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## “The Church Struggle and the Confessing Church: An Introduction to Bonhoeffer’s Context”

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Author’s note: Significant portions of this essay draw on the introduction and chapter 1 of my book, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

In a recent review of the seventeen-volume *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, edited by Eberhard Bethge and others, church historian Andrew Chandler writes, "For in the so-called Church Struggle, Bonhoeffer was a striking but marginal figure. He was young, he could not often persuade his elders toward more decisive opinions and measures, he did not much affect events. . . . Historians have certainly not found Bonhoeffer standing at the heart of the circles of resistance with which he became associated after 1939."<sup>1</sup> And Victoria Barnett writes in an essay addressing Bonhoeffer's ecumenical vision that "[Bonhoeffer's] controversial stands prevented him from ever becoming a central figure in the Confessing Church. Although he was enormously loved and respected by his students, the rest of the church disregarded him. Many Confessing Christians never heard of Bonhoeffer until after 1945."<sup>2</sup> My own research on the Confessing Church during and after the Nazi period confirms these observations. Even in the immediate postwar period when Confessing churchmen were safely ensconced in the leadership body of the Church, some continued to be dismissive of Bonhoeffer's overt political resistance during the Nazi period and did not believe that they could learn anything from him. The Lutheran bishop of Bavaria, Hans Mesier, for instance, chose not to take part in a 1953 memorial service for Bonhoeffer in Flossenbürg, Bavaria -- where the Nazis had executed Bonhoeffer -- on the grounds that Bonhoeffer was a political martyr--not a church martyr.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Chandler, "The Quest for the Historical Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 54/1 (January 2003): 92-93.

<sup>2</sup> Victoria J. Barnett, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Vision" *The Christian Century* 112/14 (April 26, 1995): 455.

<sup>3</sup> Renate Wind, "A Spoke in the Wheel: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his Development into Political Resistance" (lecture delivered at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, March 31, 2003).

Bonhoeffer's striking albeit marginal role in the German church struggle and his inability to affect significantly the direction of the Confessing Church was due to many factors, including his young age, his liberal-democratic politics, his absence from Germany from October 1933 to April 1935, his vacillating and at times contradictory positions on central issues, his radical theological critique of the Nazi state, his friendship with and family ties to Christians of Jewish descent, and ultimately his willingness to risk his life to destroy Hitler's regime. Although this essay is not a detailed study of Bonhoeffer's politics or theology but rather an introduction to "the church struggle" and the various ways that Protestant Church leaders, pastors, and theologians responded to the policies of the National Socialist regime, it does attempt to compare at key moments positions taken by important figures and groups in the Confessing Church with Bonhoeffer's position on these issues.

## 1. Religious Background

In 1933, approximately forty-one million Germans were officially registered as Evangelical (Protestant) and twenty-one million as Catholic from a total population of sixty-five million.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church where the pope played the central role, the German Evangelical Church (*Deutsche Evangelische Kirche*, DEK) had no single leader and was by no means monolithic. It was not a unified church in the doctrinal sense but rather a federation of independent regional churches (*Landeskirchen*). During the period of the church struggle the Evangelical Church in Germany consisted of twenty-eight autonomous regional churches, which included Lutheran, Reformed, and United denominations or traditions.

<sup>4</sup> *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich* (Berlin: R. Hobbing, 1934), 5-6.

The Lutheran regional churches embraced nearly one half of the Protestants and the United regional churches the other half. The United churches, the largest of which was Bonhoeffer's church, the Church of the Old Prussian Union, were shaped predominately by Lutheran practices and traditions even though they were administered since 1817 as a union of Lutheran and Reformed.<sup>5</sup> The two small Reformed regional churches in northwestern Germany consisted of four hundred thousand and five hundred thousand parishioners, respectively. Less than 1 percent of the total German population was Jewish.<sup>6</sup>

The National Socialist revolution in 1933 further exacerbated the divisions among Protestants. Unlike the Catholic Church, which signed a concordat with the Nazis in 1933, the Protestants split into essentially three groups – the ultra-nationalist, antisemitic, and pro-Nazi German Christian movement; the somewhat oppositional Confessing Church;

and the uncommitted neutrals. Each of these groups enjoyed support from clergy and laity from all three Protestant traditions (Lutheran, United, and Reformed). Of the eighteen thousand Protestant pastors in Germany, less than one-third were adherents of the German Christian movement.<sup>7</sup> Although the number of pastors who joined the Confessing Church reached just over seven thousand in January 1934, for most of the period of the church struggle from 1933 to 1945 the number was less than five thousand.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, there are no reliable figures on how many laypersons belonged to the Confessing Church. Approximately 80 percent of the laity were in the middle, subscribing to neither the beliefs of the German Christians nor the Confessing Church. And to complicate matters even further, the intensely antisemitic German Christians were divided amongst themselves, as were the pastors in the Confessing Church.

## 2. The Church Struggle

The church struggle involved three interwoven dimensions: first, the struggle between the Confessing Church and the German Christian movement for control of the Protestant Church; second, the struggle between the Confessing Church and the Nazi state over spheres of influence; and third, the conflict within the Confessing Church between the conservative and radical wings over the nature of the church's opposition to the German Christians and the Nazi state.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The most important administrative union of Lutheran and Reformed churches took place in Prussia in 1817 during the reign of Frederick William III. In addition to the influence of Pietism and the Enlightenment, the Napoleonic consolidation of the approximately 300 German principalities into 30 states with corresponding regional churches contributed to the development of union churches. Napoleon's territorial consolidations brought Lutheran subjects under the rule of Reformed leaders and Reformed subjects under the rule of Lutheran leaders. The easiest solution seemed to be the creation of United churches. Lutheran confessionalism was too strong elsewhere, especially in Bavaria, Saxony, and Hanover, for unions to take place. See Robert M. Bigler, *The Politics of German Protestantism: The Rise of the Protestant Church Elite in Prussia, 1815-1848* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), 37; Daniel R. Borg, *The Old-Prussian Church and the Weimar Republic: A Study in Political Adjustment, 1917-1927* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1984), chap. 1; and Eckhard Lessing, *Zwischen Bekenntnis und Volkskirche: Der theologische Weg der Evangelischen Kirche der altpreußischen Union (1922-1953) unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer Synoden, ihrer Gruppen und der theologischen Begründungen* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich*, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 178.

<sup>8</sup> Ernst Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1979), 156.

<sup>9</sup> Willem Visser't Hooft, the first general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), presented a similar interpretation of the church

The first dimension of the church struggle was a defensive battle waged by established church authorities such as Bishops Otto Dibelius, Hans Meiser and Theophil Wurm and Pastor Martin Niemöller, who grouped together loosely in the Confessing Church to oppose the ultranationalist pro-Nazi German Christians.<sup>10</sup> The German

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struggle immediately after the war in "The Situation of the Protestant Church in Germany," Gerhard Besier, Jörg Thierfelder, Ralf Tyra, eds., *Kirche nach der Kapitulation: Die Allianz zwischen Genf, Stuttgart und Bethel*, vol. 1, (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1989), 58-59. For discussions of the concept of the church struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) see, Georg Kretschmar, "Die Auseinandersetzung der Bekennenden Kirche mit den Deutschen Christen," in Paul Rieger and Johannes Strauss, eds., *Kirche und Nationalismus: Zur Geschichte des Kirchenkampfes* (Munich: Claudius, 1969), 117-21 and Klaus Scholder, "The Church Struggle," in *A Requiem for Hitler and Other New Perspectives on the German Church Struggle* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 94-95.

