

## **Session XII B: Christianity and the Holocaust**

### **The Protestant Responses: Courageous and Compliant**

**Theodore J. Weeden, Sr.**

#### **Introduction: Overview**

What follows is an account of German Protestantism's response to the Holocaust. The predominant Protestant response was to comply with the Nazi's persecution of Jews, particularly from the early to the mid-years of the Third Reich. Some German Protestants even applauded Adolf Hitler as the savior of the German nation and its Aryan culture, and thus triumphantly acclaimed and actively supported the anti-Semitism of National Socialism. There were, on the other hand, a significant number of courageous Protestants, who at the risk of their own lives, spoke out against the Nazi atrocities against the Jews—particularly Jews who had converted to Christianity—and actively interceded on behalf of the beleaguered Jews, supplying their needs for mere survival, offering them safe hiding, or assisting them in escaping from Germany and extermination by the Nazis.

To understand why German Protestants were so anti-Semitic we must go back four hundred years to Martin Luther, the father of the German Protestant Church. It is Luther's anti-Semitic views and his conviction that state government is ordained by God that best accounts for German Protestantism's own anti-Semitic mind-set and its failure to rise up against the Nazi government. We begin then with a look at Luther's anti-Semitism and his reasoning for believing God ordained secular government and citizens' obedience to civil authority. Source of information cited in the course of the essay is provided in parentheses by an author's name and relevant page number in his work. Title of the author's work can be found in "Works Consulted" at end of the essay.

#### **I. Martin Luther and German Protestants' Views on Jews and Authority of Government**

##### **A. Martin Luther, Father of Protestantism**

Martin Luther (1483-1546) is the father of German Protestantism, as well as father of Protestantism itself. A monk of the Augustinian Order and ordained as a Roman Catholic priest, Luther decried the Church's abuse of indulgences, posting in a demonstrative act of protest his Ninety-Five Theses against the Church to the door of Wittenberg's castle church on October 31, 1517. Subsequently, he broke with the Church and the Church's teaching on authority, biblical interpretation, sacraments, etc, and was declared a heretic. With Luther's rejection of fundamental doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformation was born in Germany. To fast-forward to the Nazi Germany: two of Luther's publications in which he set forth his views on Jews, on the one hand, and the authority of government, on the other, serve as defining documents for the way, in theological conformity with Luther, the German Protestant Church chose, for the most part, to respond to the Nazi persecution of the Jews.

##### **B. Martin Luther's Condemnation of the Jews.**

###### **1. The Evolution of Luther's Views on Jews**

Perhaps the most vitriolic condemnation of Jews by any Protestant, perhaps any Christian, is found in Luther's "*On the Jews and Their Lives*," written in 1543, three years before his death. Luther's excoriating castigation of the Jews in that publication represents the final evolution of his view of Jews during the course of his life. Early on (1519), Luther averred that it

was God's intent that the Jews be converted to belief in Jesus the Christ. However, if they do not respond, they are doomed to God's wrathful judgment. At this early stage in his views, while he insisted that the Jews' only hope was their conversion, Luther rejected Christian hatred for the Jews as he found in the Catholic doctrine *Servitudo Judearum* ("Servitude of the Jews") promulgated by Pope Justinian I (529 CE). He renounced inhuman treatment of Jews in an essay, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, which he wrote in 1523. In that essay, Luther decried Jews being derided, treated like dogs, having their property seized, and the less than cordial embrace of them by Christians when they do convert and become baptized. He argued that, with respect to lineage, they are blood relatives of Jesus Christ, whereas Gentiles are at best only Jesus' in-laws.

But then his attitude toward Jews turned decidedly sour, due apparently in part to his failure to convert them. Considering Jews hopelessly obstinate, he castigated them in his "*On the Jews and Their Lives*," accusing them of "obstinate, unbridled arrogance" in claiming to be God's holy people while rejecting God's prophetic judgment against them. He denounced them as "miserable, blind, and senseless peoples," shameful liars and blasphemers before God, perverting and falsifying scripture (Part 2), "a prophet-murdering people," and stereotyped them as "a defiled bride,

. . . an incorrigible whore and an evil slut with whom God ever had to wrangle, scuffle, and fight." In "their synagogues," Luther excoriates, "nothing is found but a den of devils in which sheer self-glory, conceit, lies, blasphemy, and defaming of God and men are practiced maliciously" (Part 3). "They are steeped in greed, in usury," Luther remonstrates, "[and] they steal and murder where they can and ever teach their children likewise" (Part 7). "[T]hey," continuing his diatribe, "defame our Lord Jesus Christ, calling him a sorcerer and tool of the devil. . . . Then they also call Jesus a whore's son, saying that his mother Mary was a whore, who conceived him in adultery with a blacksmith. . . . They have been bloodthirsty bloodhounds and murderers of all Christendom for more than fourteen hundred years in their intentions, and would undoubtedly prefer to be such with their deeds. Thus they have been accused of poisoning water and wells, of kidnapping children, of piercing them through with an awl, of hacking them in pieces, and in that way secretly cooling their wrath with the blood of Christians, for all of which they have often been condemned to death by fire."

