

# A Response to George Hunsinger

Jacques Ellul

To begin: I want to emphasize my agreement with Professor Hunsinger, first about the necessity of rediscovering the way of a Confessing Church and, second, rejecting "Protestantism Without Reformation." I agree that it is necessary to adopt political and social positions on theological foundations, and that biblical theology carries political/social consequences. But at the same time, the essay raises many questions for me. I shall raise only a few.

First, there is a fundamental difference today between the American churches and the Federation of French Protestants. In general French Protestants follow the orientation of the World Council of Churches (WCC): Come to political decisions; issue statements and proclamations! Official statements from French Protestants support the left, socialism, and (under the guise of defending the poor) all revolutionary movements in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. On the questions of nuclear and conventional weapons, but also artificial procreation, homosexuality, abortion . . . the French Protestant church is perfectly conformed to the majority of our population and brings absolutely nothing specifically *Christian* to the situation. The Federation of French Protestants has no theological thought whatsoever (certainly no more than the World Council of Churches on political problems and intervenes in the most irresponsible way in socio/political matters.<sup>1</sup>) What shocks me is that the Federation proclaims what is "good" without having to *do* "good" and without itself having to take any risks. What would our French pastors do if they suddenly became Ministers of State? I am sure they would do the same things our current ministers do. The Federation's attitude to socio/political issues is totally unrealistic, *not* Christian but "idealistic" in the worst sense of the word. It is one thing to pronounce all sorts of condemnations against the State's politics, stage demonstrations; it is another to take risks. The Federation takes no risks, and this is contrary to the situation of the members of the Synod of Barmen in 1934.

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JACQUES ELLUL is Professor of Law and Jurisprudence, Emeritus, the University of Bordeaux, and a member of the Editorial Board of *Katallagete*. His most recent books published in the United States include *The Betrayal of the West*, *Apocalypse*, *The Ethics of Freedom*, *The New Demons*, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*, and most recently, *The Subversion of Christianity*.

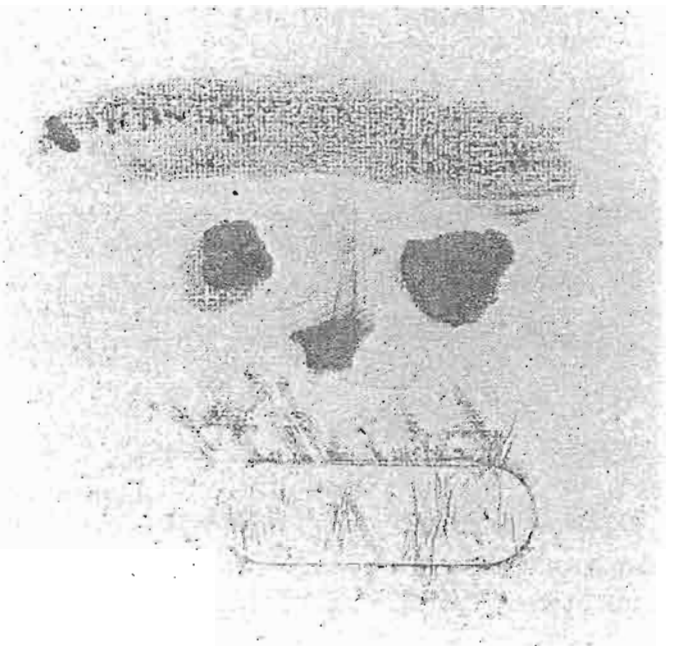
Second, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the vast difference between the United States today and Nazi Germany in the '30s. It is true that the United States is responsible for Hiroshima, the arms build-up and the horrors of the Vietnam War, etc. But there is a difference: the United States has a morality that *officially* condemns these horrors. They have a religion which is *officially* a religion of love and peace. They have signed the Declaration of Human Rights. So, it is possible for Americans to turn against their State when it is wrong and to say, "This is your religion, your morals, your ethics, what you are doing is a horrible violation of your principles." In the Nazi or Communist regimes, it is not the same: Hitler clearly announced his determination to exterminate the Jews and his determination to dominate the world with his theory of the salvation of man through war. When Hitler acted, he simply applied his morals and theories to the situation. The Communists do the same thing. They clearly announce that they seek to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat (in fact, of the Communist party) and consequently annihilate a part of their population. What is there to criticize when the Nazis and the Communists act according to what they have announced? They are justified by their own doctrines. The atrocities perpetrated by the Communists in Vietnam and in Cambodia are worse than the Americans' (and this does not in any way justify the Americans!). Remember: condemnations of guilty officers are possible in the United States, but nothing can be said or done against officers of the Nazi and communistic regimes.