<sup>10</sup> There are several excellent studies on the church struggle in English. John S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches, 1933-45* (New York: Basic Books, 1968); Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, eds., *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974); Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979); Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, vol. 1, *Preliminary History and the Time of Illusions, 1918-1934*, vol. 2, *The Year of Disillusionment: 1934. Barmen and Rome*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987-88); Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985); Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel eds., *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999). In German the literature is voluminous. See the third volume of Scholder's series by Gerhard Besier, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich: Spaltungen und Abwehrkämpfe 1934-1937* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2001); Kurt Meier, *Der evangelische Kirchenkampf*, vol. 1, *Der Kampf um die "Reichskirche"*, vol. 2, *Geschichte Neuordnungsversuche im Zeichen staatlicher Rechtshilfe*, vol. 3, *Im Zeichen des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1976-1984); Günther van Norden, *Der deutsche Protestantismus im Jahr der nationalsozialistischen Machtergreifung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1979);

Christians sought to incorporate the twenty-eight Protestant regional churches into a united German Evangelical Reich church headed by a Reich bishop with close ties to Hitler. Their goal to integrate Christianity and National Socialism in a racially pure "people's church" was a direct challenge not only to the autonomy of the regional churches but to Lutheran and Reformed doctrinal principles as well.

Thus, in addition to the ecclesiastical dimension of this conflict over who would control the churches administratively, the German Christians and Confessing Church clergy were often tenacious theological antagonists as well. Although there were clear and definite distinctions between the theology of the German Christians and that of the Confessing Church, these distinctions should not overshadow the similarities between the mainstream Protestant theology adhered to by many Confessing clergy and German Christian theology. In fact, the nationalism, antisemitism, and anti-Communism at the heart of the German Christian movement were widely accepted and defended by reputable theologians in university faculties across Germany.<sup>11</sup>

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Kurt Meier, *Die Deutschen Christen: Das Bild einer Bewegung im Kirchenkampf des Dritten Reiches* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964); Günther van Norden, *Der deutsche Protestantismus im Jahr der nationalsozialistischen Machtergreifung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1979); Armin Boyens, *Kirchenkampf und Ökumene, 1933-1939: Darstellung und Dokumentation* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1969); Eberhard Röhm and Jörg Thierfelder, *Juden, Christen, Deutsche 1933-45*, vol.1, 1933-38, vol. 2, 1935-38, vol. 3, 1938-41 (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1990-95); Manfred Gailus, *Protestantismus und Nationalismus. Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Durchdringung des protestantischen Sozialmilieus in Berlin* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> See Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz, "New Testament Scholarship and the Nazi-State: Christian Responsibility and Guilt in the Holocaust," in *Remembering for the Future*, vol. 3, ed. Yehuda Bauer et. al. (New York: Pergamon Press, 1989), 2717-2727 and her early ground-

A year after Hitler came to power the German Christians had achieved many of their goals. Through a combination of elections and strong-arm tactics they had successfully gained control of all but three of the regional churches, namely those in Württemberg, Bavaria, and Hannover.<sup>12</sup> Established church leaders, who were removed from leadership positions in these regional churches, referred to German Christian-controlled churches as “destroyed churches.”<sup>13</sup> The Lutheran churches in the south and Hanover that remained in the hands of the old leadership were thus designated “intact churches.” Immediately after gaining control of the destroyed churches, the German Christians passed racial legislation, the infamous Aryan paragraph, which sought to exclude Christians of Jewish descent from holding positions in the church.<sup>14</sup> German Christians as well as many Confessing churchmen, in contrast to Bonhoeffer, considered Christians of Jewish

descent, “non-Aryans” according to Nazi racial legislation, a “grave danger” to the church and German culture.<sup>15</sup>

The second dimension to the church struggle was the conflict between the Confessing Church and the Nazi state. This conflict is often erroneously conceived as the primary (even the only) struggle.<sup>16</sup> It is imperative to understand the church’s opposition to the state for what it really was: occasional critiques by a small group of churchmen against particular state policies, such as the Nazi euthanasia program and Nazi church policy. Bonhoeffer’s early and total opposition to the Nazi state made him unpopular with many Confessing churchmen.

When Adolf Hitler came to power in January 1933 Protestant churchmen across the country shared in the general enthusiasm for his nationalist, anticommunist, and antisemitic rhetoric. The experience of the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) for most Protestant churchmen convinced them of a need for strong national leadership and moral renewal – two prominent platforms in Hitler’s campaign. Protestant bishops, pastors, and church officials made up a particularly important segment of the group of conservative elites who willingly compromised with Hitler when he first came to power.<sup>17</sup> In addition to the political support of church leaders,

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breaking book, *Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft vor der Judenfrage: Gerhard Kittels theologische Arbeit im Wandel deutscher Geschichte* (Munich: Kaiser, 1980); Also see the collection of essays on various theology faculties edited by Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz and Carsten Nicolaisen, *Theologische Fakultäten im Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1993); The standard in English is Ericksen, *Theologians Under Hitler*.

<sup>12</sup> Although German Christians would continue to hold the reins of power in all but these three churches until 1945, by the end of 1934 the Nazi State had begun to withdraw much of its initial support for the movement because of the German Christians’ incompetence at subduing opposition from the Confessing Church. Nevertheless German Christian pastors remained committed to a racially pure church that synthesized Nazi ideology and Protestant theology. See Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 15-20.

<sup>13</sup> Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, vol. I, 550.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 471.

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<sup>15</sup> The ninth thesis of the German Christian’s guiding principles criticized missions to convert Jews to Christianity because conversion allowed “alien blood” into the body of the nation. On the Confessing Church and Jewish Christians see Gerlach, 11-86; Gutteridge, 91-151; Röhm and Thierfelder, *Juden, Christen, Deutsche 1933-45*, vol. 1, and Smid, *Deutscher Protestantismus und Judentum 1932/1933*, parts VI and VII.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Baumgärtel discusses this misinterpretation of the church struggle in *Wider die Kirchenkampf-Legenden* (Neudettelsau: Frieimund, 1959) as does Conway, *The Nazi Persecution*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>17</sup> Shelley Baranowski, “Consent and Dissent: The Confessing Church and Conservative Opposition to National Socialism,” *The Journal of Modern History* 59 (March 1987): 53-78.

the prestigious Lutheran theologians Paul Althaus, Werner Elert, Friedrich Gogarten, Gerhard Kittel, and Emanuel Hirsch lent theological justification to the National Socialist revolution.<sup>18</sup> Thus, alongside far less reputable churchmen in the ultra-nationalist and fanatically antisemitic German Christian movement, respectable and influential authorities in the church also applauded the National Socialist government.

Most Protestants found nothing incompatible with practicing their faith and supporting Hitler. Protestant leaders admired Hitler's courage in attacking atheistic leftists and liberals and believed his goals were similar to theirs. Even when Hitler backed the German Christians in the July 1933 church elections and championed their leader, Ludwig Müller, as the new Reich bishop, only a small segment of regional church leaders drew the obvious conclusion that Hitler would not let them decide the church's future, especially when they envisioned a future of strong, independent, and confessionally defined regional churches.<sup>19</sup> Even after a year of state interference in church

<sup>18</sup> See Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emmanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Hans Tiefel, "The German Lutheran Church," 326-37; and Lowell C. Greene, "The Political Ethos of Luther and Lutheranism: A Reply to the Polemics of Hans Tiefel," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (August 1974): 330-35.