Contrary to their treatment of Christians, Luther avers: "We do not curse them but wish them well, physically and spiritually. We lodge them, we let them eat and drink with us. We do not kidnap their children and pierce them through; we do not poison their wells; we do not thirst for their blood. How, then, do we incur such terrible anger, envy, and hatred on the part of such great and holy children of God? There is no other explanation for this than the one cited . . . [by Moses], that God has struck them with 'madness and blindness and confusion of mind' [Deuteronomy 28:18].

"What," Luther asks in Part 11, "shall we do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews. Since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct, now that we are aware of their lying and reviling and blaspheming." Luther advises seven actions to be taken against the Jews.

First, . . . set fire to their synagogues or schools and . . . bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of his Christians. . . .

Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. For they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues. . . .

Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them.

Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. . . .

Fifth, I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews. For they have no business in the countryside, since they are not lords, officials, tradesmen, or the like. Let them stay at home.

Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping. The reason for such a measure is that . . . they have no other means of earning a livelihood than usury, and by it they have stolen and robbed from us [what] they possess. Such money should now be used in no other way than the following: Whenever a Jew is sincerely converted, he should be handed one hundred, two hundred, or three hundred florins, as personal circumstances may suggest. With this he could set himself up in some occupation for the support of his poor wife and children, and the maintenance of the old or feeble.

Seventh, I recommend putting a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews and Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow, as was imposed upon the children of Adam (Gen. 3 [:19]).

And Luther's advise to political authorities: "In brief, dear princes and lords, those of you who have Jews under your rule: if my counsel does not please you, find better advice, so that you and we can all be rid of the unbearable, devilish burden of the Jews." Luther then admonishes his readers: "But if the authorities are reluctant to use force and restrain the Jews' devilish wantonness, the latter should, as we said, be expelled from the country and be told to return to their land and their possessions in Jerusalem, where they lie, curse, blaspheme, defame, murder, steal, rob, practice usury, mock, and indulge in all those infamous abominations which they practice among us, and leave us our government, our country, our life, and our property, much more leave our Lord the Messiah, our faith, and our church undefiled and uncontaminated with their devilish tyranny and malice" (Part 11).

## **2. The Influence of Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lives* in Nazi Germany.**

Luther's views on Jews significantly shaped the attitude toward Jews in Germany and furthered the development of anti-Semitism. Luther was adopted as the authority for the national justification for attacks upon Jews. During the Nazi era, the Nazis seized upon Luther's diatribe against Jews as kind of a scriptural playbook for their own murderous persecution of the Jews. Almost every anti-Jewish publication of the Third Reich referred to or directly quoted Luther's anti-Semitic views. His *On the Jews and Their Lives* was exhibited in a glass-case display during Nuremberg rallies for National Socialism and quoted as support of the Aryan Law (see below). Bernhard Rust, Hitler's Minister of Education, is reported to have extolled: "Since Martin Luther closed his eyes, no such son of our people has appeared again. It has been decided that we shall be the first to witness his reappearance. . . . I think the time is past when one may not say the names of Hitler and Luther in the same breath. They belong together, they are of the same stamp." Protestant Bishop Martin Sasse has been quoted as triumphantly declaring on the 1938 celebration of Luther's birth: "On November 10, 1938, on Luther's birthday, the synagogues are burning in Germany," and acclaimed that Luther was "the greatest anti-Semite of his time, the

warner of his people against the Jews.” There is no doubt that Luther’s excoriating words against Jews were mighty as the Nazi sword for their anti-Semitism.

Since 1980 a number of Lutheran communions have denounced and formally repudiated Luther for his views on the Jews, and have publicly disassociated themselves from Luther’s hatred of Jews. The Lutheran World Federation declared in 1982: “We Christians must purge ourselves of any hatred of the Jews and any sort of teaching of contempt for Judaism.” The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Church Council declared in 1994: “We who bear his name and heritage must acknowledge with pain the anti-Judaic diatribes contained in Luther’s later writings. We reject this violent invective as did many of his companions in the sixteenth century, and we are moved to deep and abiding sorrow at its tragic effects on later generations of Jews.”

### **C. Luther’s Views on Governmental Authority**

#### **1. The Two Kingdoms**

In his treatise, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, Luther averred: “God has ordained two governments: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ [the kingdom of heaven]; and the temporal [the kingdom of the world], which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that—no thanks to them—they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace.” Luther contended that because the temporal government or kingdom of this world, is necessarily ordained by God, as the Apostle Paul suggested (Letter to the Romans 13:1), “to preserve peace, punish sin, and restrain the wicked, the Christian submits most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays his taxes, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all that he can to assist the governing authority, that it may continue to function and be held in honor and fear.” Christians, according to Luther, “should esteem the sword or governmental authority as highly as the estate of marriage, or husbandry, or any other calling which God has instituted.”

