

NO "SPOKE IN THE WHEEL": THE GERMAN
EVANGELICAL CHURCH AND THE NAZI STATE

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EVANGELICAL CHURCH AND THE NAZI STATE

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Abstract: This study focuses on the relationship between the German Evangelical Church and the Nazi state from 1933-1945 and the reasons why the Church did not oppose state policies of persecution of the Jews. Through primary sources of sermons, synodal decisions, and memoirs, this study finds that during the years of the Third Reich, the German Evangelical Church retreated into itself. The internal conflicts that some historians have termed "the Church Struggle" distracted the Church from problems in the state. While some individuals within the Church did oppose state policies, the German Evangelical Church, as an institution, only protested when it felt directly threatened by the state.

There are three possible ways in which the church can act towards the state: in the first place, as has been said, it can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate and in accordance with its character as state, i.e. it can throw the state back on its responsibilities. Secondly, it can aid the victims of state action. The church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community. 'Do good to all men.' In both these courses of action, the church serves the free state in its free way, and at times when laws are changed the church may in no way withdraw from these two tasks. The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself. Such action would be direct political action, and is only possible and desirable when the church sees the state fail in its function of creating law and order, i.e. when it sees the state unrestrainedly bring about too much or too little law and order. In both cases it must see the existence of the state, and with it its own existence, threatened.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*

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CHRONOLOGY OF IMPORTANT EVENTS

30 January 1933	Hitler appointed chancellor
April 1933	Aryan Paragraph applied to civil service
July 1933	Church elections; German Christians (members of the Faith Movement of German Christians, a racist and anti-doctrinal group) gain majority
November 1933	Sportspalast rally- German Christian agenda made public, creating intense backlash
29-31 May 1934	Barmen Synod; creation of the Confessing Church
October 1934	Dahlem Synod: organization of the Confessing Church
September 1935	Nuremberg Race Laws passed
May 1936	Church leaders send memo to Hitler in the boldest (and only) opposition to come from the institutional church
March 1938	Anschluss (German annexation of Austria)
9-10 November 1938	Kristallnacht pogrom (Night of the Broken Glass)
1 September 1939	Germany invades Poland; Britain and France declare war two days later
September 1939	Euthanasia program made official (it had already been going on)
21 June 1941	Germany invades the Soviet Union
20 January 1942	Wannsee Conference; the Final Solution to the Jewish problem

9 April 1945	Bonhoeffer hanged at Flossenbürg concentration camp
30 April 1945	Hitler commits suicide
8 May 1945	Germany surrenders
April 1950	Berlin-Weissensee Synod; Church's declaration of guilt

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Almost exactly five years after the end of World War II, the German Evangelical Church (*Evangelische Kirche Deutschland*) acknowledged its complicity in Nazi atrocities. The Berlin-Weissensee Synod of April 1950 was the first such declaration of guilt to address the Jews specifically. It stated: “We confess that we have become guilty before the God of compassion by our omission and silence and thus share the blame for the terrible crimes committed against Jews by members of our nation.”¹ These confessions of guilt did little to explain why the Church had kept silent, but they did recognize that their lack of opposition allowed the Nazi regime to commit heinous crimes against humanity.

Despite the Church’s own admittance of guilt, the historiography of the churches in Nazi Germany began by accepting the idea that Nazi policies prevented resistance from the churches. Early writers on the Third Reich and the Holocaust largely ignored the role of the churches, but by the 1960s histories focusing on the churches emerged. John Conway published his work, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, in 1968. As the title suggests, Conway asserts that Nazi actions against the churches explains why they did not oppose the state. Conway argues that the intensity of Nazi persecution was not constant, and that the Nazis directed their restrictive policies against the established Catholic and Protestant churches as well as the Free Churches. Some of the most

¹ Hartmut Schmidt, “First EKD confession of guilt over crimes against Jews,” *EKD Bulletin* 02 (2000) <https://www.ekd.de/english/1693-2861.html> (accessed 17 October 2013).

useful parts of Conway's book are the primary source documents he includes in the appendices. Conway's thesis that Nazi persecution caused the inaction of the churches is representative of early English-language scholarship.² This idea does not completely excuse the churches from their lack of opposition, but rather explains church response by relying on outside forces.

Increasingly, scholars moved away from excusing the Church's inaction, typically calling the problems in the German Evangelical Church the "Church Struggle" (*Kirchenkampf*). In this narrative, the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) becomes the "good guys," opposed to the German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*).³ The Faith Movement of German Christians was a racist movement that agitated for a national church free from Jewish influence.⁴ In fact, despite the necessity of opposing groups for the narrative of the "Church Struggle" to make sense, many historians overlook the importance of the German Christians. The accepted story is that after their disgrace at the Sports Palace rally in November 1933, the German Christians began to disappear from German Protestant life and the Confessing Church became the dominant group. This accepted history begins in the late 1970s with Ernst Helmreich, who published *The German Churches Under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* in 1979. In his treatment of the Protestant Church, Helmreich focuses on the Confessing Church, adding to the exalted view of their opposition. Helmreich recognizes that the Confessing Church formed in response to the growing influence of the German Christians, but downplays the significance of the German Christians after 1933.

The view of the Church Struggle that exalted the Confessing Church remained relatively unchallenged in the literature until the 1990s and 2000s. Farther removed from the Nazi era, historians began to challenge the accepted narrative of the Church Struggle. Victoria J. Barnett,

² John S. Conway. *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-45* (New York: Basic Books, 1968). See also: Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).

³ See chapter two for a detailed explanation of these two groups and the conflict between them.

⁴ Whenever this paper uses the term "German Christians," it will always refer to this movement, not to other Christians who were German.

director for Church Relations at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, published her book, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler*, in 1992. She interviewed members of the Confessing Church as a large part of her research. To answer why more Protestants did not take a more definite stand against the Nazis, Barnett gives the typical explanations of Lutheran theology, German nationalism, and ingrained anti-Semitism. Despite the impressive research, Barnett's book lacks perspective on the German Christians, and thus gives an incomplete picture of the German Evangelical Church. In addition, by using interviews of those Confessing Church members who did actually resist in some way, she perpetuates the view that the Confessing Church as a whole acted in opposition to the Nazi state.

In the midst of such a sparse history of the German Christians from historians writing about the Protestant Church during the Nazi years, Doris Bergen's *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*, stands alone. As such, it is incredibly valuable to understanding this under-discussed movement. Bergen, a history professor at the University of Toronto, analyzes the German Christian movement in its own right, not just as the object of Confessing Church opposition. She describes the movement as being anti-doctrinal, masculine, and anti-Semitic. Bergen makes good use of archival material and her book makes the history of the German Christians more accessible to researchers. She proves that the German Christians did not disappear from church life and politics at any point during the Nazi regime.

Sparking great controversy in Germany with the publication of his book in 1985, Wolfgang Gerlach dared to criticize the Confessing Church. He went against the traditional, accepted narrative that presented the Confessing Church as the "good guys," and instead showed that for the most part, the Confessing Church actually did very little, if anything, to help the Jews. At a time when the accepted narrative was one of high regard for the Confessing Church, and when many Confessing members were still alive, Gerlach faced great criticism. Still, his boldness

adds richness to the historiography because he challenged the traditional story. His book was first published in German, and appeared in English almost fifteen years later, in 2000.⁵

Historians have covered other facets of Protestantism during the Nazi Regime. Some emphasize the nature of Lutheran theology and the legacy of Luther himself as reasons for Protestants' acceptance of Hitler, the Nazis, and their anti-Semitism.⁶ Still others make arguments about the political religion of the Nazis, highlighting the rituals and pseudo-religious atmosphere of Party functions. These historians do not explain the Protestant Church's behavior during the Third Reich, except to assert that many Protestants became caught up in the Nazi religion. Though theories of political religion had already started to become popular, Richard Steigmann-Gall set off a flurry of debate with *The Holy Reich*. Steigmann-Gall does not claim to analyze any sort of political religion, but rather asserts that many within the Nazi Party considered themselves and their movement to be a Christian movement. His work sparked strong criticism in reviews and a renewed interest in the connection between religion and politics in the Third Reich.⁷

More recently, Robert P. Ericksen published *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* in 2012.⁸ Ericksen goes further than most historians seem willing to go by claiming that German churches and universities enthusiastically accepted Nazi ideology and thus became active participants in the persecution of the Jews. Not only did churches fail to

⁵ Wolfgang Gerlach, *And the Witnesses Were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Persecution of the Jews*, Translated and Edited by Victoria J. Barnett, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000)

⁶ For examples, see: Christopher J. Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012) and Susannah Heschel, "Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life," *Church History* 63 (Dec 1994), 587-605.

⁷ Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also: Doris L. Bergen, "Nazism and Christianity: Partners or Rivals? A Response to Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich. Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945*," *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (Jan 2007), 25-33; Manfred Gailus, "A Strange Obsession with Nazi Christianity: A Critical Comment on Richard Steigmann-Gall's *The Holy Reich*," *Journal of Contemporary History* 42 (Jan 2007), 35-46; and Milan Babík, "Nazism as a Secular Religion," *History and Theory* 45 (Oct 2006), 375-396.

⁸ Robert P. Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2012.

act in opposition, theologians and clergy provided laypeople with the justification they sought to support Hitler's regime. Ericksen includes both the Protestant and Catholic churches as well as major universities in his analysis. He also examines the denazification process in both churches and universities. Ericksen's study shows that scholars are moving away from excusing the actions or inaction of the Protestant Church and are instead finding that the Church's problematic position in Nazi Germany requires further analysis.

While English-language literature on the churches in the Third Reich is growing and changing, the German-language historiography (those works not translated into English) is also developing. The brother of the famous Martin Niemöller, Wilhelm, published resources on the Church Struggle quickly after the end of the war. His *Die Evangelische Kirche im Dritten Reich: Handbuch des Kirchenkampfes* provides an outline of people, events, and sermons to aid researchers. Niemöller lived in the time he writes about and his book serves as a helpful resource.⁹ In Germany, theologians are more likely to be interested in church history than are historians. In 1984 the Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann released his study of the theology of the Confessing Church, *Bekennende Kirche wagen: Barmen 1934-1984*. Moltmann examines how Confessing theology developed at the Barmen Synod in 1934 and how it continued to influence the German Evangelical Church in the postwar period.¹⁰ Wolfgang Stegemann's *Kirche und Nationalsozialismus* is a collection of essays from a series of lectures commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht. As a theologian, Stegemann shows how the theology of the Church during the Third Reich was flawed. The anthology also includes a memoir from Bishop Kurt Scharf. While Scharf acknowledges the Church's mistakes, he defensively insists that today's historians cannot fully understand the totalitarian state.¹¹ More recently, Manfred Gailus presented an anthology of essays in 2008 in *Kirchliche Amtshilfe: die Kirche und die*

⁹ Wilhelm Niemöller, *Die Evangelische Kirche im Dritten Reich: Handbuch des Kirchenkampfes* (Bielefeld: Ludwig Bechauf Verlag, 1956)

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *Bekennende Kirche wagen: Barmen 1934-1984* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1984).

¹¹ Wolfgang Stegemann, *Kirche und Nationalsozialismus* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1992).

Judenverfolgung im "Dritten Reich." The scholars who contribute to this anthology collectively argue that the Church actively assisted the state in the persecution of the Jews by providing the state access to church records. Gailus himself goes as far as to characterize this process as persecution of Christians in the Church.¹² Just as historians writing in English, like Robert Ericksen, are beginning to place more blame on the Church, the same trend is taking shape in Germany.

The historiography of the Protestant Church in the Third Reich is still being shaped. Historians have largely moved away from the narrative of the persecution of the churches in favor of a more complicated story of a Church Struggle. Still, despite some criticism, the Confessing Church is generally held in high esteem and the role of the German Christians is downplayed. A better explanation of the German Evangelical Church's response to Nazism must recognize the importance of the German Christian movement and bring the Confessing Church back down to realistic levels. Neither Nazi persecution, nor a "Church Struggle" in which one side quickly disappears adequately explains why the Protestant Church did not do more to oppose the National Socialist regime in Germany.

Though the Protestant Church was in a position to influence the state, an inward focus prevented it from speaking out against the injustices of the Nazi state.. Divisions between the German Christians and the Confessing Church helped to cause this inward focus, but ultimately the Church remained silent as long as state actions did not directly affect the institution or its members. When it came to facing the Jewish Question, even the Confessing Church acted only to protect Jews who were church members. As a group, the Church did not take action outside its sphere. The German Evangelical Church placed its institutional interests above humanitarian ones.

¹²Manfred Gailus, *Kirchliche Amtshilfe: die Kirche und die Judenverfolgung im "Dritten Reich."* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

This paper follows the historiographical trend away from glorifying the Confessing Church or finding excuses for the inaction of the German Evangelical Church as a whole. I seek to provide an explanation for why the Church did not do more to oppose Nazi policies of persecution. Unlike Robert Ericksen's critique of major institutions, I focus solely on the German Evangelical Church. The overarching reason that the Church did not speak up for the Jews or for any other persecuted group in Germany is that it became mired in its own self-interest. This inward focus stemmed from a variety of factors examined in the following chapters.

Chapter two analyzes the influence of the Protestant Church in Germany. The Church historically had a special position in cooperation with the German state, giving it influence with the state. Also, over half of the German population belonged to the German Evangelical Church, and most of these members remained in the Church through World War II. Thus, the Protestant Church had the potential not only to influence the state against certain policies, but also had the potential to influence German citizens to take a stand against the state. However, as the chapter emphasizes, the cozy relationship with the state and a narrow interpretation of Lutheran theology concerning church and state relations prevented the Church from seizing its opportunity and instead staying in its own church realm.

Chapter three argues that the internal divisions within the German Evangelical Church (the *Kirchenkampf* that earlier literature isolated) distracted the Church from outside considerations. The Faith Movement of German Christians (simply referred to as German Christians) began in the 1920s, but gained prominent positions in church government in 1933. Opposition started with Martin Niemöller and the Pastors' Emergency League. The opposition consolidated into the Confessing Church by 1934. Despite the backlash suffered after Dr. Reinhold Krause's speech at the Sportspalast rally in November 1933, the German Christians retained their importance in the church hierarchy and the Confessing Church continued to fight against German Christian control. In the midst of such an intense power struggle, the German

Evangelical Church drew inward and focused on its own problems instead of what was happening in the state.

Chapter four analyzes anti-Semitism and national loyalty in the Church. Anti-Semitism was deeply ingrained in German Protestant culture and the opposing groups of German Christians and Confessing Christians used “Jewish” as a term of insult. The Church’s anti-Semitism caused churchpeople to ignore the plight of the Jews. The Church also faced controversy over a loyalty oath to Hitler in the late 1930s. Rather than respond to the Jewish persecution of Kristallnacht, the Church argued about swearing allegiance to the Führer.