<sup>19</sup> For an analysis of Ludwig Müller's career see, Thomas Martin Schneider, *Reichsbischof Ludwig Müller: Eine Untersuchung zu Leben, Werk und Persönlichkeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1993). Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, the conservatives' candidate for Reich bishop, had defeated Müller in the church elections in May 1933. But Bodelschwingh resigned after serving only one month, on the grounds that he could no longer carry out his tasks when virtually the entire Prussian church was under police jurisdiction. As a result of Bodelschwingh's resignation parish elections were held to elect regional and national synods, which in turn would elect a new Reich bishop. In the decisive parish elections of July 23, 1933 the German Christians,

the majority of churchmen continued to harbor the illusion that Hitler was simply misinformed and misled by Bishop Müller, his church liaison.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, in 1933 and 1934 there was little evidence of a church-state struggle. Church elites directed the bulk of their wrath at the German Christians who sought to modify church doctrine in accordance with National Socialism and its racial policies.

The final dimension of the church struggle was the intense feuding within the Confessing Church itself, between its radical and conservative wings, which became visible in 1934. Whereas the radicals, led by Pastor Martin Niemöller of Berlin-Dahlem, took a firm stand against the German Christians, the conservatives, especially in the south German churches, showed a willingness to work alongside the more reputable churchmen in the German Christian movement.

The radicals in the Confessing Church, it is important to note, were *not* socially or politically radical; in political and social matters they differed very little from the conservatives, most of whom had supported one of the right-wing political parties in Weimar elections. In the context of the persecution

now with the active support of the Nazi State and Party, gained control of all but three of the regional churches. In north Germany and much of Prussia the association of the German Christians with the Nazis increased their popularity and helped them win spectacular victories. Afterwards, the first National synod elected Ludwig Müller Reich bishop to the cheers of a number of delegates wearing their brown SA uniforms. See Shelley Baranowski, "The 1933 German Protestant Church Elections: Machtpolitik or Accommodation," *Church History* 49 (1980): 298-315.

<sup>20</sup> It was a common phenomenon, as Ian Kershaw shows, for Germans to heap blame on Hitler's subordinates and the "fanatics" in the Nazi Party while maintaining a myth of Hitler as an exemplary and virtuous leader. See Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987).

of the churches by the Nazi state, their opposition to Hitler's church policy, however, was decidedly radical.

The central issue underlying the struggle between radicals and conservatives during the Nazi era was whether the Confessing Church's opposition to attempts to incorporate the church into the Third Reich by force necessarily involved wider opposition to the Nazi state. Some pastors and church leaders in the Niemöller wing of the Confessing Church believed that it was necessary to publicly protest state laws and decrees that interfered with the church's control over its administrative, financial, legal, and pastoral offices. State policies that undermined civil liberties but were not directly harmful to the church elicited few condemnations from the pulpit. The same was true of state-orchestrated violence against those perceived to be enemies of the regime, particularly Communists and Jews.

Bonhoeffer, to be sure, stood out among these colleagues for his opposition to Hitler and Nazism from the very start. But his opposition remained undeveloped and restrained until after Kristallnacht and the outbreak of the war. Moreover, Bonhoeffer's eighteen-month stay in London from late 1933 to early 1935 and his directorship of the illegal seminary in Pomerania from 1935 to 1937 meant that he had little influence on the direction of the Confessing Church. The limited steps he and a few others in the Confessing Church took prior to 1939 toward political disobedience led to bitter quarrels within the ranks of the Confessing Church. The rift became so great that no concerted or unified stance was ever possible against the Nazi state.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Eberhard Bethge, "Troubled Self-interpretation and Uncertain Reception in the Church Struggle," in *The German Church Struggle*, ed. Littell and Locke, 172-75.

Although there was a political dimension to the divisions in the Confessing Church, differences in politics were not paramount especially early in the church struggle. The split that first became evident in the Confessing Church in 1934 was chiefly theological or doctrinal, between Lutherans who emphasized different tenets of Lutheranism. With the exception of Swiss Calvinist theologian Karl Barth and a few German Reformed Church leaders, the vast majority of Confessing Church leaders were Lutherans who accepted and subscribed in varying degrees to the Christian doctrines originating from Martin Luther and taught by the Lutheran Church. Bonhoeffer's liberal-democratic leanings as well as his rejection of the orthodox Lutheran understanding of church-state relations placed him outside mainstream Protestantism and even in opposition to many of his colleagues in the Confessing Church.

Most of the leaders of the Confessing Church were born in the last three decades of the nineteenth century and many were the sons of pastors or raised in traditional Protestant households. They experienced the Third Reich as mature adults. At the beginning of the war in 1939 they were middle-aged and well established as theologians or church leaders. Theophil Wurm (1868-1953), the conservative Lutheran bishop of Württemberg in southwest Germany, was older; he was seventy when the war began. Hans Meiser (1881-1956), the arch-conservative bishop of Bavaria, and Otto Dibelius (1880-1967), the postwar bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg, were both in their late-fifties. Martin Niemöller (1892-1984), the fiery Berlin pastor who spent 1937-45 in concentration camps for his opposition to Nazi church policy was in his late forties. The Lutherans Hans Asmussen (1898-1968), Hermann Diem (1900-1975), Hans Iwand (1899-1960), Walter Künneth (1901-1997), and Hanns Lilje (1899-1977), all of whom engaged vociferously in the debates over church-state relations, were in their thirties when the Nazis came to power and between forty-four and

forty-seven when the war ended. Karl Barth (1886–1968), the controversial Swiss Reformed (Calvinist) theologian who clashed frequently with conservatives, was fifty-three in 1939. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45), by contrast, was in his late twenties when the Nazis came to power and was killed in 1945 before his fortieth birthday. He came from a large, wealthy, and politically liberal family of scholars, scientists, and lawyers. Both his best friend and brother-in-law were Christians of Jewish descent.

The birth of the church opposition movement came from these traditional church leaders who were appalled by the German Christians' energetic overthrow of the familiar landmarks of church life. Established church leaders, who suddenly found themselves removed from their positions in the regional churches, were naturally upset by the German Christians' actions. The opposition sought to preserve traditional patterns in such matters as voting rights in church elections, the leadership principle within the church, the degree of autonomy allotted to the regional churches, the appointment of church officials, and, the use of church funds. They sought to preserve their former theological and church political positions unchanged and to block any further extension of the German Christians' takeover of church life.

### 3. The Young Reformers and the Aryan Paragraph

Prior to the establishment of the Confessing Church, a group of churchmen calling themselves the Young Reformation Movement took a stand against the German Christian desire to introduce racial legislation in the churches.<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer took the lead in formulating the theological opposition to this legislation. He and other Young Reformers wanted to distinguish themselves theologically

<sup>22</sup> See Peter Neumann, *Die Jungreformatoren Bewegung* (Göttingen, 1971), 108-14.

from both the German Christians and established conservative church leaders. In early April 1933 the Nazi state passed a law, the Civil Service Reconstruction Law that purged most Jews – “non-Aryans” according to the legislation – from the civil service. This legislation made no distinction between Jews who had converted to Christianity and Jews who had not. Since there were Christians of Jewish descent in the Protestant churches, a tiny fraction of whom (twenty-nine to be exact) were ordained pastors or held ecclesiastical offices and were therefore considered part of the civil service, the question arose of how the church would act towards them.<sup>23</sup> Not surprisingly the German Christians favored adopting the state's racial legislation and officially excluding “non-Aryans” from the pulpits and unofficially from the pews. The Young Reformers, on the other hand, outright rejected any legislation that would exclude Christians of Jewish descent from the church.

It was however symptomatic of their ambivalence toward Nazism that, on the vital question of the place of Jews in German society, they compromised.<sup>24</sup> First appearances notwithstanding, the Young Reformers' rejection of racial legislation in the church, was not a sign of their resolve to oppose antisemitism but rather of their vexation at the German Christians' arrogance for thinking they could willy-nilly disregard the sacrament of baptism and modify the church's established policy toward baptized Jews in order to accommodate their vision of a racially pure church.<sup>25</sup> The

<sup>23</sup> Kurt Meier, *Kirche und Judentum: die Haltung der evangelischen Kirche zur Judenpolitik des Dritten Reiches* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968), 26.