Third: "The End and the Means." I am in complete agreement with Professor Hunsinger about the importance he gives to criticism and understanding of "the means." I have often written that *technique* is precisely the proliferation of "the means." "The means" must be considered before everything else. "Bad means corrupt the best ends." But . . . can abominable "ends" be accepted? In fact, it is unusual to find situations as clear as German Nazism in 1932. Communism may give the illusion of supporting the poor, the oppressed, the colonized, etc. . . . But one must read their theoreticians to appreciate their announced objectives: class war, dictatorship of the proletariat, physical elimination of the "bourgeoisie."

<sup>1</sup> See the World Council of Churches Conference at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1979 on "technique," *Faith and Science in an Unjust World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

Consequently I do not hesitate to say that the American "cause" of the Vietnam War was "just." To fight communism is essential. Wherever communism has spread, there are dictatorships, concentration camps, etc. Communist dictatorship in Vietnam has brought on a million victims, and in Cambodia, two and a half million—many more victims than in the whole Vietnam war. And I would say that the brave people who fought against the Vietnam war, as led by the American government, were right with regard to the atrocious acts connected with this war. However, they are *totally* responsible for these three and a half million victims. I know what I am writing here is going to scandalize the readers of *Katallagete*. But I immediately add this: the United States' enormous error has always been (as their policy in China in the '40s and '50s) the conviction that a communist movement can be suppressed with arms, war, etc. Whatever the strength and the atrocity of the military means, a communist movement will never be destroyed either by war or police force or repression. Any communist movement or government possesses extraordinary tactics *and* legitimates itself (false, to be sure, yet generally believed) by defending the oppressed. The means used by the United States in Vietnam were not only horrible but also stupid. (American policy in Vietnam was exactly like the McCarthyism of the '50s.) What is the source of this horror and stupidity? For the last twenty years I have had sixty or so American graduate students in my courses. I found them totally ignorant of Marxist-Leninist texts and other major communist authors. Even those who had "taken a course" on Marx in the States had enormous difficulty entering into the reasoning of Marxist epistemology. I fear that the entire American *intellectual training* and *cultural milieu* make it almost impossible for students to understand seriously Marxism-Leninism and the great "strategy-tactics" perfected by the well-known Marxists. And if the students and scholars don't understand, one should not be surprised that their governments can only react to communism with violence. Today we have the same problem with Nicaragua. In other words, a Confessing Church (and I am in total agreement with Professor Hunsinger about "the center" and "the periphery") must now also be *clear-sighted, lucid, and know exactly what it is talking about*. It was easy with Nazism, it is much more difficult with Communism. The Confessing Church can no longer make simple and obvious commitments ("we are for the poor, the oppressed, against the dictatorships, for human rights," etc). Castro's movement was very appealing before he took power, exactly like the Sandinistas. We ought to have examined their writings and intentions. The "theology of liberation" *may be* (but not necessarily) a wonderful instrument in the hands of the Marxists. In Nicaragua, José Cardenal rejects his priesthood and is ready to persecute the Church for the sake of a communist dictatorship. But (I will repeat it one more time) it is not with the Contras that the Sandinista government will be prevented from becoming communist. If the Contras win, this will simply end with a dictatorship of the right instead of a dictatorship of the left. The poor and the Indians (Meskitos) will have gained nothing.

Finally, I would like to make this observation: the Confessing Church issue raised by Professor Hunsinger focuses on the conflict between the Church and political power, that is, it's better to obey God than men. Now, if this problem remains a real one, I believe that in the present world we cannot limit the conflicts to the themes held by Professor Hunsinger: the policy of the United States toward the Third World, and the development of the means of exterminating entire populations. I must emphasize two urgent dangers. The striking expansion of fundamentalist Islam: the Shi'ites' fanaticism, the proclamation of Jihad and, as a matter of fact, the wars undertaken by Moslems everywhere they are in sufficient numbers. This ought to make us think about the problems of the Third World: for instance, no one speaks of the massacre of the Christian populations in the south Sudan by the Sudan Moslem government. The other danger is the expansion of *techniques* seemingly benign. One example: we are threatened by the "holes" that are produced in the ozone layer by the space rockets and by the wild expansion of the use of neutral gas, freon (for all the aerosols) which is an agent destroying the ozone. If our ozone shield is shattered all mankind will be "grilled," a danger much less visible but more serious than hydrogen rockets. In other words, a Confessing Church must be well-informed on the real problems of society, science, and technique. The affirmation of Jesus Christ, our only Lord and Savior, must not be expressed simply through political opposition to a dictatorship here and there but through a condemnation of all *hybris*: the money, arms and armies, ideology, science—that is, any "religion" presenting another Savior of the World and another Truth. □