Finally, chapter five interprets the limited resistance from German Protestants. In 1936, church leaders sent a memo to Hitler asking that he leave the church alone. The memo also opposed concentration camps. This memo is the only example of opposition to Nazi policies from the German Evangelical Church as an institution, and the Church quickly backed away from its position. Individual pastors and church members did act to oppose the state, whether by making statements in sermons or by providing assistance to the Jews, but these individuals could expect no help from their church. Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, two of the more widely known and revered Confessing pastors, are examined in more depth.

CHAPTER II

THE INFLUENCE OF THE GERMAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH

From as far back as the sixteenth century, what became the German Evangelical Church occupied a special position in relation to the state. This position gave the Church the potential to influence the state. Theology and tradition, however, persuaded church leaders to stay out of political affairs and rather confine themselves to matters that directly affected the Church. The German Evangelical Church also counted a majority of German citizens among its members, meaning that the Church could influence wide segments of the population and mobilize ordinary Germans to act in accordance with church doctrine. When pastors, theologians, and leaders at the top of the Church hierarchy supported the Nazis, Germans could justify their actions as well.

By 1933, when Adolf Hitler came to power, the German Evangelical Church had achieved some degree of unity. Evangelicals¹³ were primarily divided by regional boundaries until the German Evangelical Church Confederation attempted to bring national unity in May 1922.¹⁴ Efforts to create unity among the *Land* Churches (regional churches, often divided by state) in Germany began with a request from the German Evangelical Workers' Organization. The Organization requested that the German Evangelical Church Committee call a national convention, which it did, and the convention was held in Dresden in September, 1919. Two years

¹³ This term, in the context of Germany, refers to Protestants of the Lutheran, Reformed, and United traditions.

¹⁴ Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The German Churches Under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), 71.

later the constitution was accepted and the officially united German Evangelical became reality.¹⁵ The Church's three-fold constitutional purpose was to "protect and represent the common interests of the German Evangelical Land churches; to cultivate the common consciousness of German Protestantism; and to support the religious-ethical Weltanschauung¹⁶ of the German churches of the Reformation."¹⁷ The Confederation was also responsible for protecting church independence and collectively representing German Evangelicalism to the government and to foreign countries.¹⁸ The German Evangelical Church comprised a significant portion of the German population; at unification in 1922, the Church counted about 40 million members, roughly two-thirds of the German population.¹⁹

Influence with the State

The German Evangelical Church also enjoyed a special position within the state. The Peace of Augsburg in 1555, which gave German princes the power to choose Lutheranism or Catholicism for their states, began the German tradition of allying the Church with the State. Both Catholic and Protestant churches enjoyed state support through the church tax, which was made official in the Weimar Constitution. Pastors received their theological training at state-run universities, and were considered civil servants. This relationship with the state, as well as new measures of unity, created the potential for the Protestant church to influence the state but also established the tradition of bowing to state authority.²⁰

Rather than challenge the state, however, many Protestants supported the National Socialist state and welcomed Hitler's strong leadership. Prior to the end of World War I, there

¹⁵ Stewart Winfield Herman, *It's Your Souls We Want* (New York: Harper, 1943), 121.

¹⁶ Weltanschauung refers to a way of looking at the world, or more simply, a worldview.

¹⁷ Helmreich, *The German Churches*, 71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Frederick O. Bonkovsky, "The German State and Protestant Elites," In *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust*, Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), 129.

²⁰ Hans Tiefel, "The German Lutheran Church and the Rise of National Socialism," *Church History* 41 (Sept 1972), 329

was little conflict between the Protestant Church and the German state.²¹ With the political and economic instability of the Weimar Republic, however, Protestants began to support movements (like National Socialism) that promised to restore Germany to its previous greatness. For example, when nationalist and Nazi politicians protested the Young Plan,²² church groups were among the supporters of the “national petition for the drafting of a law against the enslavement of the German people.”²³ For many Germans, Protestants included, the reparations required of their country after the First World War were insulting to the whole German nation. Hitler’s National Socialist party promised to bring Germany out of the economic and political instability of the Weimar years, as well as to make Germany a great nation once again. The majority of Protestant church leaders and laypeople believed Hitler and welcomed his leadership.²⁴

German Protestants supported the Nazis for other reasons beyond economics and politics. Some believed that the national renewal that Nazis promised would also spark a religious renewal in their country.²⁵ Others supported the new government for fear that disapproval risked the special status the church enjoyed with the state. That status included “state subsidies, the right to collect church taxes, corporate legal status and, in most states, at least indirect supervision of religious instruction in the schools.”²⁶ Church leaders demonstrated their support for the Nazis by refusing to sever ties with the National Socialist state, preaching sermons in praise of the new Germany, and encouraging their congregations to support the state.²⁷ Whether Protestants saw potential spiritual benefit from the Nazi movement or feared the cost of not supporting the state, it

²¹Shelley Baranowski, *The Confessing Church, Conservative Elites, and the Nazi State* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 22.

²² The Young Plan was written by an American and attempted to ease Germany’s reparations burden by spreading the payments out over more than half a century.

²³Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, Victoria J. Barnett, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 125.

²⁴ Baranowski, *The Confessing Church*, 301.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 301.

²⁷Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 54.

seems that even at the beginning of the Third Reich, the German Evangelical Church leaders sought first to look after their own interests, to preserve and strengthen their place in the German state.

Theology of Church and State

The Church's tendency to stay within its own religious sphere of influence also stemmed from Lutheran theological tradition. In the Law-Gospel theology (also known as the Two Kingdoms doctrine), Lutherans valued separation of church and state. According to this doctrine, the law included social and political duties, whereas the gospel was strictly the realm of religion and the Church. The theologians Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch argued that "the gospel is a-political, and no demands can be made upon the state in the name of the gospel."²⁸ This doctrine of two kingdoms "strictly compartmentalised Christian thinking and behaviour into a worldly-secular arena, where politicians held sway, and a private-religious sphere where the individual was alone with his God."²⁹ According to this doctrine, Christians owed obedience to earthly political leaders as well as submission to God. Thus, German Protestants could justify their support for Hitler as fulfilling Christian duty.³⁰ Bishop August Marahrens of Hannover summed up the doctrine: "the Protestant church has learned from Martin Luther to make a sharp distinction between the spheres of reason and faith, politics and religion, state and church."³¹ Such a strict separation of church and state and thus a refusal to involve the Church in political issues was a narrow interpretation of Luther's teaching, but was nonetheless the accepted interpretation at the time.

²⁸ Tiefel, "The German Lutheran Church," 332.

²⁹ Nicholas Railton, *The German Evangelical Alliance and the Third Reich: An Analysis of the "Evangelisches Allianzblatt,"* (Bern: P. Lang, 1998), 119.

³⁰ Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 11.

³¹ Quoted in Tiefel, "The German Lutheran Church," 334.

The German Evangelical Church's interpretation of Law-Gospel theology prevented it from using any potential influence to oppose the Nazi state's abuses of power. Instead, the Church used the doctrine to justify "welcoming the Nazi regime as manifestation of God's law."³² Leading theologians of the day also used the narrow interpretation of this theological concept to promote creating an ethnic or racial church. According to Friedrich Gogartan, the Church shared the ethos of the *Volk*.³³ Paul Althaus, who taught systematic theology at the University of Göttingen, went further, arguing that the Lutheran church had always taught the national ethos, and thus National Socialism was natural. Emanuel Hirsch, who also taught at the University of Göttingen, interpreted the gospel as meaning that the Church should do all things for the nation "no matter how uncivilized or foolishly this nation acts."³⁴ When theologians and church leaders interpreted doctrine in this way, the result "was the theological support of totalitarianism linked with the refusal to make any politically critical judgments in the name of Christ, for Christ has to do with another realm."³⁵ Theologians laid the groundwork for the Church to retreat into itself and only protest Nazi actions when the Church itself was threatened.

Not all theologians used theology to support the Nazi agenda. In fact, Hans Asmussen, a theologian and pastor, objected to Law-Gospel theology. Asmussen "objected to a silent church, to a life of faith which is so inward-directed that the peculiarity or the uniqueness of the Christian life has disappeared."³⁶ He warned against dividing faith and politics, cautioning against relegating the Church to solely religious matters and letting secular leaders determine everything else. Asmussen would become a leader in the Confessing Church, and a radical who advocated for church opposition to the Nazi government. Asmussen, and others like him, were in the minority as more academic theologians and important church leaders continued to believe and

³² Tiefel, "The German Lutheran Church," 332.

³³ *Ibid.*, 332. The term *Volk* can be translated to mean "people" or "nation," but in the Nazi context, the word carries a racist implication. Translation loses that undercurrent, so I choose not to translate.

³⁴ Quoted in Tiefel, "The German Lutheran Church," 332-333.

³⁵ Tiefel, "The German Lutheran Church," 334.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 335.

practice their interpretation of two kingdoms theology. Thus, though the Protestant Church enjoyed benefits from the state and a status that could have proved influential, theological interpretations dampened the Church's voice in state affairs.

Influence with the People

The German Evangelical Church's influence extended beyond potential direct political influence in state policies. In 1933 when Adolf Hitler came to power, about ninety-seven percent of the German population identified themselves as Christian. Of this number, about two-thirds were Protestant and one-third Catholic.³⁷ Certainly not all of those who identified with a particular church attended regularly or actively participated in church life, but by continuing to identify themselves with the Church they agreed to pay the church tax and allow their children to receive religious education. Thus, the Protestant Church in Germany had the potential to influence a great number of German citizens. In July 1944, less than a year before the end of the war, statistics on church membership closely resembled 1933 numbers. Fifty-four percent of Germans belonged to Protestant or Free Churches, forty percent were Catholic, three and a half percent identified themselves as neo-Pagan, and one and half percent claimed to be unbelievers.³⁸ "Free Churches" refers to the small minority of Anabaptist, Methodist, and other churches not associated with the German Evangelical Church. These are Protestant, and were thus included in the Protestant numbers, but in reality made up only a very small, almost negligible percentage. That Germans remained members of their churches shows the potential the Church had to influence how members reacted to and interacted with the Nazi state.

³⁷ Robert P. Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

³⁸ Peter Matheson, ed, *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches: A documentary account of Christian resistance and complicity during the Nazi era* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 100.

Pastors and other church leaders had direct influence over their congregations. Nazi government officials recognized this role of the Church to be shapers of public opinion and in the beginning of the Third Reich actively pursued the churches. When it came to the ordinary Protestant German, the pastor of his or her parish church could have much more influence on political thought and action than could a politician. When a pastor showed his support for Nazi policies, “ordinary Germans were reassured that those policies did not violate the tenets of Christian faith and morality.”³⁹ The German Evangelical Church had the potential for great influence among its members, not just direct influence with the state. This influence was significant for many reasons. First, the Church was large, both numerically and proportionate to the population. Secondly, the Church extended throughout Germany. Though some areas were dominated by the Catholic Church, the German Evangelical Church had a presence in every German state. Thirdly, the Church had an emotional bond with its members. Finally, the Church had organizational roots that allowed it to spread information easily.⁴⁰ For these reasons, the German Evangelical Church was an influential institution, and its failure to oppose the Nazi regime may have eased the consciences of many ordinary Germans who needed reassurance from their spiritual leaders.

With its semi-official status within the German state and the proportionately significant number of Germans in its membership, the German Evangelical Church had the potential to make a difference in Nazi Germany. This is, of course, easiest to realize in retrospect, as pastor Kurt Scharf reflected in 1981:

We could have worked in the initial stages with totally different decisiveness and power, including the power of numbers... If we had shown our protest more powerfully and more publicly! If we had brought it forward not only in sermons

³⁹ Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, “Introduction,” In *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 4.

⁴⁰ William Sheridan Allen, “Objective and Subjective Inhibitors in the German Resistance to Hitler,” In *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust*, Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), 115.

or in synodal decisions, in declarations and announcements from the pulpit, but if we had gone into the streets, arm in arm, with the Jews!⁴¹

Indeed, “much more was possible through church opposition in carefully graduated steps. A following was there if skillful, forthright leadership were present.”⁴² Though the following was there, and the potential for influence existed, still the Church did not protest state persecution of the Jews in a unified, public manner.

⁴¹ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 72.

⁴² Allen, “Objective and Subjective Inhibitors,” 122.

CHAPTER III

FOCUS ON INTERNAL CHURCH DIVISIONS

Divisions within the German Evangelical Church came to define the Church during the Third Reich. These divisions distracted the Church from problems in the state. The Church became preoccupied with its own inner conflicts, and church politics became more important to its leaders than the persecution of the Jews. Even groups that came close to opposing the state's discriminatory and deadly policies instead often became consumed by church politics and disputes.

The Faith Movement of German Christians

The initial dividing force in the German Evangelical Church came from a group of radicals who attempted to fuse Christianity with National Socialism. In 1921 Joachim Kurd Niedlich and a Pastor Bublitz established the *Bund für eine deutsche Kirche* (League for a German Church). The league demanded the elimination of the Old Testament and Rabbi Paul. Furthermore, the group suggested presenting Jesus' death as heroic sacrifice along the lines of German mysticism.⁴³ The Faith Movement of German Christians began in the late 1920s in Thuringia and was led by pastors Siegfried Leffler and Julius Leutheuser. Other groups also formed along the same ideological lines. When these groups came together in 1932 to form a more solidified movement of Protestants for the National Socialist cause, some suggested that

⁴³Cochrane, *The Church's Confession*, 75.

they call themselves “Protestant National Socialists.” However, some sources claim that Hitler himself suggested the name “German Christians.”⁴⁴ The choice of name was important “to force anyone else who claimed both Germanness and Christianity to qualify that identity or risk association with their cause. Members of the group thus used their name to enforce the contention that they represented the only authentic fusion of German ethnicity and Christian faith.”⁴⁵ This politically-driven Christianity as well as the choice of name, ran counter to the doctrine of the German Evangelical Church.

At the roots of German Christianity was racism. In fact, for German Christians, the racial aspects of their beliefs superseded the religious aspects.⁴⁶ The Principles of the religious movement of German Christians from May-June 1932 state in article seven: “We see in race, nationality and nation, orders of life given and entrusted to us by God, to care for the preservation of which is for us God’s law.”⁴⁷ The full wrath of German Christian racism was directed most against the Jews. Article nine of the Principles warns against the threat to German nationality by the Jewish Mission, and objects to the Mission in Germany “so long as the Jews have the citizenship and so long as there is danger of racial mixture and bastardization. The Holy Scriptures tell us also something about holy wrath and self-denying love. Marriages between Jews and Germans particularly must be prohibited.”⁴⁸ This doctrine of anti-Semitism permeated German Christian life, as this confirmation exchange from 1937 demonstrates:

Does the church have to address the Jewish question? Answer: Yes. Why? The candidate responded: The Jews are our misfortune. At that, the pastor laughed

⁴⁴Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 5. The German is *Deutsche Christen (DC)*.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4. See also Peter Schalk, “Twisted Cross: The Religious Nationalism of the German Christians,” *Studia Theologica* 52 (1998), 70-71.