But what if governing authorities are tyrants? “You must know,” counsels Luther, “that since the beginning of the world a wise prince is a mighty rare bird, and an upright prince even rarer. They [tyrants] are generally the biggest fools or the worst scoundrels on earth; therefore, one must constantly expect the worst from them and look for little good, especially in divine matters which concern the salvation of souls. They are God’s executioners and hangmen; his divine wrath uses them to punish the wicked and to maintain outward peace. Our God is a great lord and ruler; that is why he must also have such noble, highborn, and rich hangmen. He desires that everyone shall copiously accord them riches, honor, and fear in abundance. It pleases his divine will that we call his hangmen gracious lords, fall at their feet, and be subject to them in all humility, so long as they do not ply their trade too far and try to become shepherds [of Christians] instead of hangmen.” If the governing authorities do tread on the spiritual world by decrees or force of action, then, Luther advises Christians “should not sanction it, or lift a finger to conform or obey.”

“What if,” Luther asks, “a prince is in the wrong? Are his people bound to follow him then too? Answer: No, for it is no one’s duty to do wrong; we must obey God (who desires the right) rather than men [Acts 5:29]. What if the subjects do not know whether their prince is in the right or not? Answer: So long as they do not know, and cannot with all possible diligence find out, they may obey him without peril to their souls.”

#### **2. The Relevance of Luther’s View on Governing Authority to Protestant Response to the Rule of the Nazis.**

Given Luther's position on the two kingdoms which God has ordained, with the earthly kingdom being established by God to ensure peace and control, the German Protestant Church was able to interpret Luther as admonishing Christians against involving themselves in matters of state, i.e., being "political." Therefore many German Protestants, lay and clergy, determined that God willed that they remain "apolitical" as far as Nazi rule was concern, unless Nazi rule encroached on matters spiritual, which were ordained by God to be the Church's sovereign authority.

## **II. German Protestantism and Its Response to Nazi Anti-Semitism, and Persecution of Jews, 1933-1938.**

### **A. The German Depressed Psyche Prior to 1933 and National Socialism's Cure**

When Hitler came to power in January 1933, Germany was politically fragmented and psychically depressed. It had suffered—from the German point of view—a humiliating defeat in World War I, followed by the humiliating Treaty of Versailles. Along with a social crisis created by rapid development of urbanization and industrialization in the 1920s, Germany faced an overwhelming economic crisis fueled by hyperinflation. The world-wide Great Depression soon followed. Poverty and unemployment became so great that panic reigned in the German psyche. The Weimar Republic, an experiment in democracy, in this nation of autocratic princes, had failed (Barnett, p. 35). On top of that, there was the pestering and festering Jewish problem exacerbated by Jewish immigrants who had arrived in Germany having fled the pogroms in Poland and the Ukraine. Unlike the indigenous Jewish population in Germany prior to World War I, which were considered to be an aesthetic and urbane culture, the immigrants from Eastern Europe were viewed as uncivilized, coarse, and wayward people. The contrast between the culture of these Jewish immigrants and the native German culture was so great that they were vilified in the 1917 German press as "vermin," "riffraff," "depraved" non-humans, essentially animals. Even native German Jews had difficulty accepting them, and hoped that the immigration would end (Gerlach, p. 3). So intense was the German hatred of Jews at this point that German nationalists looked upon the German defeat in World War I as a victory for the Jews (Barnett, p.16). Many Germans blamed their political and economic crises on the Jews, and some even considered the Versailles Treaty that formally ended the War as "an international Jewish plot." (Barnett, p.126). Consequently, Germans now negated or forgot all the contributions Jews had historically made to German culture in the arts, scholarship, and the German language itself (Gerlach, p. 4).

Hitler's solution to Germany's psychic depression was to create an authoritarian rule and recover the traditional values of the German past, such as family and German culture. To help solve the Jewish problem at the outset, he initiated on April 1, 1933 a boycott of Jewish businesses, a boycott that was soon followed by his enactment of legislation in April 7, 1933 which included the so-called "Aryan Paragraph." Defining for the first time who is a "Jew," the Aryan Paragraph decreed that Jews must be removed from civil service and all public spheres of German life. Government employees were required to produce documents showing their pure Aryan descent.

### **B. German Protestantism's Response to National Socialism's Cure.**

Dispirited over the national state of affairs which it attributed to the Jews, the Protestant press contended that the German peoples' aversion to Jews was a "well-founded revulsion" (Gerlach, pp. 5f.). Under the influence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century views of the conservative theologian, Adolf Stoecher, a dedicated anti-Semite, a renewed spirit of nationalism among Protestants obtained which "viewed the Jews as the natural enemy of the national Christian tradition and held them responsible for the collapse of the Christian and monarchist order" (Gelach, p. 6; cf. p.

2). Many Protestants saw the only hope for the future lay with the vision of Adolf Hitler. Hitler's vision attracted the support of approximately eighty percent of the Protestant clergy (Barnett, p. 41). A memorandum produced by Berlin Central Council following its April 1933 meeting, the German Evangelical Church's highest council defended German anti-Semitism and contended that the state acted understandably in its anti-Jewish measures and characterized the April boycott of Jewish business as an indication of "German disciple" (Gerlach, p. 56). One pastor, Paul Humburg, wrote a song extolling Hitler as the savior of Germany. The second, third, and fourth verse are as follows (Gerlach, p. 8):

The old order wanes, the old order wanes.  
From the ruins of war a new spring shines!  
One man breaks through treason and shame;  
Millions follow him full of trust.  
His will and word sweep us to strike and act.  
His will and word sweep us to strike and act.

