibility before our heavenly Father and King. In this new life we are called to walk as children of light, discern what is pleasing to the Lord and expose unfruitful deeds of darkness.³

We affirm that our minds have been darkened in rejection of God as we have aimed to be like God by defining good things for ourselves.⁴ In Christ we are called to not be conformed to the patterns of the world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds.⁵ Therefore we reject conformity to the world’s definition of the good and affirm that the mind of Christ calls us to consider others more significant than ourselves, confident that every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.⁶

We affirm marriage between one man and one woman as a sign of God’s covenant with his Church, his faithfulness, the new creation and new life available to all.⁷ We equally affirm the high calling of celibacy in singleness as a sign of our ultimate belonging to the family of God.

We confess that the Church has too often compromised our witness and our participation in the Kingdom of God by allowing marriage and sex to become instruments for personal fulfillment and the indulgence of lust rather than a means for the Holy Spirit to disciple men, women, and children,⁸ thus becoming captive to “philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition.”⁹

2. Our Identity in Christ

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God, through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is

no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:26-28

*As Jesus’ disciples, we are crucified with Christ and Christ lives through us.*¹⁰

We affirm that those who are in Christ are being transformed from confusion to clarity about their identity.¹¹ Baptized with the Holy Spirit, we are clothed in the righteousness of God. This gift of righteousness defines us empowering our mission and community as children of God.¹²

We reject that identity is self-generated or self-discovered; instead we affirm that we receive our identities through the abundant life of Christ alone.¹³ We are made by him, for him, and called to grow into his image.

We reject the practice of making penultimate things, like gender and sexual identity, fundamental. This practice is idolatry and is at the root of sin. However, we cannot choose even these penultimate things that we are tempted to allow to define us.

We affirm that God creates us as eternal beings, physically male or female¹⁴ and our ethnicity follows us into God’s kingdom.¹⁵ These physical traits are God’s good gifts to us, and cannot be denied or denounced for God declared his creation “very good.”¹⁶ But to define ourselves ultimately by gender or sexuality, ethnicity, politics, tribe, or treasure is a betrayal of Jesus’ saving work in our lives, and a rejection of his grace and love.

We confess that we have too often loved these lesser things more than God, having dishonored him and “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”¹⁷

3. Our Freedom in Christ

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). Colossians 3:1-5

Jesus Christ is our true liberator from counterfeit claims of sexual freedom, fulfillment of desire, power and personal significance offer no liberty at all and only invite God's wrath.

We affirm that our freedom in Christ must change how we live, and fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.¹⁸ Set free from our sin and the sins committed against us by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, we can live beyond carnal and material notions of identity and worldly patterns and practices of sexuality.

We affirm our accountability before God and others. This responsibility permeates every aspect of our experience, even the most personal, "for nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light."¹⁹

We reject there are areas of our life which are not subject to Christ and the authority of his Word. The people of God are free only in Christ,²⁰ and the physical expression of our sexuality faithfully exists only in a marriage covenant between one man and one woman.²¹ We also reject that our full humanity requires the unrestricted expression of our sexuality.²² We affirm that only in Christ we may faithfully confront the affliction of disordered desires and the passions of the flesh.

We reject the idolization of gender or sexual expression that enslaves ourselves and others to finding satisfaction and worth in desire and desirability. We affirm our new and present life in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and put to death those earthly things that mire us in the old life marred by sin.²³

We confess we have allowed our love of the poor, our care for creation and our physical bodies, and even our self-understanding to be corrupted by materialism. We have made idols of the tangible—food, drink, sex, money, power, politics and personal impact and significance. All idols imprison and enslave, but we are not hopeless because "From heaven the Lord looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die."²⁴

4. Grace In Christ

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. Ephesians 2:8–9

Grace is God's undeserved and benevolent love toward us that calls us to show grace to one another, freeing us

to live a new life as disciples of Christ and children of God.

We affirm God's covenant of grace with his children made effective by Jesus Christ,²⁵ uniting us now and forever to our heavenly Father²⁶ through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We affirm that in Christ all things are possible²⁷ and that only God's grace creates new life in those dead in sin; because he created us, redeemed us, and calls us by name, we are his.²⁸

We reject the idea that grace allows us to continue sinning or even define ourselves by our sin. We affirm that continuing to sin after a knowledge of the truth profanes the sacrifice of Christ, inviting consuming fear and judgment.²⁹

We affirm that Christ's grace is good news that sets the captive free from sin, recovers the sight of the spiritually blind, and sets at liberty the oppressed.³⁰

We affirm that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,³¹ therefore we humble ourselves before the Lord, living by his grace, refusing to speak evil of others, to make distinctions among ourselves or to become judges with evil thoughts.³²

We confess that we have seen the speck in our brother's eye while ignoring the log in our own eye and hypocritically we have not extended grace to others because we believe we have not been in need of God's gift of forgiveness ourselves.³³

We affirm the unlimited possibility of God's grace to redeem anyone, forgive any sin or repair any relationship because "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."³⁴

5. Together With Christ

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. Romans 12:4-5

The gospel involves the church as the people of God on the mission of God becoming the image of God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit; this is the primary work of our life and is for all whom the Lord calls.

We affirm that the Church takes its form in a band of sinful women and men among whom Jesus Christ, through no virtue of our own, forms a fellowship whose work is to proclaim the free grace of God to the world.