⁴⁶ Schalk, “Twisted Cross,” 73.

⁴⁷ “Principles of the religious movement of ‘German Christians,’ issued in June 1932,” In *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches, 1933-45* by J.S. Conway, (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 340. For the original German see: Eberhard Röhm and Jörg Thierfelder, eds., *Evangelische Kirche zwischen Kreuz und Hakenkreuz: Bilder und Texte, einer Ausstellung*, (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1981), 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

aloud, adding, 'So it is written in *Der Stürmer*.' A girl then added, 'The curse of God is on the Jews,' and the pastor praised her reply.⁴⁹

The first defining feature of the German Christian movement was its extreme anti-Semitism, which would be carried out in various ways throughout its life.

At least at the beginning of the movement, in the 1920s, the German Christians also defined themselves by their alignment with the Nazi Party. In their founding principles, the German Christians professed their agreement with the Nazi Party program, specifically with Article 24, which declared that the National Socialists stood for "positive Christianity." Despite the lack of definition for "positive Christianity," in the Nazi party program, the German Christians proclaimed that they, too, stood "on the ground of positive Christianity."⁵⁰ By echoing the language of the Nazis, the German Christians obviously aligned themselves with the political party. Article five of the German Christians' founding principles outlined the movement's goals as political:

We want to bring the reawakened German sense of life to bear in our Church and to fill our Church with vitality. In the fateful struggle for German liberty, and the German future, the Church has turned out to be too weak in its leadership. Up to now, the Church has not summoned the faithful to a determined fight against ungodly Marxism and against the Centre Party, but has concluded a concordat with the political parties of these powers. We want our Church to fight in the front-line in the decisive battle of our nation for life or death. She must not stand aside or dissociate herself from the champions of liberation.⁵¹

In the early part of 1933, the state and the Nazi party recognized the political nature of the German Christian movement and supported it.

In addition to being extremely anti-Semitic and politically aligned with the National Socialists, the German Christians also advocated a unified Reich Church. This idea was not new

⁴⁹ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 148.

⁵⁰ "Principles," 339-40.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 340.

in Germany, but the German Christians wanted a *Volkskirche*, or a German church built on race.⁵² At the April 1933 German Christian convention, leaders expressed their desire to see a centralized Reich church for the *Volk*. Wilhelm Kube, the chairman of the Nazi delegation to the Prussian *Landtag*, stated that the party would “without hesitation” use “all existing means of state power” to unite the church with “the conversion in our *Volk*.”⁵³ Seeing that the existing church government was not accomplishing this goal, Reich Leader Joachim Hossenfelder declared that the “faithful have the right to revolt against a church government which does not totally affirm the victory of the national upheaval.”⁵⁴ The German Christian convention prepared for church elections in July 1933, which the group hoped to win and institute its ideas of a Reich church with a centralized church government headed by a Reich bishop and a new church constitution.

The important church elections in July caused the first official splits in the German Evangelical Church. Groups formed to oppose German Christian takeover in the Church. In his election pamphlet, Franz Hildebrandt, a Jewish Christian, pastor, and friend of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, directly countered German Christian claims by pointing voters back to the Bible. For example, he wrote:

The German Christians say: A godless fellow-countryman is nearer to us than one of another race, even if he sings the same hymn or prays the same prayer. (Hossenfelder, Hamburg)

The Bible says: Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother. (Mark 3.35)⁵⁵

Opponents of the German Christians formed the Gospel and Church coalition for the elections, but interference from the party, the police, and Hitler himself, largely thwarted their efforts.

⁵² Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 10.

⁵³ Shelley Baranowski, “The 1933 German Protestant Church Elections: Machtpolitik or Accommodation?” *Church History* 49 (Sept 1980), 302.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures, and Notes 1928-1936*, Edwin H. Robertson, ed., Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 210.

The German Christians benefitted from their alliance with the Nazis in the July elections. The *Sturmabteilung* (SA) helped the movement with its presence at German Christian rallies and by disrupting the opposition.⁵⁶ Rudolf Hess, head of the Nazi Political Organization, declared that “participation in the election is mandatory for those who confess the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*” and required all party members to vote German Christian.⁵⁷ Hitler himself also urged voting German Christian and publicly announced his support for the movement in a radio address the night before the election.⁵⁸ With the state’s support of the German Christians and its frustration of the opposition, the German Christians won two-thirds of the votes, assuring their prominence in church politics for the near future.

After the July elections, the next order of business for German Protestants was to write a new church constitution. The constitution committee included Hermann Kapler, president of the Church Federation; August Marahrens, Lutheran bishop of Hannover; and Hermann Albert, president of the Reformed League. Their goal was to create a stronger, more centralized Reich church while maintaining some level of federalism.⁵⁹ Despite the overwhelming support for the German Christians in the elections, the constitution committee also strove to preserve the doctrine of the German Evangelical Church. Article 1 of the Constitution states: “The unalterable basis of the German Evangelical Church is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, witnessed to us in Holy Scripture and brought to light again in the Reformation confessions.”⁶⁰ Still, the new constitution showed German Christian influence by creating the office of Reich bishop.

German Christian power rose again with the appointment of the Reich bishop. At first, Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, the director of the Bethel Institute, a Protestant hospital and

⁵⁶ Baranowski, *The Confessing Church*, 46.

⁵⁷ Baranowski, “The 1933 German Protestant Church Elections,” 310. *Weltanschauung* translates to “worldview”

⁵⁸ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 5-6; Baranowski, *The Confessing Church*, 46.

⁵⁹ Baranowski, *The Confessing Church*, 29.

⁶⁰ Matheson, *The Third Reich*, 24.

welfare center in Westphalia, received the appointment to Reich bishop. Bodelschwingh stood for an “autonomous church,” apart from state influences.⁶¹ Rampant opposition from German Christians, the Nazi Party, and Hitler prompted Bodelschwingh quickly to resign his post. Handpicked by Hitler, Ludwig Müller replaced Bodelschwingh. Müller was a former army chaplain and a virtually unknown figure. He was, however, passionate about the German Christian movement, the Reich church, and connecting the church to the Nazi state. Acquainted with Hitler, as early as 1927 Müller promised “that he would use all his strength to bring about a united German Protestant church.”⁶² He even “hoped the creation of a Reich church would bring the monarchical title of *Summus Episcopus* (supreme bishop) to Hitler.”⁶³ For his part, Hitler probably saw Müller as a potential puppet.

The State’s meddling in church affairs only served to deepen church divisions. In response to Hitler’s meddling and von Bodelschwingh’s resignation, the Young Reformation Movement issued the following theses:

Thesis I: We regard the Gospel as understood by the Reformers as being the only basis for any new ordering of the church... The voice of the church becomes more audible as it decisively confesses Christ as Lord. This confession includes the following points:

1. That any man can become a member of the church without distinction of race or social position;
2. That any reduction of the Gospel to a bourgeois trust in God or a liberal moralism is repudiated;
3. That the offices of the church are held as spiritual offices, and not political.

Thesis II: We wish to be responsible only to the church and not to any political party of the church.

⁶¹ Baranowski, “The 1933 German Protestant Church Elections,” 307.

⁶² James Bentley, *Martin Niemöller 1892-1984*, (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 49.

⁶³ Baranowski, “The 1933 German Protestant Church Elections,” 304

These theses represent the beginning of a time when the church fought first against itself and only opposed the state when it felt its institutional freedom and integrity were at risk.

Not long after their victory in the July elections, the German Christians began to lose some credibility. Only months after receiving two-thirds of the votes in the church elections and successfully appointing a German Christian to the office of Reich Bishop, the German Christian Movement suffered a self-inflicted blow. On November 13, 1933, Dr. Reinhold Krause, the leader of the Berlin German Christians and spokesperson for Church political questions,⁶⁴ delivered an impassioned speech to over 20,000 people at the Sports Palace in Berlin. Krause espoused points of German Christian doctrine that leaders had previously kept quiet. He advocated “the liberation from all that is un-German in liturgy and confession” including most of the Old Testament because of its Hebrew roots, as well as “that whole scape-goat and inferiority-type theology of the Rabbi Paul.”⁶⁵ Dr. Krause asserted that what Protestants really wanted was “a church for the German people, a church able to accommodate the whole breadth of a racially attuned experience of God. In its outward form, too, it will be structured in the truly German manner to be expected in the Third Reich.”⁶⁶ While his pronouncements received great applause from the attending crowd and prompted the assembly to pass resolutions against Jewish-Christians,⁶⁷ the speech also provoked intense backlash against the German Christians.

Krause’s speech, by bringing controversial aspects of the German Christian doctrine into the open, caused more divisions- within the German Christian movement and in the German Evangelical Church as a whole. A woman from Berlin reported that upon returning from the event she and her husband were “extremely shattered.” Upset, she “called Krause’s ideas

⁶⁴Reinhold Krause, *Ein Volk—ein Reich—ein Glaube: Die Lebenserinnerungen des DC-Sportpalastredners Dr. Reinhold Krause*, (Nordhausen: Verlag Traugott Bautz, 2006), 78.

⁶⁵ Matheson, *The Third Reich*, 39.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ James Bentley, *Martin Niemöller*, 75.

antithetical to Christianity, materialist, and the product of a 'Jewish spirit'.⁶⁸ Another woman received concerned questions from American relatives who feared the "destruction of the Protestant church in Germany."⁶⁹ The backlash extended much higher than the layperson. Following the speech, Martin Niemöller and other opposition leaders sent an ultimatum to Reich Bishop Müller demanding that he resign as president of the German Christians to stem the outcry from the rally. Müller responded by resigning as president and even withdrawing his membership from the German Christians. He also removed Krause from his church positions and made a statement condemning Krause's attack on the Bible. Though many (including Niemöller) saw this as the end of the German Christian movement, Müller remained Reich Bishop and kept his German Christian ideology; Krause's ideas would shortly become accepted in German Christian circles.⁷⁰

The Confessing Church

The first opposition to the German Christians began as early as 1932 when a small group met in Pastor Gerhard Jacobi's home. The group would later become the Young Reformation Movement and was a direct forerunner to the Confessing Church. Its first members included Martin Niemöller; Hanns Lilje, the secretary of the Student Christian Movement and eventually the editor of the Young Reformation Movement's journal *Junge Kirche*; Walter Künneth, the director of an apologetics center in Spandau; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian, pastor, and eventual political conspirator.⁷¹ The Young Reformation Movement was officially founded on May 12, 1933. The movement rejected exclusion of non-Aryans from the Church, and demanded freedom from political pressures, but envisioned working with the German Christians. Though leaders opposed the German Christians' stance on non-Aryans in the church, the movement itself

⁶⁸ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 126.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Bentley, *Martin Niemöller*, 75; Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 17; See also chapter four for a discussion on Krause's Sportpalast speech in regard to the Aryan Paragraph in the church.

⁷¹ Bentley, *Martin Niemöller*, 49.

was certainly not one of political opposition to the Nazi state. On the contrary, “its leaders were too much under the spell of the ‘historical hour’ of January 30, that is, of Hitler’s coming to power, which was interpreted as a positive sign of the ways of God.”⁷² The Young Reformation Movement was clearly not political opposition against the state or any state policies. In 1933 Walter Kunneth “granted Hitler the right to ‘solve the Jewish problem’ in the way the government felt fit, but he denied the Chancellor the right to limit the pastoral office to ‘Aryans’.” He conceded “that Church leaders might feel it necessary to take steps to emphasize the German element in the Church’s character.”⁷³ As its name suggests, the Young Reformation Movement sought primarily to bring the Church back to the Reformation confessions.

As the German Christians gained a stronger voice in the German Evangelical Church, more opposition arose. In the summer and fall of 1933 the *Pfarrernotbund* (Pastor’s Emergency League) formed under the leadership of Martin Niemöller. The Pastors Emergency League was a direct descendant of the Young Reformation Movement and similarly focused on opposing the application of the Aryan Paragraph in the Church while loyally supporting the state. To join, members agreed to the following four-point Declaration of Commitment:

1. I commit myself, as a servant of the Word aligned only with the Holy Scriptures and the Confessions of the Reformation as the right interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.
2. I commit myself to protest unreservedly against all violations of such confessions.
3. I know that I have a responsibility for those who are persecuted because of such confessional positions.
4. In such a commitment, I testify that the use of the Aryan Paragraph in the Church of Christ is a violation of these confessions.⁷⁴

⁷² Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession*, 94.

⁷³ Railton, *The German Evangelical Alliance*, 91.

⁷⁴ Unless otherwise noted, translations from the German are my own. For the original German see Wilhelm Niemöller, *Die Evangelische Kirche im Dritten Reich: Handbuch des Kirchenkampfes*, (Bielefeld: Ludwig Bechtauf Verlag, 1956), 112.

No part of this pledge commits the signer to oppose the state or even to take note of what was happening outside the church.

The Pastor's Emergency League led to the creation of the Confessing Church, which was founded at a special service in Ulm on April 22, 1934.⁷⁵ The First Confessing Synod of the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union, informally known as the Barmen Synod based on its location, met from May 29-31 to establish the organizational and confessional structures of the Confessing Church.⁷⁶ This first Confessing synod condemned all the teachings of the German Christians as heretical and made separation from the German Evangelical Church inevitable.⁷⁷ Rather than call the Confessing Church a secession movement from the German Evangelical Church (now the Reich Church under Müller), however, leaders maintained that it was the German Christian Reich Church that had broken away from the true Church, and the Confessing Church was in fact the true German Evangelical Church.⁷⁸ As such, "after Barmen the opposition was no longer an 'opposition' that still acknowledged the authority of the Reich church, but understood itself as the one 'Confessing church' in Germany."⁷⁹ Regardless of semantics, the Barmen synod clearly created the new entity of the Confessing Church and solidified the disunity of the German Evangelical Church.

Significantly, the Barmen synod issued a confessional declaration, calling believers back to the authority of Scripture. The declaration gave priority to Scriptural theology and rejected the German Christian ideas that divine revelation existed outside of Scripture, that Jesus was not lord over all aspects of life, that the church's message should be determined by the politics of the day,

⁷⁵ Kyle Jantzen, *Faith and Fatherland: Parish Politics in Hitler's Germany*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 5.