<sup>24</sup> An excellent source on attitudes toward the “Jewish Question” held by prominent Protestant Church leaders and theologians in 1932 and 1933 is Smid, *Deutscher Protestantismus und Judentum 1932/1933* (Munich: Kaiser, 1990).

<sup>25</sup> There were exceptions in the church, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. See his “The Church and the Jewish Question,” in Edwin H. Robertson, ed.,



Young Reformers charged that, “Organized exclusion [of Jewish Christians] means an interference with the power of the sacraments. The Jewish Christian has been accepted into our church through the will of God in the sacrament of baptism. Through this baptism he is bound indissoluble to this church, and this church to him.”<sup>26</sup>

As this quotation indicates, their concern for the integrity of the church’s autonomy rather than humanitarian sympathy for the victims of Nazi racial discrimination motivated the Young Reformers’ protest. Confessing churchmen said virtually nothing about the Nazi mistreatment of Jewish Germans who had not converted to Christianity. Nor did the discrimination against the approximately fifty thousand Jewish Christians in the secular sphere receive strong condemnation.<sup>27</sup>

How deeply influenced the Young Reformers, and later the Confessing Church clergy, were by anti-Judaic Christian doctrine and the existing currents of anti-Jewish prejudice in German society can be seen from the attitudes of two of their most prominent theologians.<sup>28</sup> Walter Künneth, one of the founders of the Young Reformation Movement and theologian at Berlin University, referred to Jews as “the people of the curse” and “germ carriers,” and supported “the

elimination of Jewish influence” from Germany.<sup>29</sup> He defended the right of baptized Jews to hold the positions of pastor and church administrator but “the post of Bishop and other positions of leadership in the Church should be reserved for those of the German race.”<sup>30</sup> The Young Reformers distinction between Jews and Jewish Christians, their acceptance of the Aryan paragraph in the secular sphere, and their lukewarm defense of Jewish Christians within the church were early signs that Jews, whether baptized or not, could not count on the church to protect them.

Another revealing response to this issue was the stance taken by the twenty-seven-year-old Bonhoeffer. While he was the most adamant about defending baptized Jews against racial legislation imposed by the church, his highly acclaimed April 1933 “The Church and the Jewish Question,” employed traditional anti-Judaic language typical of the Lutheran churches.<sup>31</sup> Bonhoeffer was not antisemitic. He did, however, hope for the conversion of Jews to Christianity since he believed that only through faith in Jesus as the Messiah was salvation possible. It is worth quoting from Bonhoeffer’s text at some length to demonstrate just how deeply ingrained his anti-Judaic thinking was:

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*No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 221-29. On Martin Niemöller and antisemitism see Robert Michael, “Theological Myth, German Antisemitism and the Holocaust: The Case of Martin Niemöller,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 2/1 (1987): 105-22.

<sup>26</sup> Douglass, *God Among the Germans*, 133.

<sup>27</sup> The figure fifty thousand is an estimate by Julius Richter, a missionary and advocate for Christians of Jewish descent. Approximately 200-400 Jews converted to Protestantism each year from 1900 to 1939, except in 1933 when over 900 Jews converted to Protestantism. See Röhm and Thierfelder, *Juden, Christen, Deutsche*, 192-99.

<sup>28</sup> See Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 11-49.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Ruth Zerner, “German Protestant Responses to the Nazi Persecution of the Jews,” in *Perspectives on the Holocaust*, ed. Randolph L. Braham, (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing, 1983), 62-63 from Künneth’s essay, “The Jewish Problem and the Church” in *Die Nation vor Gott: Zur Botschaft der Kirche im Dritten Reich*, ed. Walter Künneth and Helmut Schreiner (Berlin: Wichern, 1934). For further discussion of this essay see Röhm and Thierfelder, *Juden, Christen, Deutsche 1933-1945*, vol. 1, 155-59 and Smid, *Deutscher Protestantismus und Judentum 1932/1933*, 364-9.

<sup>30</sup> Zerner, “German Protestant Responses,” 62.

<sup>31</sup> “The Church and the Jewish Question,” in Robertson, *No Rusty Swords*, 221-29. Also see Röhm and Thierfelder, *Juden, Christen, Deutsche 1935-45*, vol. 1, 174-81.

The Church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the “chosen people” who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross must bear the curse for its action through a long history of suffering. ... But the history of the suffering of this people, loved and punished by God, stands under the sign of the final homecoming of Israel [the Jews] to its God. And this homecoming happens in the conversion of Israel to Christ. ... The conversion of Israel, that is to be the end of the people’s period of suffering. From here the Christian Church sees the history of the people of Israel with trembling as God’s own, free, fearful way with his people, because God is not yet finished with it. Each new attempt to solve “the Jewish question” comes to naught ... nevertheless such attempts must be made.<sup>32</sup>

Despite his theological anti-Judaism, Bonhoeffer distinguished himself from many of his colleagues by opposing implementation of racial legislation in the church and arguing that Christians had a responsibility to show Christian kindness and charity to all Jews by assisting those who suffered as a result of the state’s racial legislation.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Robertson, *No Rusty Swords*, 226-227.

<sup>33</sup> On Bonhoeffer’s understanding of a Christian’s obligation to Jews see: Röhm and Thierfelder, *Juden, Christen, Deutsche 1933-45*, vol. 1, 174-8; Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 25-30; Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. and ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 304-23; Eberhard Bethge, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews,” in *Ethical Responsibility: Bonhoeffer’s Legacy to the Churches*, ed. John D. Godsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981); Smid, 415-56; Ruth Zerner, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews: Thoughts and Actions, 1933-1945,” *Jewish Social Studies* 37 (summer and fall, 1975): 235-250; Stanley R. Rosenbaum, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Jewish View,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 18 (Spring 1981); Kenneth C. Barnes, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hitler’s Persecution of the Jews,” in *Betrayal*, ed. Ericksen and Heschel, 110-28; Robert E. Willis, “Bonhoeffer and Barth on Jewish Suffering: Reflections on the Relationship between Theology and Moral

“The church,” Bonhoeffer declared, “cannot allow its actions towards its members to be prescribed by the state. The baptized Jew is a member of our church. Thus the Jewish problem is not the same for the church as it is for the state.”<sup>34</sup> However, based on his understanding of the gospel and his Lutheran understanding of the church-state relationship Bonhoeffer did not advocate, at that time, direct political action against the state on behalf of Jews or Jewish-Christians. While it is clear that his priorities – like most of his colleagues in the Confessing Church – were first and foremost the reclamation of the church from the pernicious secular forces attacking it, he had an additional motive in writing “The Church and the Jewish Question” that distinguished his position from many in the opposition. He suggests that the Nazi state is an illegitimate state because it is remiss in its duty to maintain law and order.<sup>35</sup>

As a good Lutheran Bonhoeffer acknowledged that in a world where Christians and non-Christians alike fail to live according to the gospel in “chaotic godlessness,” that the state, independent of the church, has the right to take action and use force to maintain order.<sup>36</sup> He asserts that the church “recognizes the absolute necessity of the use of force in this world and also the ‘moral’ injustice of certain concrete acts of the state which are necessarily bound up with the use of

Sensibility,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24/4 (fall 1987): 598-615; John A. Moses, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Conspirator Against the Hitler Regime: The Motivation of a German Protestant Revolutionary,” *War & Society* 17/1 (May 1999): 25-40; Stephen R. Haynes, “Who Needs Enemies? Jews and Judaism in Anti-Nazi Religious Discourse,” *Church History* 71/ 2 (June 2002): 341-367; and Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” 227.