# Barth, Barmen and the Confessing Church Today: Summary of the Original Text

George Hunsinger

The essay was essentially a meditation on loyalty. It suggested that we stand in a two-fold crisis—political and theological—and that the crisis is rooted in disordered loyalties. A Confessing Church, as the proposed response to the crisis, would be one which got its theological and political loyalties straight. Despite the crying need for such a Church as described in the essay, little prospect was held out that one would emerge in our midst. The essay nevertheless offered a “thought-experiment” about what a Confessing Church might look like in our time.

The political need for a Confessing Church was developed in terms of an analogy between the German situation fifty years ago and our situation at present. Just as the Church had allowed itself to become an accomplice of the political executioners in Nazi Germany, it was argued, so the Church allows itself to become an accomplice of the political executioners in America today. Then as now the Church allowed itself to be casual, indifferent and callous when faced with crimes against humanity and assaults against peace. Then the crimes involved the slaughter of many millions of Europeans, most especially Jews, as well as the massive, deliberate starvation of civilian populations and prisoners of war. Today the crimes involve the torture, terror-bombing and mass murder of civilian populations, most especially but not exclusively in Central America, as well as the massive, deliberate build-up of nuclear weapons and other indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction. These weapons, it was argued, are intrinsically evil, and therefore forfeit all right to our consent. They cannot be used without violating even the most minimal rules of warfare to which the Church has historically committed itself (the laws of discrimination, noncombatant immunity, etc.) Nuclear weapons were taken to particularly heinous, since they threaten to terminate history itself. The words of Albert Camus were put to the Church: “All I ask,” he wrote, “is that, in the midst of a murderous world, we agree to reflect on murder and to make a choice. After that, we can distinguish those who accept the consequences of being murderers themselves or the accomplices of murderers, and those who refuse to do so with all their force and being.”

The theological need for a Confessing Church today was developed in terms of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s essay “Protestantism Without Reformation.” The results of Bonhoeffer’s analysis were then applied to two supposedly divergent positions on our theological scene, those of Richard J. Neuhaus and Harvey Cox. Despite appearances to the contrary, it was argued, the deep structure of their theologies is essentially the same. In his essay Bonhoeffer had concluded that “God has granted American Christianity no Reformation.” For this conclusion he offered five main reasons. In barest outline they are: (1) that in American Christianity the truth claims of confession and creed are discounted, (2) that toleration is stressed to the point of relativism, (3) that the freedom of God’s Word is confused with the “freedom of religion” the State permits the Church, (4) that the Church supposes its primary social mission to be the guiding of governmental policy-formation, and finally (5) that doctrinal matters such as the person and work of Jesus Christ are eclipsed by a concern for religious experience and ethical practice. In particular, it is the subservience of doctrine to experience and ethics, Bonhoeffer stressed, that has opened up an “almost incalculably deep opposition” between American Christianity and the continental Reformation.

When this analysis is applied to the theologies of Neuhaus and Cox, what emerges is that they both exemplify Bonhoeffer’s Protestantism without Reformation. Although their political views are very different, the logic of their theological argumentation is essentially the same. Above all, they both assign a functional or instrumental value to religion, most notably the Christian religion. Truth claims are discounted, relativism reigns in the guise of tolerance, the freedom of God’s Word gets no mention, policy-formation is the overriding goal, and doctrine is important primarily as a means to social ends. From this point of view what matters is not so much the ends—for Neuhaus they are legitimizationist and imperialist, whereas for Cox they are anti-imperialist and revolutionary—as the debased way in which theology is made to support them. Where Jesus Christ is worshipped for reasons of cultural utility, it was argued, he is not worshipped as Lord, and to that extent he is not worshipped at all. No prospect was foreseen for a Confessing Church in America until we can move beyond the crisis of Protestantism without Reformation.

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GEORGE HUNSINGER is a Presbyterian minister who teaches theology at Bangor Theological Seminary, Maine. He is the editor of *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Westminster, 1976).