⁷⁶ Helmreich, *The German Churches*, 161. A synod is an official church governmental meeting. It is the main form of decision-making for the German Evangelical Church.

⁷⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 366-67.

⁷⁸ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 226.

⁷⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 371.

and that the state could claim to be the sole authority in life.⁸⁰ The declaration concluded with a statement declaring the illegitimacy of the German Christian-led Reich Church:

The unalterable basis of the German Evangelical Church is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, witnessed to us in Holy Scripture and brought to light again in the Reformation confessions.

The present Reich Church Government has departed from this unalterable basis and has committed countless breaches of the law and of the constitution. Thereby it has forfeited its right to be the legitimate leadership of the German Evangelical Church.⁸¹

The Barmen Declaration attempted to achieve consensus among the various Evangelical groups and reassert theological independence from the German Christians.⁸² The members of the Barmen Synod directed their protest primarily against German Christian heresy and not against the National Socialist State. The Declaration did not consider issues outside of the Church realm. In particular, the Declaration was mute on the persecution of the Jews and other minorities by the Nazi State.⁸³ Rather than speak up for the oppressed, the Church chose to stay in its own sphere. The Barmen Declaration “was concerned with those things which affected the church directly. ... no mention was made of the state per se, except where it infringed on the church directly. In this traditional resistance, there was no concern for political matters as a whole.”⁸⁴ This inward focus destroyed any possibility of direct, unified opposition from the Church, even the Confessing Church.

The Barmen Synod also established the organizational basis for the Confessing Church. Each congregation would elect a brotherhood council, which would in turn send delegates to Confessing district synods. Each district synod elected a brotherhood council who sent delegates

⁸⁰ Jantzen, *Faith and Fatherland*, 5.

⁸¹ Matheson, *The Third Reich*, 47.

⁸² Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 23.

⁸³ Ericksen, *Complicity*, 99.

⁸⁴ Bonkovsky, “The German State,” 138-139.

to the Confessing synod of the province. Finally, the Provincial Brotherhood Councils made up the national Confessing synod. The national synod named a top Brotherhood Council of five members to act as the working executive.⁸⁵ Though the German Christians still officially controlled the Reich Church until 1945, the Confessing Church grew rapidly. Observing the churches in Berlin, Stewart W. Herman noted that “as a general rule the ‘Confessional pastors have the largest audiences when they preach and they usually have the largest catechetical classes.”⁸⁶ With the firm establishment of the Confessing Church claiming to be the true church, the German Evangelical Church decidedly split into warring factions.

The German Christian elements in the top tiers of church governance did not respond well to the opposition at Barmen. Following the Barmen Declaration, the church government dismissed leadership in Württemberg and Bavaria.⁸⁷ The Confessing Church came together again at Dahlem for another important synod on October 20, 1934- at Niemöller’s church. The delegates took a more decisive stand against the official German Evangelical Church because of its German Christian leadership. In the first article of the declaration, the synod declared:

The first and fundamental article of the Constitution of the German Evangelical Church... has been, in effect, swept aside by the teachings, laws, and actions of the Reich Church Government. The Christian basis of the German Evangelical Church has thus been nullified.⁸⁸

Because of this violation of the church’s Christian basis, the Dahlem Synod boldly declared the Confessing Church the only legitimate German Protestant Church. They made the break from the Reich Church clear in Article three:

We call upon the Christian congregations, pastors, and elders to accept no instructions from the previous Reich Church Government and its authorities and to withdraw all cooperation from those who intend to continue rendering this

⁸⁵ Helmreich, *The German Churches*, 161.

⁸⁶ Herman, *It’s Your Souls*, 108.

⁸⁷ Matheson, *The Third Reich*, 49.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

Church Government their obedience. We call upon them to abide by the instructions of the Confessing Synod of the German Evangelical Church and of its recognised organs.⁸⁹

For many, the Dahlem Synod went too far, and from this point on the radicals of the Confessing Church were referred to as “Dahlemites.”⁹⁰

Despite the important decisions made at Dahlem, the Confessing Church continued to emphasize institutional interests. The Synod declared that the Confessing Church was the only legitimate church in Germany and that the Confessing Church and the German Christians did not share a common faith. Following the declaration of legitimacy, Dahlem also stipulated that the Confessing Church was entitled to educate and ordain its own pastors, establish its own administration, and govern its own parishes.⁹¹ This Synod certainly drew a distinct line against the German Christians, but the conflict remained an internal church dispute. There were no “practical resolutions seeking to alleviate the continuing plight of the non-Aryans and other victims of Nazi cruelty and intolerance.”⁹² Despite their reputation for being radicals, the Dahlemites opposed only the German Christians’ takeover of the Evangelical Church, not any National Socialist policies. The Church did not speak up for the Jews or any other victims because they focused primarily on matters that concerned the Church.

Neutrals

The Dahlem Synod defined the two opposing sides in the German Evangelical Church, but there were still many Protestants who remained in the middle. The regional churches of Bavaria, Hannover, and Württemberg became known as “intact” churches because the Lutheran bishops remained at the head; the German Christians did not gain enough power in these three

⁸⁹ Ibid., 51.

⁹⁰ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 67.

⁹¹ Ibid., 65.

⁹² Richard Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb! The German Evangelical Church and the Jews 1879-1950*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), 126.

churches to disrupt the existing order.⁹³ In these intact churches, the pastors were even less likely than pastors in other regions to protest politics because they were able to continue their work as before. For them, any protest seemed like futile provocation.⁹⁴ Members of the intact churches did, however, protest when their own churches were threatened. In 1934, Müller's church commissioner, August Jäger, attempted to centralize power by dealing with the regional churches that had not succumbed to German Christian pressure. In October 1934 he placed both Bishop Wurm of Württemberg and Bishop Meiser of Bavaria under house arrest. Their arrests provoked demonstrations in Stuttgart and Munich, forcing the church government to relent from disciplining these neutral bishops.⁹⁵ The intact churches continued trying to pursue a middle road between the German Christians and the Confessing Church through 1945.

The bishops of the intact churches vacillated between supporting the Confessing Church, trying to reason with the German Christians, and proving their loyalty to the German state. Bishop Meiser of Bavaria was particularly concerned with preventing a schism in the Church. He believed that the best way to deal with the German Christians was to avoid confrontation and preserve his intact community.⁹⁶ Bishop Marahrens of Hannover struggled with opposing German Christian ideology while supporting Nazi policy. He served as a military chaplain in World War I and had two sons who served in the SA.⁹⁷ In 1938 Marahrens stated:

As members of our church we are bound with body and life to the fate of our nation, and therefore we must side with the effort of our Führer with the best we can do. Our church has only one request of nation and state, that it be given full freedom to... preach the gospel and administer the sacraments.⁹⁸

⁹³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 423.

⁹⁴ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 59.

⁹⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 393.

⁹⁶ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 49.

⁹⁷ *Sturmabteilung- Nazi Storm Troopers*

⁹⁸ Tiefel, "The German Lutheran Church," 327; See also Barnett, *For the Soul*, 49.

For Marahrens, as long as he could continue leading his church as he did before 1933, he would not protest any state policy. Bishop Wurm of Württemberg was perhaps the most paradoxical of the three bishops. He publicly opposed euthanasia of the disabled and mentally ill, and he maintained strong ties with the Confessing Church.⁹⁹ At the same time, he supported the racial policies of the Nazi state. Wurm boasted that the Protestant pastorate had kept itself free of Jewish character, and went as far to say in 1941 that “no Evangelical Church has denied the state the right to implement racial legislation for the purpose of maintaining the purity of the German *Volk*.”¹⁰⁰ Wurm’s statement, while showing his anti-Semitic attitude, also clearly shows the failure of the German Evangelical Church to oppose oppression. Truly, even by 1941, the Church had not denied the state anything in its racial policy.

The attempt to remain neutral in church politics was widespread. In 1937 Berlin alone (notably the home of Dahlem and thus the unofficial headquarters of the Confessing Church) 167 clergy were Confessing Church members, forty were German Christians, and the remaining 200 held a middle position.¹⁰¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw these neutrals as a greater threat to church unity than the German Christians. In “The Question of the Boundaries of the Church and Church Union,” delivered as a lecture on April 22, 1936 and published in article form that June, he said:

The neutrals are a particular problem. First of all it must be said that there are really no neutrals. They belong on the other side. But they themselves want to be neutral. It is therefore impossible to have an unequivocal attitude towards them as their own attitude is not unequivocal, because the boundary drawn by them against the true church is not clear.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 49.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen R. Haynes, “Who Needs Enemies? Jews and Judaism in Anti-Nazi Religious Discourse,” *Church History* 71 (June 2002), 354-355.

¹⁰¹ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler: An Appraisal*, Translated by Lawrence Wilson, (Chicago: Henry Regenery Company, 1962), 41.

¹⁰² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom; 1935-1939, from the Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by Edwin Hanton Robertson, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 93.

For Bonhoeffer, who later gave up on church-led opposition to the Nazi state and became involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler, there could be no middle ground in the church because there was no middle ground outside the church.

In addition to the divisions between the German Christians and the Confessing Church, the groups themselves were not completely united. The Confessing Church included a diverse membership, “baptized Jews and Nazi party members, radicals and moderates.”¹⁰³ In February 1936 at the Bad Oeynhausen Synod, a group led by the regional bishops August Marahrens, Theophil Wurm, and Hans Meiser (of Hannover, Württemberg, and Bavaria, respectively) advocated collaboration with the state-run Reich Church Committee. In response, Niemöller and others set up a second provisional church administration, maintaining the Dahlemite line that the Confessing Church was the only legitimate Church government.¹⁰⁴ After this separation, the Confessing Church struggled to maintain a national presence, and was instead plagued by regional disputes and increased state regulation.¹⁰⁵ The German Christians also became divided between moderate and radical groups. Moderate German Christians desired an agreement between the Church and the Nazi state. The radicals, on the other hand, advocated a more secular *völkisch* theology and envisioned a church completely politically integrated with the regime. Unlike the Confessing Church, in which the radical Dahlemites were a minority, radicals formed a majority of the German Christian Movement.¹⁰⁶

Ongoing Power Struggle

Despite pressure from the radical Dahlemites, the Confessing Church never did sever itself from the official German Evangelical Church. In addition, in spite of the mishap of Dr. Krause’s *Sportpalast* speech, German Christians remained influential among Protestants in

¹⁰³Barnett, *For the Soul*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Bentley, *Martin Niemöller*, 118.

¹⁰⁵ Baranowski, *The Confessing Church*, 66.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 299-300.

Germany. The German Christian Movement kept over half a million members until the end of World War II. German Christians “held important positions within Protestant church governments at every level and occupied influential posts in theological faculties and religious training institutes. From these offices, they controlled many of the decisions and much of the revenue of the Protestant church.”¹⁰⁷ Like the Confessing Church, the German Christians did not separate from the German Evangelical Church, but instead attempted to change the Church from within.¹⁰⁸ Thus, with both factions remaining relevant, the church struggle continued. With its attention drawn inward with internal division, the German Evangelical Church continued to be preoccupied with its internal affairs.

German Christians’ anti-Semitic rhetoric continued to fuel their conflict with the Confessing Church. At an April 1934 meeting of the Evangelical Men’s Association Karl Steger, a German Christian pastor in Friedrichshafen am Bodensee and the president of the Württemberg Land Synod, claimed the work of the German Christians was a fight for the legacy of Martin Luther. Like many other German Christians, he used the slogan, “One God, One Christ, One Volk,” to encapsulate the German Christian agenda.¹⁰⁹ In another speech a year later, Steger denied that the German Christians were fighting against any other Protestant elements, but he reiterated claims that only German Christians were both truly German and truly Christian.¹¹⁰ In Bavaria, another German Christian speaker took this concept further by calling for a “Jew-free German Protestant Reich Church” and labeling the Confessing Church “Jewish.”¹¹¹ The German

¹⁰⁷ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 2.

¹⁰⁸ Christopher J. Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 119.

¹⁰⁹ Kyle Jantzen, “Propaganda, Perseverance, and Protest: Strategies for Clerical Survival Amid the German Church Struggle,” *Church History* 70 (June 2001), 297-298.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 298.

¹¹¹ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 33.

Christian slogan for the 1937 church elections followed the same line and became: “We fight for the Jew-free German Evangelical Reich Church.”¹¹²

Perhaps the most glaring example of German Christian anti-Semitism as well as the influence German Christians retained within the Church was the establishment of the Institute for Research Into and Elimination of Jewish Influence on German Church Life. The Institute was based in Eisenach, in the state of Thuringia (the German Christian birthplace and stronghold). German Christian Siegfried Leffler directed the Institute and solicited funds from individuals, central church organs, and regional churches.¹¹³ The Institute formed shortly after Kristallnacht as German Christians felt the need to prove their participation in Nazi anti-Semitism. The Institute’s primary goal was to prove that Jesus was Aryan, not Jewish, and to remove all vestiges of Judaism from Christianity. In 1940 the Institute published its dejudalized New Testament, *Die Botschaft Gottes* (The Message of God). German Christians used the academic nature of their Institute to justify Germany’s treatment of the Jews. In 1942 Walter Grundmann, a New Testament professor at the University of Jena and the academic director of the Institute, made this purpose clear when he declared:

A healthy Volk must and will reject the Jews in every form. This fact is justified before history and through history. If someone is upset about Germany’s treatment of the Jews, Germany has the historical justification and historical authorization for the fight against the Jews on its side.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Wolfgang Gerlach, *And the Witnesses Were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Persecution of the Jews*, Victoria J. Barnett, trans. and ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 113.

¹¹³ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 149. The German name for the Institute is *Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben*. Due to the length of the name, I will refer to this organization as simply the “Institute.”

¹¹⁴ Susannah Heschel, “When Jesus was an Aryan: The Protestant Church and Antisemitic Propaganda,” In *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, Eds. Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 69.

The Institute, funded through official church channels, showed the strong influence German Christians maintained in the Church and provided religious and academic justification for state actions against the Jews.

The anti-Semitism of the German Christians continued through the end of the Third Reich. A German Christian newsletter connected the church with the genocidal German nation in 1944:

There is no other solution to the Jewish problem than this: that one day the whole world will rise up and decide either for or against Judaism, and will keep on struggling with each other until the world is totally judaized or completely purged of Judaism. We can say with an honest, pure conscience that we did not want this war and did not start this war. But we can proudly profess before all the world—the world of today as well as tomorrow—that we took up the gauntlet with the firm resolve to solve the Jewish question forever.¹¹⁵

That German Christians with these extreme racist views remained relevant in church leadership and lay community shows the difficulty others faced in opposing Nazi policies. Rather than confront racism in their state, Confessing Church leaders struggled against German Christians in the Church. In fact, the Confessing Church did not always have a better record on issues of race.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 26-27.

