



Gemeinschaft Evangelischer Kirchen in Europa (GEKE)  
Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)  
Communion d'Eglises Protestantes en Europe (CEPE)

## **The importance of the Barmen Theological Declaration**

### **A statement by the Council of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe on the 75th anniversary of the Declaration**

The Barmen Theological Declaration, with which in 1934 the Confessing Synod of the German Evangelical Church in Wuppertal-Barmen marked itself off from the ideology of National Socialism which had permeated the churches, is assuming increasing importance in the churches of the CPCE. In the German member churches of the CPCE it is being given the status of a normative witness of faith. At the same time the Barmen Theological Declaration has an ecumenical dimension which points far beyond Germany. So it has found its way into many Protestant church ordinances all over the world.

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Confessing Synod of Barmen, the Council of the CPCE celebrates the Barmen Theological Declaration as an important document on the way to the Leuenberg Agreement and recalls its abiding importance for the churches in Europe.

#### **1. Serving the community**

*“We commit to God what this may mean for the relationship of the confessing churches with each other” (Barmen Theological Declaration, Preface)*

In a “time of common need and tribulation” it has become possible for members of synods from Lutheran, Reformed and United churches to confess “a common word” and in so doing be able “to be and remain true to their diverse confessions”. That would open up the way which then led to the “church fellowship...among churches with different confessional positions” (Leuenberg Agreement 29).

The churches of the CPCE have committed themselves “to promote the ecumenical fellowship of all Christian churches” (Leuenberg Agreement 46). The Barmen Theological Declaration is an encouragement even in difficult situations to seek what the churches have in common and through dialogue to arrive at common witness in the challenges of the present day

#### **2. Hearing the one Word of God**

*“Jesus Christ, as he is testified to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and obey in life and in death” (Barmen Theological Declaration 1)*

The Barmen Theological Declaration rejects as false teaching that "outside and alongside this one Word of God" yet other events and powers can be recognized as a part of the church's proclamation. In the same way the Leuenberg Agreement puts the gospel as "the message of Jesus Christ, the salvation of the world" (Leuenberg Agreement 7) at the centre of all its statements.

The revelation of the triune God in Jesus Christ is the sole foundation of the life of the church. The church has also to bear witness to this today and time and again bring it to bear in present-day contexts.

### **3. Serving from freedom**

*"... Jesus Christ the pledge of the forgiveness of all our sins... also God's mighty claim on our whole life" (Barmen Theological Declaration 2).*

From "joyous liberation from the godless claims of this world" there follows "free and thankful service to God's creation". The Leuenberg Agreement also recognizes as a consequence of justification freedom "for responsible service in the world" and defines this as "standing up for temporal justice and peace between individuals and nations" (Leuenberg Agreement 11).

This combination of freedom and responsibility is a special mark of the Protestant church in its social involvement. The Barmen Theological Declaration strengthens it "in giving clear witness in word and action in the present challenges of global insecurity, violent conflicts and the destruction of the natural foundations of life".

### **4. Shaping the church**

*The Christian church attests "with her faith as well as her obedience, with her message as well as her ordinances, that she is Christ's alone" (Barmen Theological Declaration 3).*

Like the Barmen Theological Declaration, the Leuenberg Agreement emphasizes that the church is founded on Jesus Christ alone, "who gathers the Church and sends it forth, by the bestowal of his salvation in preaching and the sacraments" (Leuenberg Agreement 2).

According to the understanding of the Leuenberg Agreement, church fellowship is not a formal principle but something which is lived out and proved time and again in orientation on Jesus Christ. Accordingly, the shaping of the church cannot simply follow political or social factors. In its ordinances, too, the church must bear witness to the one to whom it belongs.

### **5. Preaching the gospel**

*"The commission of the church, in which her freedom is founded, consists in this: in place of Christ and thus in the service of his own word and work to extend through word and sacrament the message of the free grace of God to all people" (Barmen Theological Declaration 6)*

According to the Barmen Theological Declaration the church's task is not of its own choosing. The Leuenberg Agreement, too, commits the churches to determine their

action and their shape slowly in terms of bearing witness in the world (Leuenberg Agreement 4).

Handing on the gospel to all men and women is of the essence of the church. The message of the free grace of God holds for all people, including those who supposedly stand far off. It brings liberation to hand on the gospel, particularly in situations which seem difficult and hopeless.

Oslo, 17 January 2009

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## **Explanations**

### ***Barmen Theological Declaration***

*With the Barmen Theological Declaration in 1934 the "Confessing Church" in Germany marked itself off clearly from National Socialism. It was worked out essentially by Karl Barth and passed at the first Confessing Synod in Wuppertal-Barmen from 29-31 May 1934. It is regarded as pioneering witness to the teaching and faith of the church in the twentieth century. For some German regional churches it is even one of the confessional foundations on which pastors are ordained. Therefore it is printed in full in the Evangelisches Gesangbuch, the hymn book used in most German-language Protestant churches.*

### ***Leuenberg Agreement***

*The Leuenberg Agreement is the fundamental theological document of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) The passing of the Agreement on 16 March 1973, which was preceded by decades of doctrinal conversations, ended a separation between churches in Europe which had lasted for more than 450 years. The member churches, now numbering 105 from 29 countries, grant each other fellowship of pulpit and eucharist. They reciprocally recognize ordination and ministries. The Agreement is the foundation for the ecumenical model of the CPCE, "unity in reconciled diversity".*