The sun rises, the sun rises at morn!  
We arm ourselves for battle,  
For sacrifice despite the enemy's hate and scorn.  
Come, brother, prepare; we march side by side  
with Adolf Hitler, Germany's truest son.  
with Adolf Hitler, Germany's truest son.

To work, to work!  
Young Germany dares anew!  
Our call to battle: "Germany," unto the death.  
The Fuehrer calls; we rejoice, ever true!  
Before us the day! And our fortress is God.  
Before us the day! And our fortress is God.

Afflicted with disunity among themselves, the German Protestant churches—ideologically anti-modern, opposed to democracy, and politically and socially nationalistic—tried to resolve their disunity by unifying to become a stronger Christian body. At the time the principal Protestant body of Christian churches was the German Evangelical Church, consisting of some 28 regional church jurisdiction bodies made up of the strictly conservative Lutheran Church, the more liberal Reformed Church, and the United Church, which had Lutheran and Reform elements among its membership.

Within the German Evangelical Church there was a small group of Christians called "German Christians," organized in May 1932 (Barnett, p. 27), who "fell in love" with Hitler and National Socialism's solution to Germany's woes. They even looked upon Nazism as an exciting spiritual experience and movement. These German Christians strongly advocated for the purity of the Aryan race in Church and State in support of the Aryan Paragraph and opposed any association with Jews, including mixed marriage. Originally the Aryan Paragraph had applied only to pastors and church leaders who under German law were considered civil servants, but the German Church now applied the paragraph to all members of the church (Barnett, pp. 128f.). Their slogan at the time of church elections in 1937 was: "We fight for the Jew-free German Evangelical Reich Church" (Gerlach, p. 113). They advocated that Jewish Christians, barred from membership in a pure Aryan church, should establish their own separate church. The German Christians solution to the "Jewish Problem" then was this: Once the Jewish Christians were removed from the Aryan Christian Church, and they formed their own Jewish Christian congregations as a result, those congregations could be permanently eliminated as a whole from the German body politic (Gerlach, p. 76).

As small as this group of German Christians was, it wielded immense influence in 1933 and 1934 in the German Evangelical Church, and attracted the attention and support of Hitler. They even proposed the creation of a national church, the Reich Church, which Hitler wanted to unify the 28 regional churches as an instrument of National Socialism. By July 1933 the German Christians were a controlling force in most of the synods of the various regional churches and were successful in electing a Reich bishop in a synod on July 23, and also engineering application of the Aryan Paragraph upon the racial lineage of all clergy and their wives: they must be free of any “Jewish blood” (p 34). In September 1933 the German Christians were able to force through a Prussian church synod two clergy restrictions upon the church: ‘political reliability’ and the support of the “Aryan Paragraph” (Barnett, pp. 33-34; Gerlach, pp. 39f.).

There were, however, a few Protestant voices which became alarmed at the increased oppression of the Jews, particularly as it affected Jews who had converted to Christianity. Not only did 75 delegates to the aforementioned July 23 synod sound an alarm by walking out in protest to the “Aryan Paragraph” respecting the racial lineage of pastors and their wives (Barnett, p. 34), but one such sounding of alarm came early on from the Regional Church Government of Kassel. In a statement sent to the German Evangelical Committee on May 5, the Kassel Protestants decried their church government for its solidarity with National Socialism in seeking the separation of Jews from Christians in church as well as state: “The Evangelical Church must be reproached strongly for not putting an end to the persecution of its own children in the faith—indeed, for giving its blessing from the pulpit to those who are working against its own children in the faith . . . and for banishing people of the same faith, with whom they joined in worship, before the church’s very doors as though they were mangy dogs.” In this statement, concern for Jews, as was generally the case among Protestant protesters of Jewish oppression, was narrowly focused upon baptized Jews who were members of the Church and not Jews generally (Gerlach, pp. 20f.). A noted exception to this narrow focus on the plight of Jewish members of the Church was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, concerned that the Church would limit its focus to Jews within the Church, declared at the time that the Church’s “unconditional obligation [is] to the victims of every social order, even those who do not belong to the Christian congregation’ and, further, that the Church must be called to action of “not only binding up the wounds of the victims under the wheel, but stopping the wheel itself.”