CHAPTER IV

CHURCHMEN, THE ARYAN PARAGRAPH, AND NATIONAL LOYALTY

The Jewish Question

Clergy and theologians tried to reassure lay people that the state's policies against the Jews were not antithetical to Christianity. Gerhard Kittel, professor of theology at the University of Tübingen, wrote in his 1933 article, "The Jewish Question,"

The fight against the Jews can be conducted from the platform of a conscious and clear Christianity. It is not enough to base this battle on racial points of view or current attitudes alone. *The actual, complete answer can only be found where one succeeds in giving the Jewish question a religious foundation, giving the battle against the Jews a Christian interpretation.* We must find... the clear path which allows us to think and behave in both a German and Christian manner, thus allowing us to come to an unambiguous decision.¹¹⁶

Kittel went further when he declared that "with total and unmistakable clarity, the Church must make it clear that baptism does not affect Jewish identity... A converted Jew does not become a German but rather a Jew-Christian."¹¹⁷ This anti-Semitism from respected Christian leaders had a great influence on the Church at all levels. For Kittel and many other German Protestants, the Church had its own Jewish question.

¹¹⁶Quoted in Ericksen, *Complicity*, 31. Emphasis in the original.

¹¹⁷ Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 65.

Many German Protestants learned anti-Semitism in a church context from their childhood.

Hellmut Gollwitzer, the son of a Bavarian pastor, explained in an interview later in life:

Just as the average Protestant was middle class and ‘national,’ he was also anti-Semitic. Today you can hardly speak of ‘harmless’ anti-Semitism, but at that time we saw antipathy toward the Jews as harmless. All of us. ... I was raised to believe that, until the Jews rejected Jesus, they were a loyal people, a wonderful people. They were farmers and shepherds. Then God rejected them, and since that time they have been merchants, good for nothing, and they infiltrate everything, everywhere they go. And against that you have to defend yourself.¹¹⁸

Though Christian anti-Semitism may have started as anti-Judaism, by the 1930s it easily became racial. The anti-Semitic attitudes inside the church meant that even if individuals did not directly participate in persecuting the Jews, they often failed to see the wrongness of the state’s actions. Gollwitzer mentioned later in his interview that the Christian tradition pitied the Jews, but that pity was not enough for the Church to break out of its walls and oppose the state. The tradition of anti-Semitism reassured laypeople that the state was not overstepping its bounds.

Not only did Christians hear anti-Semitism from theologians, they heard it from the pulpit. Otto Dibelius, as General Superintendent for the Church in the Kurmark, declared in his Easter message of 1928:

All of us will not only understand but have complete sympathy for the final motivations behind the *völkisch* movement. Despite the evil ring that the word has acquired in many cases, I have always considered myself an anti-Semite. It cannot be denied that Judaism plays a leading role in all the corruptive phenomenon of modern civilization.¹¹⁹

In April 1933, in response to the boycott of Jewish businesses, Dibelius declared that “in the last 15 years in Germany, the influence of Judaism has strengthened extraordinarily. The number of Jewish judges, Jewish politicians, Jewish civil servants in influential positions has grown

¹¹⁸Quoted in Barnett, *For the Soul*, 15.

¹¹⁹Quoted in Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 14; See also: Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth*, 1.

noticeably. The voice of the people is turning against this.”¹²⁰ Dibelius soon became disenchanted with the direction of the Nazi regime. He became a leader in the Confessing Church and was one of the few Christians to speak out against the state. Still, his early declarations of anti-Semitism helped lead the Church astray; most Christians did not experience the change of heart that Dibelius did. With anti-Semitism as a foundation, from the beginning of the Third Reich the Church primarily protested state actions that directly affected itself or its members.

German Protestants also often used “Jewish” as an offensive way to refer to other Christians. Even Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom many consider a martyr, fell prey to this way of thinking. In a letter to Erwin Sutz, a Swiss theologian, Bonhoeffer wrote that the Jewish question troubled the church and “even the most intelligent people have lost their heads and their Bibles over it.”¹²¹ A few months later, he published his essay, “The Church and the Jewish Question.” This essay is problematic because in a few pages Bonhoeffer suggests that the Church should stand up to the state, that the Church cannot take political action, that a Jewish problem exists, and that the German Christians were the real Jewish Christians. Historians often take Bonhoeffer’s positive statements about the Church’s possible reactions to the state out of context and overlook the inherent anti-Semitism in this essay.

In “The Church and the Jewish Question” Bonhoeffer accepts the existence of a “Jewish problem” in Germany. He writes: “The church cannot allow its actions towards its members to be prescribed by the state. The baptised Jew is a member of our church. Thus the Jewish problem is not the same for the church as it is for the state.”¹²² In this statement, Bonhoeffer accepts a Jewish problem in Germany, and the state’s right to deal with it. He guards against state interference in

¹²⁰ Quoted in Barnett, *For the Soul*, 124.

¹²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. 1, Eberhard Bethge, ed. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1958), 37.

¹²² Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 227. For the original German text of this essay see Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. 2, 48.

the Church, but only suggests protection for baptized Jews who are members of the Church.

Earlier in the essay Bonhoeffer expressed this more directly:

Without doubt the Jewish question is one of the historic problems which our state must deal with, and without doubt the state is justified in adopting new methods here. It remains the concern of humanitarian associations and individual Christians who feel themselves called to the task, to remind the state of the moral side of any of its measures, i.e. on occasions to accuse the state of offences against morality.¹²³

At this time, Bonhoeffer did not see the plight of German Jews as a situation for the Church as an institution to involve itself. He considered it a state matter, and one in which the state was justified in acting.

Bonhoeffer further falls into entrenched anti-Semitism when he uses “Jewish” as an offensive term against the German Christians. Bonhoeffer is implicitly referring to the book of Romans when he implies that an emphasis on the law makes one Jewish. According to Bonhoeffer:

From the point of view of the church it is not baptised Christians of Jewish race who are Jewish Christians; in the church’s view the Jewish Christian is the man who lets membership of the people of God, of the church of Christ, be determined by the observance of a divine law. In contrast, the Gentile Christian knows no presupposition for membership of the people of God, the church of Christ, but the call of God by his Word in Christ.¹²⁴

By using “Jewish” in a derogatory sense, Bonhoeffer continues the Church’s tradition of looking down on Jews. It is the Jewish Christian, not the Gentile, who is not a true Christian.

Bonhoeffer’s view that the state was justified in dealing with its Jewish problem, and his negative perception of the adjective “Jewish” hindered him and the Church from reaching outside its own membership to stop oppression. By using “Jewish” as a derisive term, Bonhoeffer essentially

¹²³ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 223.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 227-228.

increased the vulnerability of German Jews; they would not find an ally in the German Evangelical Church.¹²⁵

Bonhoeffer's essay does address the Church's relationship with the state. In the most quoted portion of the essay, Bonhoeffer describes the possible methods the Church can use:

There are three possible ways in which the church can act towards the state: in the first place, as has been said, it can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate and in accordance with its character as state, i.e. it can throw the state back on its responsibilities. Secondly, it can aid the victims of state action. The church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community. 'Do good to all men.' In both these courses of action, the church serves the free state in its free way, and at times when laws are changed the church may in no way withdraw from these two tasks. The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself. Such action would be direct political action, and is only possible and desirable when the church sees the state fail in its function of creating law and order, i.e. when it sees the state unrestrainedly bring about too much or too little law and order. In both cases it must see the existence of the state, and with it its own existence, threatened.¹²⁶

Bonhoeffer saw the third option, direct political action, as an extreme step. In fact, at the beginning of the essay he had already ruled out this option when he stated that "the Church of the Reformation has no right to address the state directly in its specifically political actions."¹²⁷

Bonhoeffer would eventually choose direct political action for himself, apart from the Church, but in 1933, he did not see an option for the Church to act outside of its sphere. The time to be a spoke in the wheel had not yet come. When such a time came, however, the Church did not heed Bonhoeffer's words and continued only to act in the first two ways.

The Church's attitude toward Jews meant that it did not protest state actions against them. Even before the National Socialists came to power it was clear that they would enact brutal

¹²⁵ Haynes, "Who Needs Enemies?" 366.

¹²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, 225.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 222.

measures against German Jews. For example, in 1931, around the Jewish New Year, about one thousand SA storm troopers participated in a pogrom against Berlin's Jews. An article in the 1932 *Church Annual* discussed the vilification of and acts against the Jews, but did not expressly condemn such actions.¹²⁸ Less than four months after Hitler came to power the state sanctioned a nation-wide boycott of Jewish businesses. In many places, the boycott became more violent than anticipated and was called off early. The Church hardly reacted to this action against the Jews. In response to the April 1, 1933 Jewish boycott, the only reaction from the Berlin Church was a wire to the Reich Agency of German Jews, which read: "Following development with greatest vigilance. Hope Boycott measures will come to conclusion today."¹²⁹ Otto Dibelius, then the Brandenburg General Superintendent, denounced foreign backlash from the boycott. He explained that Jews had political power disproportionate to their population and that "the conditions and relations here are to be brought back to their formal level."¹³⁰ There were a few isolated protests, but they remained in internal church correspondence and did not reach the state. Church historian Klaus Scholder concluded that "the Church as a whole remained silent. In the decisive days following April 1, no bishop, no church administration, and no synod objected publicly to the persecution of the Jews in Germany."¹³¹ The boycott of Jewish business and violent actions that accompanied it did not directly affect the Church, and thus the Church refrained from protest.

When the state passed the Nuremberg Race Laws in 1935, defining Jews and placing harsher restrictions on them, the Church still did not protest. Even the Confessing Church, in its opposition to the virulently anti-Semitic German Christians, only spoke up for Jewish Christians in its own membership. Despite Bonhoeffer's efforts, the Steglitz Confessing Synod of 1935

¹²⁸ Gutteridge, *Open thy Mouth*, 70.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹³⁰ Baranowski, *The Confessing Church*, 23.

¹³¹ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 17.

refused officially and publicly to protest the Race Laws.¹³² The Church even aided the state with its new race laws by supplying the documentary evidence of the Church registers without being required by law to do so. These registers gave evidence of Aryan descent and thus simplified identification of non-Aryans.¹³³ Not only did the German Evangelical Church not protest the Nuremberg Laws, it assisted the state in carrying out the racist laws. In September 1935, the Church managed a weak protest. Though the Steglitz Synod had initially considered issuing a declaration favoring the Nuremberg Race Laws, opposition tempered the Synod's enthusiasm. In the end, the Synod merely "defended the mission to the Jews and Jewish baptism."¹³⁴

The most contentious issue concerning the Jewish Question in the Church was the application of the Aryan Paragraph to the Church positions. The Civil Service Law excluding all non-Aryans from civil service was passed on April 7, 1933. The law included exclusions for those who had already served before August 1914, had fought on the front lines of World War I, or had lost a father or son in the war.¹³⁵ The Aryan Paragraph quickly expanded to virtually every aspect of society, excluding non-Aryans from most sectors of employment. The exclusion of non-Aryans became known as the Aryan Paragraph, as it was simply added to existing laws. The German Christians gaining ground in church government quickly advocated the adoption of the Aryan Paragraph into the church constitution. At the General Synod on September 5, 1933¹³⁶ the Church officially adopted its own Aryan Paragraph:

Anyone not of Aryan descent or who is married to a person of non-Aryan descent may not be appointed as minister or official. Ministers or officials who marry non-Aryans are to be dismissed. The State Law decides who is to be reckoned

¹³² Kurt Meier, *Kreuz und Hakenkreuz: Die evangelische Kirche im Dritten Reich*, (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992), 161.

¹³³ Gutteridge, *Open thy Mouth*, 153.

¹³⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 489.

¹³⁵ Gutteridge, *Open thy Mouth*, 91.

¹³⁶ This Synod was known as the "Brown Synod" because of the number of attendants who appeared wearing the brown uniforms of the Nazis.

non-Aryan. Ministers of non-Aryan descent or married to non-Aryans are to be retired. The exceptions are the same as those laid down in the State Law.¹³⁷

Upon adopting the Aryan Paragraph, the general superintendents at the Synod voted not to dismiss those already in offices, but that non-Aryans (or those married to non-Aryans) would not be eligible to hold office in the future. General Superintendent Kalmus stated: “We understand and appreciate the measures taken by the state and recognize that the Protestant church must also be vigilant in the preservation of the German race.”¹³⁸ The application of the Aryan Paragraph potentially affected very few in the Church. In 1933, there were thirty-seven pastors of Jewish or half-Jewish descent, and eight of these were retired. The exemptions applied to at least eleven of these pastors. Thus, of the thousands of Protestant pastors in Germany, the law affected less than two percent.¹³⁹ Still, the issue of the Aryan Paragraph in the Church would consume church politics for the coming years.

Theologians’ response to the Aryan Paragraph in the Church varied. Paul Althaus, professor of systematic theology at the University of Göttingen, responded that the Church should not remove non-Aryan clergy from office unless specific circumstances warranted such removal. He also said that Jewish Christians should refrain from taking official positions to avoid conflict.¹⁴⁰ Official responses came from the theological faculty at Marburg and Erlangen. The Marburg faculty unanimously rejected the Aryan Paragraph, stating in their September 20, 1933 declaration:

Whoever does not desire to recognize, along with the Apostles and Reformers, *the full unity between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians in the church*, as was impressively articulated in the Letter to the Ephesians in the New Testament, and does not desire to realize it fundamentally in the church’s constitution, deceives

¹³⁷ Gutteridge, *Open thy Mouth*, 94.

¹³⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 307.

¹³⁹ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 31.

¹⁴⁰ Robert P. Ericksen, “Assessing the Heritage: German Protestant Theologians, Nazis, and the ‘Jewish Question’,” In *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 25.

himself when he confesses that, for him, the Holy Scripture is God's Word and Jesus is God's Son and Lord of all human beings.¹⁴¹

They clearly stated that "the concept of brotherhood rules out all legal inequality as well as all avoidable estrangement in earthly relationships."¹⁴² The Marburg declaration was a clear, biblical rejection of the Aryan Paragraph, but it came too late to influence the synodal decision to adopt the law. The Erlangen theological faculty took the opposite stance, declaring the Aryan Paragraph acceptable for the Church and consistent with history. They stated that the Church had always used certain criteria for ordination and appointment to church offices. The requirement that clergy be Aryan would simply be another requirement to ensure the suitability of candidates.¹⁴³ The Erlangen opinion stated that "The church must therefore demand that its Christians of Jewish descent stay away from the ministry."¹⁴⁴ These opposing theological responses show the deep schism forming in the German Evangelical Church. Debates over the Aryan Paragraph would continue to drive the Church's focus inward through the years of the Third Reich.