<sup>35</sup> John Moses’ essay, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Conspirator,” is particularly useful on this issue.

<sup>36</sup> Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” 222.

force.”<sup>37</sup> However, the church should not sit by disinterestedly in political affairs. It has the obligation, Bonhoeffer insists, to “continually ask the state whether its action can be justified as legitimate action of the state, i.e., as action which leads to law and order, and not to lawlessness and disorder.”<sup>38</sup> Moreover, when the state oversteps its God-given duty by passing laws that endanger the church’s proclamation, the church has three possibilities: it can remind the state of its duties and responsibilities; it can aid the victims of the state’s misuse of its power; or it can take direct political action against the state. Bonhoeffer was disappointed that neither the Young Reformation Movement in 1933 nor the Confessing Church as a whole in 1934 were willing to act on the first or second of these measures unequivocally. Only after Kristallnacht and the beginning of the Second World War did Bonhoeffer himself conclude that that direct political action was a necessity.

#### 4. The Barmen Declaration

Even Karl Barth, who offered frequent advice and direction to many pastors and theologians in the church opposition, was unprepared to urge Confessors to defend Jews against Nazi persecution in the early 1930s.<sup>39</sup> He did, however, propose developing an unambiguous theological opposition that would be directed against any theology, whether German Christian or orthodox Lutheran, which did not acknowledge the infinite qualitative distinction between

God and man.<sup>40</sup> Barth urged the opposition in the Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches to recognize the unity of their faith through their confession of the exclusivity of Jesus Christ and the gospel as sources of God’s revelation. Motivated by a sense of urgency in the midst of the coordination (*Gleichschaltung*) of the churches by the Nazis, churchmen from across Germany gathered for the First General Confessional synod in Barmen in late May 1934. In addition to issuing the famous Barmen theological declaration, the delegates elected a leadership body, the Reich council of brethren (*Reichsbruderrat*) to direct the national affairs of the Confessing Church.<sup>41</sup>

The Barmen declaration consists of a preamble, six theses, and a conclusion. Each of the six theses begins by quoting Scripture followed by an explanation of the passage and a condemnation of error or *damnatio*. The theological committee designated to draft the declaration for the Barmen synod consisted of Karl Barth; the relatively unknown Bavarian Lutheran churchman, Thomas Breit; and Hans Asmussen, a Lutheran pastor and theologian from Altona near Hamburg. Although Asmussen was a Lutheran, and after the war a rather conservative one, he was influential in

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>39</sup> See Eberhard Busch, *Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes: Karl Barth und die Juden 1933-1945* (Neukirchen-Vlyun: Neukircher Verlag, 1996) and Mark Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity: The Theological Basis of Karl Barth’s Opposition to Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Karl Barth, “The Church’s Opposition in 1933,” in *The German Church Conflict* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 16.

<sup>41</sup> The noteworthy churchmen elected to the (Reich) council of brethren were President Karl Koch of Bad Oeynhausen near Minden, Bishop Hans Meiser of Munich, Bishop Theophil Wurm of Stuttgart, Pastor Joachim Beckmann of Düsseldorf, Pastor Karl Immer of Barmen, Pastor Gerhard Jacobi of Berlin, Pastor Martin Niemöller of Berlin-Dahlem, Pastor Hans Asmussen of Altona, and Pastor Hermann Hesse of Wuppertal-Elberfeld as spokesman of the Reformed churches. Over the next few years the membership of the council of brethren would change dramatically, increasingly including more and more Confessing churchmen from the moderate or Dahlem wing of the Confessing Church. See Gerhard Niemöller, *Die erste Bekenntnissynode der Deutschen Evangelischen Kirche zu Barmen*, vol. 2, *Text, Dokumente, Berichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1959), 204.

the radical wing of the Confessing Church and sympathetic to Barth's theology during the church struggle. Despite the presence of Lutherans on the theological committee, scholars agree that Barth was the principal author of the declaration. Bonhoeffer at this time was in London preaching and administering the sacraments to German expatriates in two small congregations. Although he had very little direct influence on the Barmen declaration, his critique of the Nazi state in his April 1933 "The Church and Jewish Question" is echoed in the first and fifth thesis of the Barmen declaration.

"The Barmen Theological Declaration of Faith," as it was officially called, was an attempt to achieve consensus among the three Evangelical (Protestant) traditions and to reassert or reclaim church independence, particularly theological independence, from the Nazi-influenced German Christian movement. Although there were a significant number of pastors and church leaders from all three traditions – Lutheran, Reformed, United – who were willing to make doctrinal concessions in order to achieve a consensus in the face of the German Christian threat, there was also a powerful group of Lutherans, including some of the most respected and world-renowned Lutheran theologians in Germany, who believed strongly that the theological consensus reached at Barmen was an unacceptable dilution of Lutheran theology.

To be sure, all Lutherans present at Barmen voted in favor of the declaration. But the number of Barmen critics increased when the German Christian threat diminished after 1934 and especially after 1945 when confessional unity was no longer an urgent necessity. Some Lutherans, like Erlangen theologian and church historian Hermann Sasse (1895-1976), opposed Barmen because its theological

content clashed with the traditional Lutheran Confessions.<sup>42</sup> Others, such as Paul Althaus (1888-1966), a Lutheran professor of systematic theology at Erlangen University, seemed more agitated by what they believed were Barmen's political implications, particularly a curtailment of the state's authority. Bishop Meiser of Bavaria exemplifies those who voted for Barmen primarily to register their protest against the German Christians' storm-trooper tactics and theological excesses – not because they held the declaration itself in high esteem.

Many conservative Lutherans shared Mesier's strategy and beliefs. After 1934 these Lutherans distanced themselves from the declaration; they felt Barmen's revision of core Lutheran doctrine was too drastic. They quite rightly perceived that the Barmen declaration challenged four of the conservative Lutherans most sacred tenets: the law-gospel dialectic, the orders of creation, natural revelation, and the orthodox Lutheran understanding of Martin Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms.

Barmen's first thesis grounded the church in a theology centered on Christ and committed the church's proclamation to the principle of *sola scriptura*, based on Scripture alone. The second article asserted that Christ's message, which

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<sup>42</sup> Sasse asserted in 1936, "He who recognizes the Theological Declaration of Barmen as a doctrinal decision has thereby surrendered the Augsburg Confession and with it the confession of the orthodox Evangelical Church. What is pure and false doctrine, what is and is not to be preached in the Lutheran Church can only be decided by a synod which is united in the confession of Lutheran doctrine, and not an assembly at which Lutherans, Reformed, Consensus United, Pietists, and Liberals were all equal participants, as was the case in Barmen." See Sasse's essay "Against Fanaticism," in Hermann Sasse, *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters*, vol. 1, 1927-1939 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002). The original German, "Wider die Schwarmgeisterei," was published in *Lutherische Kirche* (1 Aug. 1936): 237-40.

unites God's grace and God's law, had authority in all areas and aspects of life. Thesis III declared that the church's ecclesiastical structure derived from Christ's message and that neither the church's structure nor message could be changed to satisfy current political or ideological trends. The fourth thesis stated that the purpose of the church's ecclesiastical offices was to fulfill the church's special commission to preach the gospel and administer pastoral care—not for personal advancement or aggrandizement. Thesis V acknowledged the state's divine origins and its right to use force to maintain order; at the same time, it asserted that the church's message and worldly engagement should remind the state of its ultimate origins in God. Finally, Barmen VI explained the mission of the church as spreading the message of God's free grace through its office of preaching. What the Barmen declaration did not address was the increasingly prevalent attacks on Jews and Judaism. Of the six theses the two most contentious were the first and the fifth.