Our presence among the company of Christ's elect supersedes but does not destroy associations with nations, races, governments, families, and tribes. Where those loyalties conflict, we must submit to Jesus Christ, who is over all things and preeminent.³⁵

We reject alliances of expediency that compromise the Gospel—be they with liberal or conservative groups. Neither will we rage powerlessly against the culture as if we are victims of a sinful world rather than victorious in Christ.³⁶

We affirm the breathtaking cultural diversity of humanity as a reflection of the Kingdom of God³⁷ and claim that we are effectively united only as a work of the Holy Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God and heirs of our heavenly Father the King.³⁸

We affirm that the Spirit joins together in unity and the bond of peace God's warring, and wounded children.³⁹ This astonishing unity among sinners made holy demonstrates the character of God to move the world to believe and confess Jesus Christ as Lord.⁴⁰

We reject that we are united in a holy bond of unity by anything else—be it sexual desire, political agendas, shared causes, or even common enemies. Where there is no Spirit-inspired fellowship, there is no Church and no witness.

We confess that we have sought other means to unite us and even rejected God to achieve unity and power behind sinful human leaders, making ourselves "like all the nations."⁴¹

We affirm that the unifying power of the Holy Spirit for the Kingdom requires no fallible human mediator, priest, essential hierarchies, or distinctions. It is available to all women and men called by God who has promised, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."⁴²

6. The Love of Christ

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 1 John 4:19-21

Those who are in Christ are called to love uniquely and are compelled to join Christ's mission of reconciliation in a community that produces ambassadors of Christ who love God and their neighbor as themselves.

We affirm that in love God is reconciling all things to himself.⁴³ The Church loves God and the world by making disciples, baptizing believers in the name of the Triune God and teaching obedience to God's commands.⁴⁴

We affirm there is no love that does not keep the Lord's commands and serve him as King.⁴⁵

We reject the Church serving herself by seeking approval and acceptance from a world that rejects its Maker, winning the world to our good intentions rather than proclaiming Jesus Christ and his propitiation for our sin.⁴⁶ Speaking truth in love can give the impression to the world of intolerance.

We affirm love is patient but not permissive.

We affirm love is kind but not weak.

We affirm love does not rejoice at wrongdoing but in the truth.⁴⁷

We reject the equivocation of love as something that exists apart from God. Love is not love apart from God.⁴⁸ We affirm that Jesus modeled and taught there is no greater love than laying down our life for others.⁴⁹ We reject any claim to love Jesus that does not also love our brother, sister, neighbor, or even our enemy.

We affirm that to receive and share the love of God is to grow into the measure of the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ.⁵⁰

We confess that too often we have only loved those who have loved us, and we have rejected the wounded, the sexually broken, those unlike us, the lost and sinners—the very ones whom Jesus came to heal.⁵¹ In the love of God the glorious hope of the Kingdom that is both present and coming is revealed.

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are ... What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."⁵²

This document, "Gender, Sex, and the Kingdom of God," was drafted by and is reprinted with permission from the Standing Theological Committee of the ECO A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from NRSV.

² 2 Corinthians 5:17.

³ Ephesians 5:8–11.

⁴ Romans 1:21.

⁵ Romans 12:2.

⁶ Philippians 2:2–11.

⁷ Revelation 19:7–8.

⁸ This references Malachi 2:15 which states God seeks ‘godly offspring’ in marriage through the work of the Holy Spirit. We believe ‘godly offspring’ refers to more than just children but all whom a marriage impacts.

⁹ Colossians 2:8.

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:20.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 3:18.

¹² John 1:12.

¹³ John 10:10.

¹⁴ Genesis 1:27. We understand that a small minority of people are born with one of many intersex conditions, which include some form of biological ambiguity, about .018% according to one study published by the National Institute of Health.

¹⁵ Daniel 7:14; Revelation 7:9–10.

¹⁶ Genesis 1:31.

¹⁷ Romans 1:25.

¹⁸ Galatians 5:13, Hebrews 12:2.

¹⁹ Luke 8:17, see also Matthew 12:36; Romans 14:12; Hebrew 4:13, and many others.

²⁰ Galatians 5:1.

²¹ Genesis 2:24–25.

²² Matthew 22:29–30.

²³ Colossians 3:5.

²⁴ Psalm 102:19–20.

²⁵ Luke 22:20.

²⁶ Jeremiah 31:33.

²⁷ Matthew 19:26.

²⁸ Isaiah 43:1.

²⁹ Hebrews 10:26–27.

³⁰ Luke 4:18.

³¹ Romans 3:23.

³² James 2:4, 4:11–12.

³³ Matthew 7:3–5.

³⁴ Lamentations 3:22–23.

³⁵ Colossians 1:15–20.

³⁶ 1 John 5:4.

³⁷ Matthew 8:11.

³⁸ Romans 8:16–17.

³⁹ Ephesians 4:3–6.

⁴⁰ John 17:21.

⁴¹ 1 Samuel 8:5.

⁴² Isaiah 43:6–7.

⁴³ 2 Corinthians 5:18–19; Colossians 1:20.

⁴⁴ Matthew 28:19–20.

⁴⁵ John 14:15.

⁴⁶ 1 John 4:9–10.

⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:4–6.

⁴⁸ 1 John 4:7–12.

⁴⁹ John 15:13.

⁵⁰ Ephesians 4:11–16; Philippians 3:12–14.

⁵¹ Mark 2:17.

⁵² 1 John 3:1–3.

Since our founding in 1994, when several American mainline denominations officially supported an effort to “re-imagine” Christianity and align the church with radically progressive cultural and political movements, *Theology Matters* has provided an important resource for congregational leaders who have sought to think through various theological challenges, temptations, and opportunities of our times.

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