In the first year after the September General Synod's acceptance of the Aryan Paragraph, the Church government wavered on its stand on the issue. Following the fiasco of Dr. Reinhold Krause's virulent speech at the Sportpalast rally in Berlin in November, Reich Bishop Müller declared the Aryan Paragraph no longer in force. Müller took this step to calm the outcry from Krause's speech in which he promoted the German Christians' anti-Semitic and anti-doctrinal positions. By January 1934, Müller declared that the Aryan Paragraph would resume. He followed this declaration with a Muzzling Decree, outlawing opposition. Still, opposition remained strong, and by March the Aryan Paragraph was once again out. By August, it was back

¹⁴¹ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 39.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁴⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 306.

in effect. The law stayed in effect from this point on, but remained a point of contention in the German Evangelical Church.¹⁴⁵

Part of the problem surrounding the Aryan Paragraph in the Church was the lack of clear opposition. Martin Niemöller, who organized the Pastors' Emergency League to protest the Aryan Paragraph, believed that arguments for the law had some validity in response to congregational prejudices. He urged Jewish Christians not to accept prominent positions in the Church in order to spare their fellow Christians the tough decisions.¹⁴⁶ Though the commitment card that members of the Pastors' Emergency League signed committed them to take responsibility for those persecuted because of confessional positions and to guard against the Aryan Paragraph in the Church, Niemöller encouraged them to avoid concrete action. He encouraged League members, when confronted with the problems of the Aryan Paragraph, to "make a virtue of verbal confession" instead of taking action.¹⁴⁷

The German Christians' stance on the Aryan Paragraph became muddled as Müller constantly changed the status of the law; likewise, the opposition's response was muddled. In a lecture at the University of Berlin in June 1933 Bonhoeffer cited Romans 14 about the strong and weak in faith when he stated that "Strong is he who ejects no one; weak is he who puts a fence around the congregation. Those today who are weak in faith need a racial law."¹⁴⁸ This reasoning was problematic for the opposition because that biblical passage commands believers not to cause the weak to stumble. In this case, if the weak in faith need a racial law, the Church should consider instituting such a law. Bonhoeffer's statements muddled the opposition. Furthermore, the Pastors' Emergency League embraced a contradictory stance on the Aryan Paragraph. The membership pledge committed the League to protecting non-Aryan clergy, while at the same time

¹⁴⁵ Gutteridge, *Open thy Mouth*, 121.

¹⁴⁶ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 90.

¹⁴⁷ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 48

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

the League “proclaimed its readiness, in the wake of *völkisch* euphoria, to guard the ministry against ‘Jewish foreign infiltration.’”¹⁴⁹ One solution to the problem was the proposal of separate Jewish Christian congregations. The Paulusbund, the Reich Association of Non-Aryan Christians, was founded in 1936. Church leaders hoped that through such an organization the Jewish Christians could solve their own problems.¹⁵⁰ The opposition from the Pastors’ Emergency League and later the Confessing Church to the Aryan Paragraph suffered from these contradictory views. While claiming to protect non-Aryan Christians, they also attempted to segregate congregations in order to avoid offense.

When the Confessing Church was established at Barmen in 1934, the issue of the Aryan Paragraph was no longer at the core of its identity. Though the Confessing Church initially formed from opposition to the Aryan Paragraph, the Barmen Declaration does not directly address the law or the situation of the Jews (within or outside the Church). The Confessing Church did not cease opposing the Aryan Paragraph, but it did not incorporate the issue into its confessional statement. Many saw this omission as abandoning non-Aryan Christians to isolation.¹⁵¹ Confessing Church leaders and lay members still referred to Christians who had converted from Judaism (as well as their descendants) as “Jewish Christians” or “baptized Jews.”¹⁵² Continuing to draw distinctions between Jew and non-Jew made it easier for the Church to succumb to Nazi ideology about Jewishness. After the Dahlem Synod established the Provisional Church Administration in 1934, the Confessing Church became more concerned with proving its legitimacy than with the plight of German Jews or even of non-Aryan Christians.¹⁵³ Though the Confessing Church was founded on opposition to the Aryan Paragraph in the Church,

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁵⁰ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 132.

¹⁵¹ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 76.

¹⁵² Bergen, *For the Soul*, 83.

¹⁵³ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 100.

the majority of its leaders still favored such laws in the civil sector.¹⁵⁴ The Confessing Church continued this confused opposition throughout its existence.

National Loyalty

Another controversy that hindered the German Evangelical Church's response to Germany's oppression of its Jews was the question of national loyalty. Many German Protestant laypeople and clergy voted for the National Socialists and saw Hitler's rule as the way to restore Germany to its former glory. For example, Martin Niemöller, the founder of the Pastors' Emergency League, voted for the National Socialists since 1924. When he had an audience with Hitler on January 25, 1934, he emphasized the League's loyalty to Germany and to their Führer, stressing that their struggle against the German Christians was "not directed against the Third Reich but for the sake of this Reich."¹⁵⁵ Additionally, the membership cards for the Confessing Church read: "such a confession includes the obligation for loyalty and devotion to *Volk* and Fatherland."¹⁵⁶ Such a declaration showed that even church opposition relegated itself to remain in the church sphere; opposition did not extend to the politics of the state. The Church first mandated that its pastors swear an oath of loyalty at the national synod on August 9, 1934. Reich Bishop Müller saw such a show of national loyalty as "gratitude for Germany's rescue from the dangers of revolution and for the creation of the new office of the Führer."¹⁵⁷ The national synod ordered this "oath of service" in addition to oaths clergy already swore upon ordination.

Though clergy took an oath of loyalty to the German state upon appointment to church office, the Church felt a stronger show of loyalty was important.¹⁵⁸ Upon the wave of national euphoria provoked by the *Anschluss* with Austria in March 1938, the Reich Church government

¹⁵⁴ Railton, *The German Evangelical Alliance*, 79.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵⁶ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 57.

¹⁵⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 373.

¹⁵⁸ The German Evangelical Church, despite the roiling conflicts within, maintained a semblance of official status with the state. Thus, church officials were also considered civil servants.

issued an order in the *Legal Gazette* of April 20 that year that “all pastors in active office were to take the oath of allegiance to the Führer.¹⁵⁹ The loyalty oath read: “I will be loyal and obedient to the Führer of the German Reich and nation, Adolf Hitler.”¹⁶⁰ The date of the order, Hitler’s birthday, was important; the loyalty oath was intended to be a birthday present for the Führer. The move to require this oath began in Thuringia, Saxon, and Mecklenburg, but soon most of the regional churches followed.¹⁶¹ Many pastors viewed this loyalty oath as simply an expression of nationalism, and an extension of the loyalty to the German state that they already professed.

Other pastors felt that declaring personal loyalty to Hitler went too far. For these, the “oath expressed more than [they] could declare with a clear conscience at that point, for it made a farce of their ordination vows.”¹⁶² These pastors felt that they could not swear allegiance to a single man, as their allegiance to God must come before any man. The most adamant of the opposition was the radical “Dahlemite” wing of the Confessing Church, whose members outright refused to take the oath. Despite the initial intense opposition, on July 31, 1938 the Confessing Synod of the Old Prussian Union (a regional division of the Confessing Church) advised the pastors to take oath.¹⁶³ The Synod clarified that because a Christian’s ultimate loyalty is to God, no human leader could receive full allegiance. Thus, “for Confessing Christians, the unspoken implication was that they could and would refuse to follow Nazi dictates when these ran contrary to Christian precepts.”¹⁶⁴ Still, the Confessing Church made the step of accepting, at least on the surface, the loyalty oath for its pastors. For Bonhoeffer, the Synod’s decision was shameful; because of their decision, he was ashamed of the Confessing Church.¹⁶⁵ The Confessing Church typically resisted German Christian attempts to align the Church with Nazi ideology, and

¹⁵⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 599.

¹⁶⁰ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 157.

¹⁶¹ Helmreich, *The German Churches*, 228.

¹⁶² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 600.

¹⁶³ Helmreich, *The German Churches*, 228.

¹⁶⁴ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 157.

¹⁶⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 603.

Confessing churchmen especially opposed any auspices that the state had power over the Church. Still, in the case of proving national loyalty, the Confessing Church officially sided with the Reich Church government and agreed that pastors should swear personal loyalty to Adolf Hitler.

Despite the appearance that the loyalty oath was for the state, or more accurately for Hitler himself, the state removed itself from the conflict surrounding it. Hitler's deputy Martin Bormann directed all Nazi regional directors to handle the oath as an "internal church affair."¹⁶⁶ While in the past the state had involved itself on the side of the German Christians, in this instance it left the matter completely to the Church. After the Confessing Synod's decision that its pastors could take the oath, most did. The percent of pastors who took the oath in the regional churches typically ranged from sixty to eighty-nine percent. Only in Westphalia did the majority of pastors refuse; there only twenty-one percent of pastors took the oath.¹⁶⁷ A statement from Martin Bormann in August made this entire dilemma seem for naught. He stated that the oath was not significant outside the Church and neither the Party nor the state would distinguish "whether a clergyman has taken an oath of loyalty to the Führer or not."¹⁶⁸ Bormann reasoned that an oath only had significance if ordered by the Nazi Party or by Hitler himself. Furthermore, Rudolf Hess, Deputy Führer to Hitler, informed Hans Kerrl, Minister for Church Affairs, that Hitler had been unaware of an oath of loyalty from the pastors. According to Hess, Hitler placed no value on the oath.¹⁶⁹ Thus, what was intended as a birthday gift and became a heated issue in the Church, was in fact a meaningless issue.

As the situation for Germany's Jews worsened, the Church's position on the issue did not improve. On December 17, 1938, the Thuringian regional church council issued this decree:

¹⁶⁶ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 157.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 601.

¹⁶⁹ Helmreich, *The German Churches*, 228.

The pastors of the Thuringian Evangelical Church must conduct their office in the manner required by the church's duty toward the state and the people. ... Given the German people's position toward Jewry, it is out of the question for a pastor, through ministry to the Jews, to offer even the slightest impression that the church... might hinder the state's measures for the final elimination of Jewry from German cultural life. Any difficulties in the implementation of this basic position must be borne for the sake of the cause.¹⁷⁰

The Thuringian Church, as the origins for the German Christian movement, represents the most extreme declaration of a church policy against helping the Jews. Though the Church had seen only a month previously the danger that German Jews faced, it refused to help in order to align itself with popular opinion. Most other regional churches did not make such brash statements; but neither did they condemn the November 1938 Kristallnacht pogroms. In fact, the German Evangelical Church as a whole made no official statement opposing state actions in Kristallnacht. Some Christians whom the law defined as non-Aryan did receive assistance from their churches, but that aid lessened after 1939 when emigration became practically impossible. Any help for the Jews was on an individual basis; it did not come through official church channels.¹⁷¹

The Church remained silent on the Jews' plight even as the Nazis embarked on their "Final Solution." Kurt Scharf, a pastor and member of the Confessing Church, admitted in a later interview:

Our parishes knew what was happening there [Sachsenhausen]. The knowledge about the procedures in the camp lay like a poison cloud over our parishes. Because of that, the recognition grew quickly that this war would work its way out on us like the judgement of God. That's how we saw the bombing raids on Berlin after 1942... Our parishes saw the burning churches and burning cities as God's judgment for what had been done in 1938 to the Jews and their synagogues.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 176.

¹⁷¹ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 152.

¹⁷² Quoted in Barnett, *For the Soul*, 103.

Despite the knowledge of the camps and the witnessing of Kristallnacht, Confessing Synods during the war continued to consider the status of non-Aryan Christians while not even discussing the oppression of the Jews.¹⁷³ The Church knew what was happening, but continued to concern itself only with the Church, doing nothing to oppose the Holocaust.

The German Evangelical Church, by its own later admission, did not have a good record concerning German Jews. Struggling with an entrenched anti-Semitism initially helped to blind leaders to the realities of Nazi oppression. Later, the on-going debate over the Aryan Paragraph and the loyalty oath turned the Church's focus inward. When the official German Evangelical Church, and even the Confessing Church, addressed the Jewish question it did so only in matters that directly concerned the Church. Jews outside the Protestant Church could expect no official help.

¹⁷³ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 205.

CHAPTER V

ISOLATED AND INDIVIDUALIZED PROTEST

The German Evangelical Church's internal preoccupation prevented much organized, institutional opposition to the Nazi state's oppressive policies. Most often, protests from the Church came only when the state threatened the Church or its members. Church opposition to state actions outside the Church's realm was minor, made up of isolated incidents. More effective opposition came from individual Christians who acted without official Church sanction.

Hitler Memo

The Confessing Church made its first official attempt at protesting state policies in a memorandum it sent directly to Hitler in May 1936. This memo "was to be aimed first, not to the general public, but to Hitler alone, so that he might have the opportunity of responding to the facts."¹⁷⁴ The Confessing Church leaders still believed that Hitler was restoring Germany to its former glory; they did not believe that he was directly involved in, or even knew about, the excesses of the Nazi state. The memo contained seven main points:

- (1) Was the de-Christianization of the people official government policy?
- (2) What was the actual or ostensible meaning of the Party formula "positive Christianity"?
- (3) The recent "pacification work" muzzled the churches

¹⁷⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 531.

(4) In breach of existing agreements, young people, schools, universities, and the press were forcibly being de-Christianized under the slogan “deconfessionalization”

(5) The new ideology was imposing an anti-Semitism that necessarily committed people to a *hatred of the Jews*, which parents had to combat in the education of their children

(6) The Church saw reason for anxiety in the popular materialistic morality, the exalting of the loyalty oath, manipulation of the Reichstag elections, concentration camps that mocked a constitutional state, and the activities, unhampered by legal scrutiny, of the Gestapo

(7) Spying and eavesdropping exert an unhealthy influence¹⁷⁵

Most of these points focused on the Church itself. Still, the memo went further than any Church protest in arguing against anti-Semitism and against state actions like concentration camps and Gestapo tactics. The memo stated clearly: “Where Aryan man is glorified, God’s Word witnesses to the fallenness of all men; where anti-semitism is forced on the Christian in the context of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* obligating him to *hate* the Jews, the Christian command to love one’s neighbour points in the opposite direction.”¹⁷⁶ In the sixth point of the memo, the Church became bolder in its protest: “The Evangelical conscience, aware of its co-responsibility for people and Government, is most severely burdened by the fact that in Germany, which describes itself as a state where law prevails, concentration camps still exist.”¹⁷⁷ The memo went on to protest that “the state secret police are still exempt from any judicial investigation.”¹⁷⁸ This memo, while the majority focused on the Church and the impact of state policies on its members, was the boldest attempt by the Church to protest state actions against those outside the church.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 532.