On September 11, 1933 a group of Protestant clergy known as the “Rhineland Brotherhood” declared that the Aryan Paragraph and its attempt at outside control of pastoral and church civil service matters, violated what the Church stood for and demanded that the paragraph be withdrawn and promised to “reject all measures pertinent to its enforcement” (Gerlach, p. 34). In October, a group of Protestant clergy, opposed to imposition of the Aryan Paragraph upon the Church and in protest against the German Christians, organized themselves under the leadership of Martin Niemoeller as the “Pastors’ Emergency League” (PEL). On November 2 Niemoeller condemned the German Christians’ proposal that Jewish Christians establish their own church separate from an Aryan church (Gerlach, pp. 45, 48). By January the PEL consisted of over 7,000 members, with Martin Niemoeller as one of its prominent leaders. In response to opposition to the application of the Aryan Paragraph to the Church, Reinhold Krause, a Berlin regional leader of the German Christians, proclaimed at a rally of the German Christians on November 13 that Christianity was always an Aryan religion and advocated that the Christian Bible be stripped of its Jewish Old Testament, that the influence of “Rabbi” Paul be removed, and that the focus of Christianity should be upon Jesus as a model hero and not upon the crucified Jesus (Locke, pp. 51f.).

A poignant and courageous indictment of the Protestant Church’s pursuance of the state’s non-Aryan policy in the Church was published in the *Evangelischer Ruf*, a Breslau Protestant paper on October 14, 1933 (Gerlach, p.8):

Vision

Worship service. The opening hymn has died away. The minister stands at the altar and begins:

"Non-Aryans are requested to leave the church!" No one moves.

"Non-Aryans are requested to leave the church!" Again, all remain still.

"Non-Aryans are requested to leave the church!" Then Christ climbs down

from the cross on the altar and leaves the church.

## C. The Barmen Declaration, May 1934

### 1. The Drafting of the Barmen Declaration

As hostility grew between the German Christians who wanted Christianity to be a baptism of National Socialism and other Christians of the German Evangelical Christians who opposed the hegemonic implanting of Nazi ideology in the Church, a synod was called at Barmen in May 29-31, 1934, at which synod the German Confessing Church was born with the issuance of the so-called "Barmen Declaration," which became their founding document. Among its six articles, the Barmen Declaration set forth the following (Locke, p. 66):

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church apart from [its exercise of ministry], could and were permitted to give to itself, or allow to be given to it, special leaders vested with ruling powers.

Affirming, with an apparent bow to Luther, that governmental authority is an instrument of God—a doctrine tenaciously subscribed to by German Protestantism—(Barnett, p. 11) the Declaration stated as such with the following: "[I]n the as yet unredeemed world in which the Church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace" (Locke, p. 67). Originally that section framed by the famous German theologian Karl Barth, an opponent of Nazism and the church's compliance with it, read (Locke, p. 67):

We reject the error, as though the State were the only and totalitarian order of human life. We reject the error, as though the Church had to conform to a particular form of the State in its message and form.

But that wording of Barth's draft was too strong for the delegates at the synod. For Barth's original wording gave the appearance that the delegates were directly attacking the Nazi state, which the delegates did not want to suggest. So to gain support of the majority of the delegates Barth reworded the section to state the following (Locke, pp. 67f.):

We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church's vocation as well. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State.

That rewording saved the Confessing Church from in any way implying that it was challenging the authority of the state in temporal affairs, while firmly insisting that in religious matters the Church was its own sovereign authority. In effect the Barmen Declaration declared that Church and Christians by implication should refrain from being political, i.e., aligning with one political side or another in the temporal world, but rather it should restrict itself to proclaiming the gospel (Locke, pp. 68, 83; cf. Barnett, pp. 73, 133). Martin Luther must have rolled over smiling in his grave.

## 2. The Response to the Barmen Declaration and the Issue of the Aryan Paragraph

When the Barmen Declaration was made public it was subjected to severe criticism. Among those adamantly opposed to it were Paul Althaus, prominent German theologian at Erlangen University, and a Lutheran, who welcomed Hitler's accession of Hitler to power in January 1933 with this declaration: "We accept the turning point of this year as mercy from God's hand." (Locke, p. 27). Althaus, along with Werner Elert, his colleague at Erlangen, viewed the Barmen Declaration as a potshot at the renewal of Germany under the Nazis, and stated in defense of National Socialism, conjointly with Elert (Locke, p. 73):

As Christians we honor with thanks toward God ... every authority ... as a tool of divine preservation ... In this knowledge we as believing Christians thank God that he has given to our people in its time of need the Fuehrer as a 'pious and faithful leader' and the National Socialist political system as 'good government,' a government with 'decency and honor'."

While some have viewed the Barmen Declaration—given the tyrannical character of Nazism at the time—was a courageous statement declaring the absolute sovereignty of the church over religious affairs and that the state had no right to interfere with Church affairs, it stopped short in categorically denouncing Adolf Hitler and his National Socialism for meddling in Church affairs. But more blatantly absent in the Declaration is any reference to the issue of the Aryan Paragraph as it impacted the racial character of Protestant clergy and laity, to say nothing of the paragraph's inherent and politically aggressive anti-Semitism or, for that matter, the Church's position on anti-Semitism itself.