The first thesis was meant to re-enforce *to whom* and *to what* the church must listen, *from where* the church's knowledge of God must come, and *from what source* the church's proclamation must be derived. According to this fundamental thesis, "Jesus Christ, as he is proclaimed to us in the Holy Scriptures, is the one Word of God that we have to hear, to trust in life and death, and to obey." Barmen I rejected all claims that the church could proclaim that the message of God's saving grace could be found in a source other than Jesus Christ as attested to in the Scriptures.

Barth explained in the late 1930s that the primary aim of Barmen I (and the declaration as a whole for that matter) was to tackle the problem of natural theology in general and its crude manipulation by the German Christians in

particular.<sup>43</sup> The vulgar natural theology espoused by the German Christians placed the events of 1933, German history, German blood, and even Adolf Hitler alongside the gospel as revelations of God's will. Walter Grundmann, a leader of the German Christians in Saxony, provided one of the more brazen distortions of natural theology in his explanation of the significance of the Nazi insignia for Christianity: "The Swastika is a sign of sacrifice which lets the cross of Christ shine out for us in a new light."<sup>44</sup> Directed primarily but not exclusively against this type of theological error, Barmen's first thesis rejected the placing of the swastika next to the cross, the Third Reich next to God's Reich, or Hitler next to Christ in church proclamation. Thus the rejection of crude natural theology in the first thesis was for Barth and many of his supporters, including Bonhoeffer, the foundation over which the entire church struggle was to be fought.

Conservatives, however, detected correctly a challenge not only to the German Christian's blatant heresy of placing Hitler next to Christ but also a challenge to the long doctrinal tradition of natural theology and natural revelation in Christianity, particularly Luther's theory of the divine orders. Several highly respected Lutheran theologians, including Paul Althaus, Werner Elert, Friedrich Gogarten, Emanuel Hirsch, and Hermann Sasse, to name a few, maintained a twofold revelation of God, in Jesus Christ and in the divine orders (family, state, and *Volk*). They did not, of course, maintain that the two revelations were of equal importance to

<sup>43</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936-62), vol. 2, part 1, 172-82.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace*, 23. Also see Scholder, *The Churches*, vol. 2, 13-14 and Susannah Heschel, "Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence in German Church Life," *Church History* 63:4 (Dec. 1994): 587-605.

Christians. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ was always given priority. But the very fact that they took a second revelation in the divine orders with resolute seriousness meant that it was highly unlikely that they could support the Barmen declaration unconditionally. Sasse believed that Barth's attack on natural theology and the divine orders was a grave mistake because such a critique alienated not only the German Christians but the conservative Lutherans as well.

Barth did not mind alienating both German Christians and conservative Lutherans. He wanted to stress that German Christian theology was merely the logical outcome of orthodox Lutheranism. Since Barth saw no adequate way to check or limit the prioritizing of a natural revelation over the revelation of God in Christ as attested in the Scriptures, he maintained that all natural theologies must be eliminated from church proclamation. Barth wrote the declaration, to be sure, with an eye to pleasing certain Lutherans as well as Reformed churchmen. The Lutherans Barth wanted to meet halfway, however, were Asmussen, Niemöller, and their colleagues who sought confessional unity—not conservative Lutheran confessionalists like Althaus, Eiert, and Sasse.

Of the six theses, the fifth is most important for an appreciation of the political and theological debates regarding church-state relations. At issue was the degree of authority Christians ought to allot the state. Conservatives granted it more, radicals less. The authors of Barmen V modified the orthodox Lutheran interpretation of Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms in order to map out an alternative view of the relation of church and state that would address the totalitarian claims of the Nazi state.

Lutherans, both moderate and conservative, agreed that the state existed by reason of man's sin. Since Christians and non-Christians failed to conduct themselves in

accordance with the dictates of the gospel it was necessary for God to rule the earth by means other than the consoling promise of the gospel. Accordingly, God created a second government, the worldly government or regiment (*das weltliche Regiment*), alongside the spiritual government or regiment (*das geistliche Regiment*), in order to preserve life and property in the not yet redeemed world. Whereas the Holy Spirit ruled the church or spiritual kingdom by means of the gospel, the state ruled civil society or the earthly kingdom by means of coercion and force. The two kingdoms within which every Christian lived simultaneously were both kingdoms of God. God, however, commissioned them with different tasks, ruled them with different governments, and placed different means at the disposal of the two governments. The task of a church minister was to proclaim the gospel of Christ; the task of a state minister was to keep the peace. Barmen V did not explicitly challenge this accepted interpretation of Luther's doctrine but it did modify it much the same way as Bonhoeffer had done in his 1933 essay.

The fifth thesis emphasized the ties between the two kingdoms as much as their separateness when the authors declared the church "... calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and ruled." In doing so the church reminded the state that not only was it divinely sanctioned in its role to maintain order but also in its responsibility to the kingdom of God and the Word of God. This strongly suggested, although it was never explicitly stated in the Barmen declaration, that the honor due the secular authority was contingent on the state's fulfillment of or at least the genuine attempt to fulfill its God-given task in accordance with commonly recognized Christian principles. Conservative Lutherans denounced this link between the two kingdoms as a departure from orthodoxy. For them, Barth's interpretation undermined the orthodox Lutheran distinction

between God's alien work and God's proper work, between law and gospel, between *das geistliche Regiment* and *das weltliche Regiment*. Thus, Barmen V limited implicitly the autonomy and authority of the state and in doing so lost the support of many conservative Lutherans.

For the supporters of Barmen, the traditional interpretation of the Lutheran confessions provided inadequate doctrinal resources to withstand attempts by the German Christians to fuse Christianity and National Socialism. In view of the German Christian heresies, Barth and his followers sought not simply to restore the traditional Lutheran vision but to revise that vision by restricting the church's proclamation to God's word alone. They defined the church as the brethren gathered together to profess Jesus Christ as the sole mediator between God and man. Conservative Lutherans, relying on other mediating links between God and man such as the state, accused the radicals of acting like a sect determined to exclude anyone who did not accept and adhere to their unorthodox declaration.<sup>45</sup>

### 5. The Dahlem Resolutions and the Schism in the Confessing Church

In late 1934, only five months after Barmen, a follow-up synod of the same opposition forces in the Confessing Church was held in Pastor Niemöller's church in the Berlin suburb of Dahlem. It was a call for battle against the errors of the German Christians. The radical wing of the Confessing Church declared in effect that the leaders of the official Reich church had cut themselves off from the Christian church as a result of their unconstitutional and unchristian behavior. Moreover, the misuse of the legal

<sup>45</sup> See in particular Sasse's "Against Fanaticism," in *The Lonely Way*, 307-310.

machinery of the Reich church by the German Christian leaders necessitated the implementation of emergency rights (*Notrecht*) by the Confessing Church and the replacement of the administrative and governing bodies of the Reich church with Confessing synods and councils of brethren (*Bruderräte*).<sup>46</sup> The resolution called on all parishes:

... to accept no instructions from the former Reich Church government or its administrative offices, and to withdraw from further cooperation with those who continue to obey this church regime. We summon them [the congregations] to follow the instructions of the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church and those bodies it recognizes.<sup>47</sup>

And finally, the Dahlem resolution requested the official recognition of the Confessing Church, its synods, and councils as the legitimate leadership of the German Evangelical Church by the Nazi state.<sup>48</sup> In effect, the drafters of the Dahlem resolutions declared an outright schism in the church between the Confessing Church and the Reich church controlled by the German Christians. In so doing they also caused a rupture between radicals and conservatives in the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer, who from spring 1935 to summer 1937 ran the Confessing Church's illegal seminary in the village of Finkenwalde near the Baltic Sea, captured the essence of the Dahlem resolution in his controversial comment in 1936 that "Whoever knowingly cuts himself off

<sup>46</sup> In addition to the Reich council of brethren (*Reichsbruderrat*) elected at Barmen, councils of brethren were often elected at the local and regional level to administer to the affairs of the Confessing Church communities throughout Germany.