¹⁷⁶ Matheson, *The Third Reich*, 61.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 62.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

Though the Church leaders who wrote and sent the memo hoped that Hitler would respond positively, they received neither acknowledgement nor reply.¹⁷⁹ Rather than just disappear, however, the memo turned into a scandal for the Confessing Church. A report about a Church memo challenging Hitler appeared in the London *Morning Post* on July 17, six weeks after the memo was sent to Hitler. Five days after that, the entire memo appeared verbatim in the Swiss *Basler Nachrichten*.¹⁸⁰ As the memo was intended for Hitler only, and not for public consumption, and because that Confessing Church felt the need to prove its loyalty to the state, church leaders decided to aid the Gestapo in resolving the issue. First, the Confessing Church's Provisional Administration wrote to the regional church governments that "publication occurred without the knowledge or assistance of the Provisional Administration."¹⁸¹ Church leaders provided the Gestapo with a copy of the foreign newspapers and aided in the search for the culprits. They arrested three Confessing Church leaders (all lawyers): Friedrich Weissler, Werner Koch, and Ernst Tillich. Koch and Tillich, both Aryans, were tried and released. Weissler, on the other hand, was a full Jew. He was treated brutally and died after less than a year in prison.¹⁸² The Confessing Church's reaction to the leak nullified its protest in the memo. The memo to Hitler protested the Gestapo's tactics, yet the Church helped the Gestapo arrest its own leaders. The memo protested anti-Semitism, yet the Church allowed Weissler, a Jew, to be made into a scapegoat.

The 1936 Hitler Memo represented the boldest protest from the Church collectively, but also demonstrated the Confessing Church's unwillingness to oppose the Nazi state on issues not directly related to itself. As the seven points of the memo show, the focus of the protest was on the impact of Nazi policies on the Church and its members. In this way, the memo "was not a plain disavowal of anti-semitism as such but merely of the militant Nazi version of it. The

¹⁷⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 533.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 533.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth*, 160.

emphasis was not primarily on the plight of the Jews and Jewish Christians ... but rather upon the severe conflict of conscience experienced by devout German churchpeople.”¹⁸³ Rather than encourage church leadership and lay people to speak up for the Jews, the memo continued the Church’s propensity to protect itself and stay focused inward. The memo also further increased the distinction of the radical “Dahlemites” in the church struggle.¹⁸⁴ In sending this memo of protest to Hitler, “the church was still speaking largely on its own behalf, but it was the first and, indeed, the last time it would go so far in matters that concerned every German.”¹⁸⁵ The memo itself still focused on the Church and church members, and the reaction to the memo’s foreign publication compromised any effect that its protest against state policies might have had.

Euthanasia

When the Nazi state began its euthanasia program in 1939 it threatened the German Evangelical Church’s Bethel Institute. The Bethel Institute, a part of the Church’s Inner Mission run by Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, comprised an orphanage as well as a mental institution.¹⁸⁶ Von Bodelschwingh worked to save Bethel’s patients who were targeted for euthanasia. His methods ranged from moving the patients home to families or to other institutions to simply refusing to fill out the Nazi “transfer” forms.¹⁸⁷ Von Bodelschwingh is credited with successfully saving all of his patients at Bethel.¹⁸⁸ Still, like many other German Protestants, von Bodelschwingh fervently swore his national loyalty. He refused to publicly attack Hitler’s regime or speak out against the euthanasia program. Some of his communications “were conciliatory to the point that they gave the impression the Bethel leader was prepared to compromise.”¹⁸⁹ Von

¹⁸³ Gutteridge, *Open thy Mouth*, 159. See also: Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 107.

¹⁸⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 533.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 532.

¹⁸⁶ Von Bodelschwingh was an eminent leader in the German Evangelical Church. He was nominated to be Reich Bishop before Müller, but intense reaction from German Christians caused him to resign quickly.

¹⁸⁷ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 113.

¹⁸⁸ Helmreich, *The German Churches*, 314.

¹⁸⁹ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 111; 113.

Bodelschwingh also discouraged Confessing Church leaders from taking a public stand against euthanasia, claiming that public opposition would destroy his efforts to save his patients.¹⁹⁰ In this way, von Bodelschwingh continued the Church's tradition of limiting opposition efforts to policies that directly affected the Church. Von Bodelschwingh may have been successful at saving the Bethel Institute's mental patients, but he squelched protests or opposition against euthanasia in the rest of German society. Thus the Church only acted to protect those already in its protection. Furthermore, though von Bodelschwingh successfully saved his mental patients, the Jews at Bethel were not so fortunate. Bethel authorities were informed of the order to transport Jewish patients on September 5, 1940. The fact that the Jewish community was practically non-existent, and in any case unable to accept the patients, prevented Bethel from sending the Jews away in time. All but three were transferred according to orders.¹⁹¹

When Church leaders did speak out against euthanasia or other state policies, they often felt isolated. For example, Paul Braune, the vice president of the Central Council of the Inner Mission and director of the Lobetal Institution near Berlin, did speak out publicly against the state's euthanasia program. His opposition, however, left him feeling isolated. He stated about his stance:

I knew that the official church leadership at that time, which had been informed by me, would hardly find itself prepared for energetic opposition against such measures of the State. I was therefore prepared to lead this fight essentially alone.¹⁹²

When leaders like von Bodelschwingh actually discouraged opposition, Braune was correct in his assessment that he was alone in his opposition.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 113.

¹⁹¹ Helmreich, *The German Churches*, 314.

¹⁹² Quoted in Barnett, *For the Soul*, 114.

Individual Protest

Following the pogroms known as Kristallnacht in November 1938 some pastors used Repentance Day to preach or pray on behalf of the Jews. Pastor Julius von Jan of Oberlenningen preached boldly on injustices and distributed his written sermon and repentance prayer. In his Repentance Day sermon von Jan addressed Kristallnacht directly:

A crime has occurred in Paris. The murderer will receive his just punishment because he has sinned against the commandment of God. Along with our people (*Volk*), we mourn the victim of this criminal act. But who would have thought that this one crime in Paris could be followed by so many crimes in Germany? Here we see the price we are paying for the great falling away from God and Christ, for the organized anti-Christianity. Passions have been released, the laws of God jeered at, houses of God that were sacred to others have been burned to the ground, property belonging to the foreigner plundered or destroyed, men who faithfully served our nation (*Volk*) and who fulfilled their duty in good conscience have been thrown into concentration camps simply because they belong to another race, and all this without anyone being held accountable! ... That is why the day of repentance is a day of mourning over our sins and the sins of our nation (*Volk*) that we confess before God, and this is a *day of prayer*¹⁹³

For his boldness, von Jan was arrested.¹⁹⁴ Helmut Gollwitzer, the pastor who replaced Martin Niemöller in the Dahlem parish, declared the complicity of the church and implored his fellowmen Confessing churchmen, “Open your mouth for the speechless (Proverbs 31:8) and for the cause of all who are forsaken.”¹⁹⁵ The few pastors who audaciously chose to speak against state persecution of the Jews did so on their own. There was no official condemnation from the German Evangelical Church.

Just because the Church did not officially protest the state’s policies of euthanasia or the extermination of the Jews did not mean that individual Christians failed to act. Many parishes across Germany protected their Jewish Christian members. At the parish level, some Christians

¹⁹³ David G. Stroud, Ed., *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 112.

¹⁹⁴ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 144.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

still felt a sense of responsibility toward their fellow humans.¹⁹⁶ In some isolated instances individual Christians did provide shelter for Jews. For example, in Württemberg, the community of the Confessing Church greatly helped those who were forced underground. Several parishes, led by pastors Hermann Diem, Theodor Dipper, Otto Mörike, Kurt Müller, and others hid Jews through the course of the war. Max Krakauer and his wife, both Jews, were hidden in sixty-one houses throughout these parishes until they immigrated to the United States in 1945.¹⁹⁷

Unfortunately these stories are few. More often, German Evangelical parishes turned inward, cautiously only concerning themselves with their own parish members. For many, “the churches’ isolated actions for the Jews were hardly noticed... It did not occur to anyone to be proud of those small acts of bravery; everyone knew how inadequate all this was compared to what was actually happening, even though there were still only vague suspicions about the numbers of victims and the methods being used.”¹⁹⁸

Pastors who individually decided to oppose the state or protect the Jews often found that they could not expect support from church leadership. One such pastor, Hans Ehrenberg of Westphalia, was forced into early retirement after virulent attacks in the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer*. While his close colleagues stood by him, the regional church leadership did not. On Kristallnacht, Ehrenberg was arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He was later released and immigrated to England. A fellow pastor was arrested for praying publicly for Ehrenberg.¹⁹⁹ When not even persecuted pastors could expect support from church leadership, racially-defined Jews, who were not associated with the Church, certainly could not. Pastors and laypeople who acted in opposition to the state to help the Jews did so of their own accord; their actions were not condoned by the Church.

¹⁹⁶ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 133.

¹⁹⁷ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 161.

¹⁹⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 746.

¹⁹⁹ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 129.

The Limits of Resistance: Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are two of the most well known names in the story of Christian resistance to the Nazis and the Holocaust. To some, these men's actions make them saints of the Church. Still, like the Church, which spoke out when its own interests were threatened but did not speak out for the general Jewish population, neither Niemöller nor Bonhoeffer had a perfect resistance record.²⁰⁰ Instead of lauding them as saints or even as martyrs, Niemöller and Bonhoeffer should be seen as examples of the Church's limited resistance.

Martin Niemöller

Martin Niemöller initially supported the National Socialist party and welcomed Hitler's rise to power. He voted National Socialist in the 1924 *Landtag* elections, read *Mein Kampf*, and voted National Socialist again in the spring of 1933.²⁰¹ When Hitler came to power in January 1933 Niemöller welcomed the new leader, approved of the Nazi economic plans, and hoped that Hitler could revitalize Germany's churches.²⁰² Niemöller's support for the Nazis stemmed from his intense nationalism. For him, German nationalism and Protestant Christianity coexisted seamlessly.²⁰³ In a sermon on the first Sunday in Lent, 1933, Niemöller reflected his nationalism when he called on the State to consider Christianity a public matter:

This nation—our nation—will either be a Christian nation or it will cease to exist. For that reason we can and must ask the nation's political leaders to take this vital interest into account and not to be deluded into thinking that the question of religion can ever be a private matter among us.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Even Niemöller's biographer recognized that such criticism was valid. See Bentley, *Martin Niemöller*, 65.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 41. The *Landtag* is roughly equivalent to a state legislature. The 1933 elections were the last free elections of the decade.

²⁰² Bonkovsky, "The German State," 137.

²⁰³ Bentley, *Martin Niemöller*, 2.

²⁰⁴ Martin Niemöller, *Here Stand I!* Translated by Jane Lymburn, (Chicago, New York: Willett, Clark & Co, 1937), 13.

Niemöller, like so many other Evangelicals in Germany, at first strongly believed in the connection of Church and State and in his nationalism, supported the Nazi State. Unlike many others, though, Niemöller quickly changed course, began to oppose the National Socialization of the Church under the German Christians, and moved toward opposition.

Within a few months of a Nazi-controlled State, Niemöller saw the problems and shifted from nationalistic support of the State to opposition within the Church, including tacit and cautious opposition of State policies. By May, 1933 Niemöller warned his parishioners in Dahlem that “The renewal of the Christian church, upon which the existence of the German people depended, would be proved not by propagandistic campaigns or a restructuring of the church's organizational life, but by a readiness of the individual Christian to witness to the work of God through acts of love and service to all men, heathen, Christians, or Jews alike.”²⁰⁵ In the July 1933 Church Elections Martin Niemöller created the Gospel and Church Party (*Evangelium und Kirche*) to oppose the German Christians. He later walked out of the Prussian Synod to protest its overt National Socialist orientation and in response created the Pastor's Emergency League on September 11, 1933.²⁰⁶ The Emergency League paved the way for the creation of the Confessing Church, but did not establish political opposition against the State. In fact, Niemöller supported state policies when he joined with several other leaders of the Pastors' Emergency League in sending Hitler hearty congratulations after Hitler announced that Germany had left the League of Nations.²⁰⁷ Niemöller's position was cautious in that he believed that Christian interests were best protected when motives remained religious. To Niemöller and the majority of Confessing Church leaders, political motives corrupted the faith. Even the membership cards of the Confessing

²⁰⁵ John Conway, “The Political Theology of Martin Niemöller.” *German Studies Review* Vol. 9, No. 3 (Oct 1986), 525.

²⁰⁶ Jantzen, *Faith and Fatherland*, 4.

²⁰⁷ Bentley, *Martin Niemöller*, 78.

Church stated that “such a confession includes the obligation for loyalty and devotion to *Volk* and Fatherland.”²⁰⁸

In Niemöller’s sermons the divisions of the Church as well as the Church’s preoccupation with its own affairs are evident. In October, 1934, Niemöller railed against the German Christians and the Reich Church government, saying: “It is dreadful and infuriating to see a few unprincipled men who call themselves ‘church government’ destroy the church and persecute the fellowship of Jesus.”²⁰⁹ Niemöller’s fiercest opposition remained contained within the Church conflict, however, and never fully crossed into the political. On the fourth Sunday after Epiphany, 1935, Niemöller preached specifically on the Christian’s role in the State:

Of course, we may also have a right to disobedience; but this right may be exercised only when we are asked to do wrong, and then it is a duty, for ‘one must obey God rather than men’... Thus Christian faith and loyalty to the state have belonged together from the time of pagan Rome till the present day... That is why a Protestant Christian who is an enemy to the state, or a Protestant church which is an enemy to the state is a contradiction... And while we thank God today for having given our nation a government, and for having through it preserved order and peace for us, at the same time we ask him to guide and rule our Führer and his counselors, our nation and our church, in such a way that his kingdom may come and be a reality among us.²¹⁰

Niemöller did recognize that there should be separation between the church and the state (or the nation), and preached in a sermon titled “Brotherly Love versus the Hatred of the World” in June, 1934, that while “we were accustomed to view the church and the nation as one... Today we face an entirely different situation: church and nation can and indeed dare no longer be regarded as one.”²¹¹ In this statement Niemöller was reacting against the German Christian doctrine of blood and race in the Church, while not advocating even civil disobedience against the State.

Niemöller’s opposition was primarily directed against the German Christians, reflecting the

²⁰⁸ Barnett, *For the Soul*, 57.