The failure of the Barmen Declaration to address specifically and critically the offensive Aryan Paragraph, and its disastrous implications for the well-being of Christian Jews is strange and surprising. One might argue that concern for Christian Jews as they are affected by the application of the Aryan Paragraph to the Church is implied in the Declaration by its stated opposition to the German Christians, with their Aryan ideology. The Declaration does directly refer to the fact that what the German Evangelical Churches "hold in common" is "grievously imperiled, and with it the unity of the Evangelical Church . . . is threatened by the teaching methods and actions of the ruling Church party of the 'German Christians' and of the Church administration carried on by them" (Locke, p. 62). Then why not address directly and specifically the issue of the Aryan Paragraph—the issue dividing the Church—as it affects the leadership and membership of baptized Jews in the Church? Why not name the offensive "beast" raising its ugly head for what it is, an abomination to the sacred and inviolate meaning of being baptized into the fellowship of the communion of Christians, regardless of ethnicity?

Already a year prior some of the 75 delegates, who represented the Young Reformation Movement, protested at a national synod in September 1933 against the decision to approve the Aryan Paragraph, which required thenceforth "that pastors and their wives be free of 'Jewish blood'," and in protest walked out of the synod (Barnett, p. 34). And there were Protestant clergy at the time of the Barmen synod who did directly and publicly oppose the Aryan Paragraph, in contrast to the Barmen Declaration's silence. Rudolf Bultmann, a Lutheran and the most influential New Testament theologian of the twentieth century, along with other theological faculty members at the University of Marburg published an attack upon the Aryan Paragraph, denouncing it as un-Christian (Locke, p. 79), in sharp contrast to Althaus and Elert who contended that Germany faced a Jewish problem, couched in the racial and cultural stereotypes regarding Jews as a threat to Germany, and supported the right of the Nazis to prevent Jews from exercising significant public positions, including functioning as Protestant clergy. Althaus and Elert argued that since qualifications such as age and gender had always been applied to Protestant clergy, then race should also be one such qualification for the clergy (Locke, pp. 78f.).

There were also other Protestant voices which objected strongly to the Aryan Paragraph, Martin Niemöller, Karl Barth, who publicly denounced National Socialism, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In Niemöller case his objection was primarily over the issue of Church independence, and did not deal directly with the enforcement of the Aryan Paragraph against Jews who had not been baptized and admitted into church membership. Dietrich Bonhoeffer took a wider view of the matter. As early as 1933 he had tried to persuade the German Evangelical Church that it ought to be concerned not only about Jewish Christians who were being persecuted by racial laws of the Nazis but all Jews, as well as, all others being persecuted via such laws (Gerlach, pp. 25-27)..

But in that early period of Nazi tyranny against the Jews there were few church leaders, aside from Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, who were willing to address anti-Semitism as it affected all Jews, much less acknowledge the problem of anti-Semitism as it directly affected Jewish Christians in the Church itself. When the majority of the Confessing Christians objected to the Aryan Paragraph, Martin Niemöller being a case in point (Barnett, p.103), their objection was largely against the Nazis intrusion into Church affairs—which Martin Luther had declared was inviolably off-bounds to the state—and not so much a genuine concern for the impact the Paragraph would have on baptized Jews and members of the Church. Some Confessing Christians tried to achieve compromises with the Nazis. Some even belonged to the Nazi party (Barnett, p. 5). Many were strongly nationalistic, and as with nationalism in the German psyche, strongly ingrained in anti-Semitism. A number of leaders of the church, likely influenced by Luther, contended that Nazis attack upon Jews represented a defense of Christianity. The Jews, after all, had brought it all on themselves, for all the reasons conventionally and stereotypically articulated, and, in the judgment of these church leaders, the Nazi persecution was God’s instrument for punishing them. Helmut Gollwitzer, a student of Karl Barth, and part of the resistance movement, likely spoke for many Germans when he said regarding his upbringing as a son of a conservative Bavarian pastor: “I was raised to believe that, until the Jews rejected Jesus, they were loyal people, 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” (Barnett, p. 15). It took quite a while before very many Confessing Christians recognized the consequences of the historic German prejudice against the Jews (Barnett, p. 15).

As far as the Nazi brutal persecution of non-Christian Jews was concerned, in Protestantism, generally, and among many in the Confessing Church, it was a non-issue. Dietrich Goldschmidt, son of a Jewish father, remonstrated on recalling later the times (Barnett, p. 20, 128; cf. pp. 138f.):

[T]he idea that, from a Christian consciousness, one had to stand up for the Jews occurred to very few people . . . . The Jews were “damned.” This teaching that the Jews had condemned Jesus, the teaching that God had indeed made a covenant with the Jews but that this covenant was void after the murder of Jesus, and that that Christians are the people of the new covenant—props up even today in the heads of pastors.

For the Protestants as long as the Nazi regime did not encroach upon the church’s territory, it remained apolitical and the treatment of Jews generally was not considered its responsibility (Barnett, p. 133). And even in some cases Protestants turned their heads the other way when Jewish Christian pastors were subjected to Nazi wrath, as in the case of the Jewish Christian pastor Hans Ehrenberg who incurred the wrath of the Nazis in 1937 for his making pacifist statements in 1919 and was compelled to resign his pastorate. After a plea to his fellow Confessing Church pastors for support, the only counsel he received from them was to accept his fate (Barnett, pp. 134f)..