<sup>47</sup> Douglass, *God Among the Germans*, 261.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

from the Confessing Church in Germany cuts himself off from salvation."<sup>49</sup>

The Dahlem synod brought into the open the divisions that had simmered below the surface at Barmen. The Dahlemites, on the one hand, argued that the Dahlem resolutions were the logical outcome of the theological declaration made at Barmen. Barmen, they argued, laid out the Confessing Church's theology and Dahlem its praxis. The authors of the Barmen declaration asserted that the gospel of Jesus Christ was the one word that the church must hear and obey. The Dahlemites put this into practice by contending that the basis of the Reich church was something other than the gospel and therefore it was their duty as true Christians to sever ties with the leadership of the Reich Church and to erect new laws and bodies that corresponded with the gospel. Conservative Lutherans, on the other hand, interpreted Barmen as a necessary and timely reminder that the gospel and not National Socialist politics took priority in the church. The practical implementation of this conservative interpretation of Barmen was the removal of radical German Christians and a restoration of the old leadership of the regional churches.

Conservatives' eagerness to avoid any unnecessary tension with the state guided their actions in the months after the Dahlem synod. Consequently, the Confessing Church's leadership council, the Reich council of brethren, split into two distinct leadership bodies; each aimed to implement their interpretation of the mandate given to them at Barmen, or in the case of the Dahlemites, at Barmen and Dahlem. On one side, there was the Council of the German Evangelical

Church (*Rat der DEK*), consisting primarily of Dahlemites who saw no room for compromise with the German Christians or Nazi church policies. On the other side, there was the Provisional Church Directory (*Vorläufige Leitung*), led by Bishop Marahrens of Hannover and conservative church leaders primarily from the intact churches.

Leadership of the churches was still solidly divided when the Second World War began in September 1939. As the nation geared up for war and the state clamped down on any sign of disloyalty, churchmen were increasingly confronted with conflicts of interest between their political and ideological loyalty to the Nazi state and their religious and spiritual loyalty to the church and their ordination vows. Whereas the German Christians' readiness to adapt their religious convictions to the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* meant they rarely experienced a conflict of interest, pastors in the Confessing Church continually struggled with how to meet the contradictory demands required of a patriotic citizen and a pious cleric.

Predictably, responses by the Dahlem and conservative wings of the Confessing Church to the dual demands of the gospel and National Socialism diverged considerably in certain instances but only slightly in others. For the most part, the Lutherans traditionalists, such as Marahrens and Meiser, strove to reconcile their political loyalty to Hitler and their religious loyalty to the Lutheran confessions by maintaining that the state leadership was divinely ordained. They hypocritically charged the Dahlem wing of the Confessing Church as well as extremists in the German Christian movement with mixing politics and religion and thus failing to recognize Luther's admonishment to keep the worldly and spiritual kingdoms separate. Without a doubt, Marahrens and Meiser's support for the Nazi regime was certainly more restrained than that of the German Christians but their political quietism was no less political.

<sup>49</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "On the Question of Church Community," April 22, 1936, in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 173.



Pastors in the Dahlem wing of the Confessing Church distinguished between love for the fatherland and unmitigated support for Hitler, making it possible to express their patriotism, even chauvinism, while maintaining that, as the fifth thesis of the Barmen declaration stated, Christians should not allow the state to become “the single and totalitarian order of human life.” Typical of most “opposition” in Nazi Germany, the Dahlemites in the Confessing Church enthusiastically supported certain facets of Nazi rule, opposed others, and toward the rest were indifferent or complacent. But in contrast to the first few years of Nazi rule, the Nazi regime after 1937 sought total control over individuals and groups in the public sphere and hence also sought to quash even the smallest signs of public dissent. Thus, despite their professed allegiance to the fatherland, pastors from the Dahlem wing who strove to preach according to the dictates set down in the Barmen declaration, which clearly limited the role of the state, were considered enemies of the Reich.

Even Kristallnacht failed to spark an outcry by the majority in the Confessing Church. The official response was silence. Some individual Confessing Church pastors, including Niemöller’s replacement Helmut Gollwitzer and a Württembergian pastor, Julius von Jan, took advantage of Germany’s Prayer and Repentance Day (*Buß und Betttag*) the following week to protest the Nazi orchestrated pogrom but the leaders whose voices carried the most weight—Bishops Marahrens, Meiser, and Wurm—made no formal protest.<sup>50</sup> Although a unified response from the Confessing Church was virtually impossible, the real stumbling block to

<sup>50</sup> Röhm and Thierfelder, *Juden, Christen, Deutsche 1933-45*, vol. 3, part 1, 19-61. On Gollwitzer and von Jan’s sermons, see Röhm and Thierfelder, 62-68 and 69-92 respectively. Also see Gerlach, *And the Witnesses were Silent*, 141-152; Barnett, *For the Soul of the People*, 142-43

an official Confessing Church protest was not the confessional, organizational, or even political divisions. Instead, at the core of this silence was the traditional antipathy towards Judaism derived from centuries of Lutheran teaching that the Jew was a godless outcast who would always be a danger to a Christian nation unless he converted to Christianity. Racial antisemitism was certainly prevalent in the Confessing Church, but it paled in comparison to anti-Judaism, the church’s official doctrine on the Jews. According to this doctrine the Jewish threat to Christian society came not from the Jews race or biology but because they rejected Jesus Christ as the Messiah.<sup>51</sup>

Most churchmen from the Confessing Church put Jews and Jewish Christians in very different categories. It was only members of the latter group – the converts – that the Confessing Church would even consider defending against Nazi racial laws. But these attempts to defend Jewish Christians were the exception and not the rule and had the effect of legitimizing much of the Nazis’ murderous racial policy. By 1939, not only had the state’s persecution of the churches reached new heights but the Nazis were clamping down on anyone aiding or abetting any person defined as a Jew by the Nazis. Even if the larger body of the Confessing Church had had a change of heart – which they did not – assistance to Jews would have been extremely difficult and risky.

Although too late to have a major impact on Nazi racial policy, the violence of *Kristallnacht* did spur some individuals to take a more active role in trying to assist their Jewish countrymen. With institutional support from the leadership body of the Dahlem wing of the Confessing Church, Martin

<sup>51</sup> See, Franklin Littell, *The Crucifixion of the Jews: The Failure of Christians to Understand the Jewish Experience* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996).

Albertz, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Heinrich Grüber, Hermann Maas, and others provided relief and help with emigration for Jews and Christians of Jewish descent.<sup>52</sup> Barth and Bonhoeffer also toned down their earlier anti-Judaic explanations for Jewish suffering and became pro-active defenders of European Jews.<sup>53</sup>

Bonhoeffer's opposition was more political and consequently more perilous than Barth's. Active in resistance work through the ecumenical movement for a number of years he eventually joined the conspiracy against Hitler led by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris and Major General Hans Oster in the counterintelligence office of the High Military Command. During trips abroad he smuggled out information on behalf of the resistance and on a trip to Italy, even made contact with the Italian Resistance. When the Gestapo uncovered a plan of the conspirators to smuggle Jews out of Germany in April 1943 Bonhoeffer was arrested and held in Tegel prison in Berlin. On April 9, 1945, the Nazis executed the thirty-nine-year-old pastor and theologian with his fellow conspirators, Canaris and Oster, at

Flossenburg concentration camp.<sup>54</sup> Within a month the Nazis also executed Bonhoeffer's brother and two brothers-in-law for "antiwar activity."