The focus of the essay then shifted from the need for a Confessing Church today to lessons from the Confessing Church of yesterday. Three points in particular were made: (1) that the Church resists by confessing, (2) that confession without resistance is not enough, and (3) that confession is the center and resistance the periphery. Each point will be summarized in turn.

First, the Church resists by confessing. As illustrated by the Barmen Declaration of 1934, written primarily by Karl Barth, circumstances may arise when the Church must formally reaffirm its loyalty to Jesus Christ above all else. The Church thereby strives to disentangle itself from false and disordered loyalties which have insinuated themselves into its common life. The first article of the Barmen Declaration is such an 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." This affirmation is at once a declaration of loyalty and an act of resistance. Loyalty is declared to Jesus Christ, as attested in Scripture, as the exclusive source of authority for the Church. None other can carry this authority; none other is the living Word of God. Resistance is thereby mounted against all attempts to relativize and domesticate the Gospel by compromising the exclusivity of our loyalty to Jesus Christ. In particular, any loyalty is to be resisted which would turn Jesus Christ into an instrumental value for the achievement of secular ends.

Second, confession without resistance is not enough. What the Church confesses in word must, in a *status confessionis*, be followed by resistance in deed. At this point not only the German Confessing Church, but the Barmen Declaration itself were said to leave something to be desired. These shortcomings were pointed out in full acknowledgement of the great heritage the German Confessing Church has bequeathed to us, but for the sake of the future they could not be overlooked. The German Confessing Church fought for the purity of its proclamation, but remained tragically silent about much, in Barth's words, "against which the Old Testament prophets would certainly have spoken out." The Confessing Church feared accusations of disloyalty to the nation more than it feared practical apostasy. It could not bear the unthinkable thought that "disloyalty" to the nation might be the cost of the loyalty it confessed to Jesus Christ. This aversion to resistance by deed, this refusal of political "disloyalty," this compromise with unspeakable crime, was not helped by the vagueness of the Barmen Declaration itself. The spirit of the Declaration, it might be said, did not fully come to expression in the letter. Barth consistently interpreted the Declaration's spirit (rightly so, in my opinion) as a mandate for political resistance, while the Confessing Church sought refuge in the vagueness of the letter. Be that as it may, with reference to the present, the essay concluded that it is hard to see how a State sponsoring crimes against humanity (systematic human rights violations in Third World client states) and assaults against peace (the mindless proliferation of indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction including "first-strike" nuclear weapons) could reasonably be regarded, under a Barthian reading of the Declaration, as not inspiring here and now a similar mandate to resistance.

Third, confession is the center and resistance the periphery. The difference from instrumentalism was here to be made clear. Resistance by deed is based on confession by word. Yet confession by word is not subservient to resistance by deed. Resistance can be an implication of confession. But confession is not instrumentally related to resistance. Confession is always an action to be undertaken for its own sake. In the face of competing loyalties, it is a matter of clarifying the Church's exclusive loyalty to its Lord. It is a matter of rejecting competitors for the overriding loyalty of the Church. Whether or not political resistance might be called for in any particular situation is a "peripheral" matter. It is "peripheral" in the sense that it presupposes confessional clarity at the center of the Church's life. Only when there is confessional clarity at the center, it was argued, can the Church make responsible political decisions at the periphery.

The essay then shifted focus for the last time in order to ask about prospects for a Confessing Church tomorrow. Various possible prototypes and hopeful trends were lifted up in the face of our otherwise less than promising situation. The vitality of the black church in America was remembered, especially because it generally displays a healthier understanding than the white church of how the Gospel and its political implications are related. The base communities and church of martyrs in Latin America today were invoked as a model of spiritual renewal and political witness. The Sanctuary Movement underway in the United States was taken as an uplifting sign that even among us some churches have learned how to make the crucial choice between being an American and being a Christian as one's primary self-identification. Finally, the seeds of spiritually grounded civil disobedience, seeds which could blossom into a movement of immense importance, were honored by pointing to those who are willing to give of their lives that we and our children might be spared a nuclear death. The essay ended on the note of being perplexed but not unto despair, and concluded with a plea for prayer.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Since my original essay, a number of books have appeared about the Barmen Declaration and the Confessing Church: Rolf Ahlers, *The Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986); Shelly Baranowski, *The Confessing Church, Conservative Elite and the Nazi State* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986); *The Barmen Confession: Papers from the Seattle Assembly*, Hubert G. Locke, ed. (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986); *The Church Confronts the Nazis: Barmen Then and Now*, Hubert G. Locke, ed. (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984); Klaus Sholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).