There were courageous exceptions. Four women who were vicars of the church, among whom was Ina Gschloessl, were denounced in 1933 for “unseemly remarks” against Hitler and for their defense of Jews “in a manner and fashion . . . which lacks understanding for the national standpoint.” All four were immediately dismissed from their church positions. Gschloessl after 1938 devoted herself to assisting Jews, as well as Jewish Christians, illegally in Cologne (Barnett, p. 130).

Another such courageous exception was Wilhelm von Pechmann, a leader in the German Evangelical Church, who wrote a letter addressed to the leadership of the church, a letter made public in April 1934, in which he declared (Gerlach, p. 76).

Now as you well know, I have protested frequently and repeatedly since April of last year against the rape of the church, against its lack of strength to resist, and against its silence in the face of much injustice and in the face of all that misery and heartache that . . . has entered numerous 'non-Aryan' hearts and homes, Christian and Jewish. But, until now, I have protested only with words . . . and always utterly in vain. It is time to go one step further, that is, *to protest by resigning from a church that ceases to be a church.*

### **III. German Protestantism and Its Response to Nazi Anti-Semitism, and Persecution of Jews, 1938-1945**

#### **A. The Growing Silence of the Protestant Church about Nazi Atrocities against Jews**

In the four years that followed the Barmen Confession, and just prior to *Kristallnacht*, the Confessing Church fell essentially into disarray and increasingly grew silent as far as Nazi persecution of Jews was concerned. This state of affairs, disarray and silence, was due in large part to increased tyrannical measures employed by Nazis to control the German Church, such as, notably, in the case of the Protestant Old Prussian Church and its attempted promulgation of its “Resolutions of the Confessional Synod of the Protestant Church of the Old Prussian Union in March 1935, a declaration of the church which basically attacked German acquiescence to Nazism as the equivalent of a “neopagan” religion. The “Resolutions” unequivocally condemned the ideology of National Socialism with these words (Gerlach, p. 80).

We see our people threatened by a deadly danger. The danger exists in a new religion. . . . In it, the racist-*volkisch* (nationalistic) ideology becomes myth. In it, blood and race, *Volkstum* (nationality), honor, and freedom are turned into idols. . . . Whoever makes blood, race, and *Volkstum* the Creator and Lord of state authority in place of God undermines the state.

To squash the reading of this declaration from the pulpits, the police quickly moved in and arrested 715 Old Prussian Church pastors and detained them for a brief period of time.

Such terrorist tactics by the Nazis caused the Protestant Church to grow silent about the external affairs of state and turn inward and focused its primary effort on the Church’s self-preservation in defense against the state, with the welfare of Jewish Christians or any responsibility to them largely neglected or ignored (Gerlach, pp. 80f., 99.). In doing so, as elucidated above, the Protestant Church, by and large—Dietrich Bonhoeffer being a noted exception—fell back upon Paul (Letter to the Romans 13:1) and Martin Luther’s views of the divinely ordained role of temporal authority, which meant that the Church must not take on the role of being public social guardian for non-Aryan Christians if assuming that role was or was

perceived by the state to be in opposition to the laws, policies, or authority of the state. To do so would be, from the perspective of Martin Luther's doctrinaire position, an offense to God, who established the inviolable authority of the state in temporal affairs (Gerlach, p. 82), just as God had established the sovereign authority of the Church in spiritual affairs. Thus, most German Protestants held that if the Church stayed out of the affairs of state, the state would stay out of the affairs of Church.

A voice that challenged the Church's blind obedience to the state when terrible injustices were committed against its non-Aryan members was that of Marga Muesel, who was director of welfare service for the Protestant district in Berlin-Zehlendorf. In an addendum to an original memorandum addressed to Confessing Church leaders for a synod meeting at Berlin-Steglitz in September 1935, she deplored the dire economic straits forced upon non-Aryans as a result of Nazi laws and policies, which not only threatened the deprivation of the most meager of livelihood for these persecuted people, but also appeared to be executed with the clear intent of exterminating them. In a damning indictment of the Confessing Church for its silence and inaction in the face of the abhorrent injustices to which its non-Aryans members were being subjected, Meusel in outrage cried in ringing indictment of the Church (Gerlach, pp. 85f.; cf. pp. 81-86):

Why must one always be told from the ranks of non-Aryan Christians that they feel forsaken by the church and the ecumenical world? That Jewish persons and Jewish aid organizations help them, but not their church? That they would not have to worry about their Catholic members, for these would not perish, because the church cares for them, but that one can only say about the attitude of the Protestant Church: :Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do? Why does the Catholic Church employ non-Aryan doctors and nurses where it can—but the Protestant Inner Mission has the Aryan paragraph? . . .

What should one say in response to all the desperate, bitter questions and accusations: Why does the church do nothing? Why does it tolerate this unspeakable injustice? How can it repeatedly make jubilant declarations to the National Socialist state, which are political declarations directed against the lives of some of its own members? Why does it not protect at least the children? Should then everything that is absolutely incompatible with the humanity so despised today be compatible with Christianity?