Bonhoeffer's attitude toward the Jews changed in the late 1930s, although he continued to maintain that in their rejection of Christ Jewish suffering served as a sign to Christians of God's severity. Gone from his theology, however, was the traditional Lutheran separation between the people of the Old Testament and those of the New Testament. Aiding the Jews was no longer an act of Christian charity, as he had advocated in 1933, but a theological necessity based on the unity of Jews and Christians in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>55</sup>

When the slaughter of innocent Jews and Slavs began in earnest in 1941 across eastern Europe, fear and prejudice paralyzed the Confessing Church. Soon after the German army began its drive eastward, stories of atrocities against Jews filtered back to civilians and churchmen in Germany. Stewart Herman, pastor of the American Church in Berlin until December 1941, reported in 1943 that "it became definitely known through the soldiers returning from the front that in occupied Russia ... Jewish civilians – men, women, and babies – were being lined up and machine-gunned by the thousands."<sup>56</sup> Bishop Wurm had also alluded to the rumors of mass killings in a letter to the Reich minister of church affairs dated December 1941.<sup>57</sup> Despite the prevalence from late 1941 onwards of rumors and eye-witness accounts that mass killings were taking place, the

<sup>52</sup> Röhm and Thierfelder, *Juden, Christen, Deutsche 1933-45*, vol. 3, part 1, 93-133. Gerlach, *When the Witnesses Were Silent*, 154-162. Gerlach emphasizes that the "Grüber office" was "explicitly commissioned by the second Provisional Church Administration," i.e., the leadership body of the Dahlem wing of the Confessing Church after 1936 (p. 155).

<sup>53</sup> On Barth see Eberhard Busch, *Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes: Karl Barth und die Juden 1933-1945* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1996), 313-58 and Mark Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity: The Theological Basis of Karl Barth's Opposition to Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust*, 261. On Bonhoeffer see, Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, revised and edited by Victoria Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 607 and Kenneth C. Barnes, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hitler's Persecution of the Jews," in Ericksen and Heschel, eds., *Betrayal*, 110-128.

<sup>54</sup> Barnes, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hitler's Persecution of the Jews," 124-125.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-26.

<sup>56</sup> Stewart Herman, *It's Your Souls We Want* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943), 208.

<sup>57</sup> Gutteridge, *Open They Mouth*, 238.

Protestant Church issued only one public condemnation during the Holocaust – and this was a partially veiled criticism in October 1943 by the twelfth confessional synod of the Church of the Old Prussian Union (Bonhoeffer's church) held in Breslau. In its statement to the congregations the Prussian Confessional synod declared, "The murdering of men solely because they are members of a foreign race, or because they are old, or mentally ill, or the relatives of a criminal, cannot be considered as carrying out the authority entrusted to the State by God."<sup>58</sup> The synod also called on the congregations to show spiritual fellowship and brotherly love to "our non-Aryan fellow Christians," i.e., baptized Jews. Unfortunately this plea went unrecognized by most Protestants in all but a few exceptional instances.

Even Bishop Wurm, who openly asserted that Jews were dangerous and destructive and needed to be combated, sent a letter to Hitler protesting "in God's name" the "persecution and annihilation to which many men and women under German domination are being subjected."<sup>59</sup> Tellingly, he could not convince his conservative colleagues, Bishops Marahrens and Meiser to sign the letter with him. As the letter to Hitler makes clear, Wurm minced no words in expressing his belief that the inhuman treatment of men and women was contrary to God's commands. Be that as it may, it would be a misinterpretation of the private protests of Wurm and other church leaders if they were presented as championing the cause of the Jews. The notion that antisemitism was justified as long as it stayed within "biblical limits," as one pastor put it, was widely accepted within the

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 248.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 354. The entire letter is translated in app. VI of Gutteridge, 353-55. Also see David J. Diephouse "Antisemitism as Moral Discourse: Theophil Wurm and Protestant Opposition to the Holocaust," (paper presented at the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, Philadelphia, March 2000).

church.<sup>60</sup> Although never explicitly defined, "biblical limits" seemed to exclude extermination and brutal mistreatment but not the denial of civil liberties or expulsion from Germany.

## 5. Conclusions

Despite many public statements professing church unity, the divisions that racked the Confessing Church during the church struggle essentially carried over into postwar Germany. Those who took part in the church struggle, whether as conservatives or Dahlemites in the Confessing Church, tended to carry with them into the postwar period one of two lasting impressions. The church struggle convinced them either of the error in developing a theologically based political opposition to the state, or, conversely that the error was to mount a theological opposition but fail to draw the political consequences of that theology.

For the great majority for whom the church struggle provided further evidence of the incompatibility of Lutheran theology and political resistance, the end of the war offered the opportunity to restore traditional Lutheranism. They regarded the common confession made at Barmen in May 1934 to be of great significance for the church struggle but not necessarily for the postwar period. Conservatives favored a church-organized denazification of the churches, which for them meant accepting all but the most extreme German Christians back into the fold.<sup>61</sup> Conservative Lutherans, including Hans Meiser, never forgot the criticisms they had to endure from the Niemöller wing of the

<sup>60</sup> Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth*, 120.

<sup>61</sup> Clemens Vollnhals, *Evangelische Kirche und Entnazifizierung 1945-1949: Die Last der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1989), 52-60.

Confessing Church, which accused them of abandoning the Barmen declaration and thereby weakening the oppositional front.<sup>62</sup> The legacy of the church struggle for conservative Lutherans was the unbridgeable gap that had developed between themselves and those they deemed radical sectarians.

The Dahlemites who conferred such importance on the Barmen declaration and its practical application in the Dahlem resolutions wanted to carry over the confessional unity into the post-'45 church. The legacy of the church struggle for the Dahlemites was that it demonstrated the inadequacy of orthodox Lutheran theology to provide the theoretical foundation to resist or oppose measures taken by the state, in particular the state's racial policy. This reasoning led many from the Dahlem wing to advocate fundamental reforms in the postwar church.

Had Bonhoeffer lived he certainly would have joined the Dahlemites in their postwar clamor for ecclesiastical and theological reforms. Sadly, his death denied the church its most experienced ecumenical leader and perhaps the one voice most prepared to address the church's guilt toward Jews and Christians of Jewish descent. The respect he had earned within the ecumenical movement from the likes of George Bell, the Anglican bishop of Chichester, and Willem Visser't Hooft, a Dutch theologian and the first general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), was sorely lacking for many of the Confessing churchmen who became the leaders of the postwar church. Although it is difficult to say whether Bonhoeffer would have abandoned his anti-Judaic theology, his writings and lectures in the late

1930s and early 1940s indicate that he would have urged the church to acknowledge its complicity in the Holocaust and work for reconciliation with Jewish survivors. His admonition in the mid-1930s that Lutherans were gathering "like eagles round the carcass of cheap grace" and his insistence that "the preaching of forgiveness must always go hand-in-hand with the preaching of repentance" rang even truer in the immediate postwar years.<sup>63</sup> Although Bonhoeffer's political resistance against the Nazi state and his activities on behalf of Jews in the early 1940s was far too radical for the Meisers and Wurms of the postwar church to embrace, many Dahlemites such as Hermann Diem, Hans Iwand, and Martin Niemöller developed a Christian ethics similar to Bonhoeffer's. He may have remained a marginal figure in the immediate postwar years, however it is a testament to Bonhoeffer's theology and ethics that upon reflection some Confessing pastors drew the lesson from the Nazi era that, "when Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die."<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> These accusations continued after the war. See, Niemöller to Asmussen, 28 Nov. 1946, ZEKHN-Darmstadt 62/539 and Bogner to Niemöller, 15 Mar. 1946, LKA Nuremberg LKR 1, 102h (new number 303).

<sup>63</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 64 and 287-288.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.