²⁰⁹ Niemöller, *Here Stand I!*, 104.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 122-23.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

intense divisions within the German Evangelical Church. By maintaining loyalty to the Nazi state, Niemöller also demonstrated the tendency of the Church not to react against the State until state policy affected the Church directly.

Despite his caution, Niemöller outlined three ways for the church to respond to the state in an article published in September 1936. The first possible response was for the Church to remain a *Volkskirche*, or People's Church. Niemöller argued that this response would make the Church completely subservient to the state which was unacceptable. Secondly, the German Evangelical Church could become a Free Church. According to Niemöller, the problem with the approach was that the state could refuse to tolerate such independence. Finally, because the previous two options were undesirable, Niemöller maintained that the Church must become a church of martyrs.²¹² For its part, the Church took the first option of making no change. Martin Niemöller continued to speak out against German Christian influence in the Church, and when the state viewed his opposition as threatening the Gestapo intervened.

Pastor Martin Niemöller was arrested on July 1, 1937. The official announcement of his arrest declared:

That for a long time Niemöller had been making provocative statements from the pulpit and in public addresses; that he had defamed leading personalities of the state and state measures; that he had caused unrest among the populace. Likewise he had urged rebellion against state laws and ordinances. His statements are the steady fare of the hostile foreign press.²¹³

His trial lasted from February 7 through March 2, 1938. In his defense, Niemöller "made a point of emphasising his desire not to interfere in political issues. His sole concern was about the Gospel. Applying this to the Jewish question he reiterated his former attitude that the Jews were alien and uncongenial to him."²¹⁴ A witness who testified at the trial confirmed that he did not

²¹² Bentley, *Martin Niemöller*, 96.

²¹³ Helmreich, *The German Churches*, 214.

²¹⁴ Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth*, 103.

know of any occurrence of Niemöller criticizing the Aryan legislation in general, but only as applied to the Church.²¹⁵ At the conclusion of the trial, Niemöller was sentenced to seven months, which he had already served, and was set free. The following day he was taken into custody again- this time under Hitler's direct orders as the Führer's personal prisoner. He was sent first to Sachsenhausen and then transferred to Dachau in July 1941.²¹⁶ Niemöller remained at Dachau until the end of April 1945 when he and other political prisoners were taken to South Tirol and freed by German troops.²¹⁷

Many consider Niemöller close to a martyr because of his arrest and imprisonment. His actions, however, show the limited nature of Church resistance. Even while imprisoned, Niemöller remained loyal to his nation and reportedly even wrote to Hitler asking to be reinstated as a submarine captain when war broke out.²¹⁸ In January 1946 Niemöller admitted to a student audience that "he had kept silent when he was first made aware of the increasing persecution of the Jews, and only broke silence when there was an ecclesiastical problem concerning non-Aryans."²¹⁹ Though the state viewed his statements as threatening enough to keep him in a concentration camp for the duration of the war, Niemöller acted much like the Church did by protesting only when the Church or its doctrine was threatened.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

A man whom many of today's Protestants consider a martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the earliest and loudest voices of protest in German Protestantism. In the tumult of 1933, Bonhoeffer protested against the Führer principle and the corruption of the Church along racial lines, both areas about which others outright accepted, tacitly supported, or otherwise remained

²¹⁵ Ibid., 103.

²¹⁶ Helmreich, *The German Churches*, 214. Sachsenhausen and Dachau were both concentration camps in Germany.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 215.

²¹⁸ Niemöller served on a submarine in the First World War.

²¹⁹ Gutteridge, *Open thy Mouth*, 102.

silent. Two days after Hitler's election, Bonhoeffer gave a radio address titled, "The Younger Generation's Altered Concept of Leadership." The German word *Führer* translates as leader; the *Führer* principle connotes an idea of absolute leadership.²²⁰ While not attacking Adolf Hitler himself, as Bonhoeffer planned the speech before Hitler came to power and as the *Führer* principle was not yet associated with him, Bonhoeffer addressed the primary problems of absolute leadership, focusing especially on the danger of the *Führer* becoming an idol. Even before Hitler consolidated power, Bonhoeffer saw and preached against the dangers of such a strong and solitary leader.

Bonhoeffer was also an early opponent of the Nazi regime's answer to the Jewish Question. The boycott of Jewish businesses throughout Germany on April 1, 1933 made the position of the regime clear. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ninety-one-year-old grandmother, Julie Bonhoeffer, defied the SA promoting the boycott to shop at the Jewish-owned *Kaufhaus des Westens* in Berlin.²²¹ Bonhoeffer, perhaps following his grandmother's example, also spoke out against the persecution of the Jews. In a letter to his friend Erwin Sutz, dated April 14, 1933, Bonhoeffer wrote that "the Jewish question has caused the church no end of trouble; here, the most sensible people have lost their heads and their entire Bible."²²² About the same time, Bonhoeffer wrote an article titled "The Church and the Jewish Question," in which he analyzes the Church's position on the racial question.²²³

Though his early opposition propelled Bonhoeffer into leadership in the emerging Confessing Church, he led from a distance. In October 1933, Bonhoeffer moved to London to be parish minister in the German parsonage.²²⁴ Two years later upon his return to Germany, Bonhoeffer became the director of Finkenwalde Seminary in Pomerania. This was a Confessing

²²⁰ Adolf Hitler adopted the term *Führer* as a title for himself, thus after the Third Reich it has come to be synonymous with Hitler.

²²¹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 11.

²²² Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 25.

²²³ See chapter five for more discussion of this article.

²²⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 328.

seminary, founded to train pastors for the Confessing Church. The universities' theological faculties had become overrun with German Christians, so the Confessing Church established separate, unofficial (not recognized by the state or by the official church government) seminaries to prepare their pastors. The Finkenwalde seminary emphasized community and became the basis for Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together*. Both the German Christian-led Church government and the state felt threatened by separate Confessing Church seminaries and eventually closed Finkenwalde in 1937.²²⁵ In the summer of 1939, Bonhoeffer returned to the United States, accepting the invitation of Union Theological Seminary in New York City where he had studied in 1930-31. Upon his arrival in the United States, Bonhoeffer changed his mind and returned to Germany to join his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi and others in political opposition to Hitler's Nazi regime.

Upon his return to Germany in the summer of 1939, Bonhoeffer joined Dohnanyi and Admiral Wilhelm Canaris to work against Hitler through the Abwehr Military Intelligence.²²⁶ His activities caught up with him when he was arrested on April 5, 1943.²²⁷ At first the Gestapo lacked hard evidence to link Bonhoeffer to actual anti-government activities. When Admiral Canaris's diary surfaced, evidence came to light inextricably incriminating Bonhoeffer and Dohnanyi of their roles in plots against Hitler's life. Bonhoeffer and the other conspirators with him were transferred to Flossenbürg concentration camp and executed in April 1945, just two weeks before the Allies liberated the camp.²²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer advocated church opposition to the injustices of the Nazi state from the beginning. Though he is often hailed a martyr for the church, Bonhoeffer engaged in his acts of opposition apart from the church and was executed for his political activities, not for his church work. Ultimately, Bonhoeffer saw the only method of

²²⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 422; 493.

²²⁶ Kenneth Barnes, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hitler's Persecution of the Jews," In *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, Edited by Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Herschel, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 114. See also Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 370.

²²⁷ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 436.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 532.

effective opposition as outside the Church and teamed up with secular allies in order to pursue the opposition he felt necessary.

Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer serve as examples of the limited nature of church resistance. Though Niemöller led opposition against the German Christian movement in the Protestant Church, he did not extend that opposition to state policies against the general Jewish population. He continued to be loyal to the German state even while incarcerated as Hitler's personal prisoner. Bonhoeffer went further in his opposition, but did this without the support of the Church. He could not stay within the German Evangelical Church and carry out the kind of opposition he saw necessary.

In October 1943, the Confessional Synod meeting in Breslau issued the first public protest of the Holocaust. The statement, which was to be read from pulpits on Repentance Day, read:

Woe unto us and our nation, when the life which God has given is held in contempt and man, made in the image of God, is regarded in purely utilitarian terms; when the killing of men is justified on the grounds that they are unfit to live or that they belong to another race; when hate and callousness become widespread. For God says: "Thou shalt not kill." ...

Let us confess with shame: We Christians share the guilt for the contempt and perversion of the holy Commandments. We have often kept our silence; we have pled too seldom, too timidly, or not at all, for the absolute validity of God's holy Commandments.²²⁹

The declaration condemned the state on the basis of the Sixth Commandment and New Testament interpretations of the authority of the state. This "divine order did not recognize expressions such as 'extermination' and 'liquidation' and 'worthless of life.' The life of all mankind belonged to God alone. It was sacred to Him. And that included the life of the people of Israel."²³⁰ The

²²⁹ Matheson, *The Third Reich*, 99.

²³⁰ Gutteridge, *Open thy Mouth*, 249.

Breslau Statement represented a united oppositional front from the Confessing Church, no longer concerned with only its internal conflicts and affairs, but also with those outside of the Church.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

From the midst of the Third Reich's atrocities come stories of heroism and true selfless charity. Some German Protestants like Hermann Diem, Theodor Dipper, Otto Mörike, Kurt Müller, and others opposed the Nazi regime by hiding Jews. These pastors and members of their congregations followed the directive from the Proverbs to open their mouths for the oppressed.²³¹ Other Protestants, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, became political and attempted to attack the state head-on. Individuals, not the Church, undertook these bold actions. Instead, as an institution, the German Evangelical Church remained quiet rather than oppose state policies.

The Protestant Church was a particularly important institution in Germany. With its vast membership and connection to the state, the Church had the potential to make a difference in the Third Reich. The position of the Church also makes it an important institution to study. Rather than make excuses for why the Church did not act more boldly, it is more important to recognize that the Church failed and try to determine why it failed. Because of its potential for significant influence, the German Evangelical Church is an important institution to study in relation to Hitler's Nazi regime. On the institutional level, the German Evangelical Church did not do more to oppose oppressive Nazi policies because it was focused inward; with few exceptions, the Church only spoke out when its organization or its members felt directly threatened. This inward focus stemmed from several issues, but the basic explanation for the Church's inaction is

²³¹ Proverbs 31:8

its self-absorbed position.

The Church's theology and traditions contributed to its inward focus in the Third Reich. German Protestant theologians interpreted Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms to mean that the Church should always stay completely out of political affairs. This interpretation encouraged church leaders not to oppose the state, even when state policies conflicted with Biblical values. The German Evangelical Church also had a long tradition of cooperation with the state. Despite the interpretation of the Two Kingdoms (Law-Gospel) doctrine, there was no separation of church and state in Germany. The Church benefitted from its relationship with the state through tax subsidies and religious instruction in schools, among other benefits. Protestants wanted to keep their position with the state and did not risk losing their benefits by opposing state policies. This reluctance to risk status, as well as a narrow interpretation of theological tenets contributed to the Church drawing inward and failing to oppose the state.

German Protestantism also had a history of anti-Semitism, which clouded their perception of state actions. The Faith Movement of German Christians defined itself by its intense racism, but anti-Semitism was not exclusively a German Christian issue. Even leaders in the Confessing Church displayed anti-Semitic ideas by using the term "Jewish" as an insult for their enemies. Opposition to the German Christians formed around protesting the application of the Aryan Paragraph to the Church. First the Pastors' Emergency League, and later the Confessing Church, opposed the Aryan Paragraph on the grounds that all Christians were equal regardless of race. At the institutional level, this view of equality of races did not extend outside the realm of the Church. The Confessing Church worked to protect Jewish Christian members and clergymen, but its entrenched anti-Semitism blinded it to the plight of Jews who did not belong to the Protestant Church.

Another factor that contributed to the preoccupation of the Church with its own matters was nationalism. Many Protestants welcomed Adolf Hitler's rise to power because they thought that the Nazis would restore Germany to its former glory. National loyalty also came into question when the church government required clergy to take an oath of loyalty to the nation and to Hitler after the *Anschluss* in 1938. Ultimately, despite reservations, most pastors did take the oath. After all the controversy, the oath became meaningless when Hitler gave it no significance. Rather than focus on issues outside the institutional Church, German Protestants debated about Christians taking a loyalty oath.

Perhaps the most important factor that distracted the German Evangelical Church was its internal division. Founded a decade earlier, the Faith Movement of German Christians gained significant power in church government in the July 1933 elections. That summer, the Church wrote a new constitution that created the office of Reich Bishop. Handpicked by Hitler, Ludwig Müller filled the position and kept the German Christians at the top of church hierarchy. Despite some setbacks early on, the German Christians remained relevant in the German Evangelical Church throughout the Third Reich. The German Christian-dominated Institute for the Research into and Elimination of Jewish Influence on German Church Life gave religious justification for the Holocaust. Opposition to the German Christians began early in 1933 and by 1934 had consolidated into the Confessing Church. Though it claimed to be the only true German Evangelical Church, the Confessing Church never fully separated itself from the official Church. By remaining a part of the Protestant Church, the Confessing Church was not the center of opposition that earlier histories claim, but rather it also drew inward and focused primarily on internal church affairs. The Confessing Church opposed the German Christians within the German Evangelical Church, and this internal division prevented significant political opposition.

Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer provide examples of the limited resistance that came from the Church. Niemöller led the opposition to the German Christians with the

foundation of the Pastors' Emergency League. Niemöller's parish church in Dahlem became the center of the most radical wing of the Confessing Church. In 1937, he became Hitler's personal prisoner. Though incarcerated for perceived opposition to the state, Niemöller requested to be reinstated as a U-Boat commander in the war. Like many in the Church, Niemöller remained loyal to Germany. Despite the hagiography that has developed around him, Niemöller confined his protest to the church realm. An even greater hagiography developed for Dietrich Bonhoeffer who is often portrayed as a martyr for the Church. Bonhoeffer's actions show that the Church was not willing to enter the political realm and oppose state policies. Bonhoeffer became frustrated with the Church's inaction and joined the Abwehr to oppose the state politically. He did not act as a representative of the Church.

When historians began to focus on the churches' role in the Third Reich the accepted narrative excused their failures by blaming Nazi persecution. Later the historiography turned to a narrative of Church Struggle. This narrative focused on the divisions between the German Christians and the Confessing Church, but many historians dismissed the German Christians' influence after the Sportspalast rally in November 1933. The explanation of the Church Struggle lacked enough focus on the German Christians. Rather than excusing church actions, a fair analysis must recognize that the Protestant Church remained quiet on issues of Jewish persecution and seek an explanation for that failure. Such an explanation must recognize that the German Christians did not disappear in 1933 but remained relevant throughout the Third Reich.

When the Berlin-Weissensee Synod issued its statement of guilt in April 1950, they recognized that the Church failed to speak up for the victims of Nazi oppression. The Church did not make excuses, but admitted its shortcomings.

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