And if the church can do nothing in many cases because of the threat to its own existence, why does it not at least admit its guilt? Why does it not pray for those who are afflicted by this undeserved suffering and persecution? Why are there not worship services of intercession, as there were for imprisoned pastors? The church makes it bitterly difficult for one to defend it. . . .

Judaism believes that God is calling it back in this time. It lives from this faith and from it derives the strength for martyrdom. And we know that God is calling us back, through the judgment poured upon the church and the people. But we are seized with cold dread when there can be people in the Confessing Church who dare to believe that they are justified, even called, to proclaim to the Jews that God's judgment and grace are present in the current historical events and in the suffering that we have brought on them. Since when does the evildoer have the right to pass off his crime as the will of God? Since when is it anything other than blasphemy to assert that it is the will of God that we commit injustice? Let us take care that we do not hide the outrage of our sins behind the holy shrine of the will of God. Otherwise, it could well be that the punishment meted out to the desecrators of the Temple might befall us too,

that we would have to hear the curse uttered by the One [Jesus] who braided the lash and drove them out [Gospel of Mark 11:15-17].

### **B. The Nazis Gain Control of the Protestant Church Affairs and Its Psyche**

German Protestantism's hopes that the state would stay out of church affairs were dashed on September 24 by Hitler enacting the Law for the Securing of the German Evangelical Church, which sanctioned the state intervening in the Old Prussian Union churches to exercise authority over also their church administrations. That was then followed in October 1935 by Hanna Kerri, the Reich Minister of Church Affairs, convening a new state committee, the Reich Church Committee to bring order to disarray in the German Evangelical Church. That act produce the final split among the Confessing Church, with some church bodies supporting the intervention of the new Reich Church Committee in the internal affairs of the Church and others strongly opposing it. The result was that the Confessing Church, in the interest of its own survival and legitimacy never again had much interest in challenging the Nazi's racial policies (Gerlach, pp. 100, 232f.). And the Reich Church Committee wielding the power of the state proclaimed to the German Evangelical Church: "We affirm the Nationalist Socialist formation of the *Volk* [people/nation] on the foundation of race, blood, and soil" (Gerlach, p. 103).

Even some in the Confessing Church exhibited more patriotism for the war effort than compassion for those being exterminated in the prosecution of the war effort. Pastor Hanns Lilje's in 1941 is reported to have extolled the "war as a spiritual achievement" (Gerlach, p. 234). Wolfgang Gerlach accounts for this subservience to patriotism in his description of the sad and deplorable state of affairs to which the Confessing Church had sunk (p. 234):

Even the Confessing Church's publication *Junge Kirche* occasionally emphasized its patriotism. After the failed assassination of Hitler on 8 November 1939 in Munich, the paper gave thanks for the "extraordinary preservation of the Fuehrer." And, in 1940, every issue contained wartime "prayers of the church." "Bless and preserve with a strong arm our Fuehrer against all the dangers surrounding him, and give him, amidst the onslaught of our enemies, good counsel and vigorous action at the proper time." "Commend our Fuehrer to your grace." "Have thanks for all the successes of our weapons that you already have granted us." After the Germans prevented the English landing in Norway *Junge Kirche* noted: "We gratefully cast our eyes upon the Fuehrer and his *Wehrmacht* [armed forces], who once again have averted danger at the proper moment." These voices were also a part of the disharmonious chorus that had begun as the Confessing Church and attempted to stand firm in a totalitarian system.

Finally in a dramatic tour de force against the German Evangelical Church, Reich Minister Kerrl, failing to bring unity to the Church—which was the Reich Church Committee's mandate—categorically proclaimed at a regional Church assembly of church committee chairmen on February 12, 1937: "[T]he church must be purged of subjects who work against the state. The civil service laws will be applied to the pastors. Jews will no longer be pastors" (Gerlach, p. 108).

There were individual voices aligned with and on behalf of the Confessing Church that did speak out against the imposition of Nazi hegemony upon the Church but they suffered severe punitive reprisals for doing so. A radical group of Confessing Christians sent a memorandum to Hitler protesting the Nazi concepts of race, blood, and nationality as "eternal values," as well as protesting against inciting hatred of the Jews. Several of those who helped draft the memorandum were arrested. A Jewish lawyer, Friedrich Weissler, who assisted the Confessing Church was arrested and delivered to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where he was murdered (Gerlach, p. 107).

By the latter part of 1937 and the early part of 1938 the Confessing Church all but ceased with making statements regarding the Jewish question. The Nazi's terrorizing reprisals against the Church, and particularly its courageous members who did speak out, had taken their toll. Many of the voices which might have spoken out were silenced within prison cells or concentration camps, among whom were Paul Leo, Bruno Bedfey, both non-Aryan pastors, and Martin Niemoeller (Gerlach, p. 113f.).

Martin Niemoeller's arrest on July 1, 1937 shook the Confessing Church. Many Confessing Christians had assumed that the Nazis would never attack a person of Niemoeller's fame and stature. During his trial Niemoeller was charged with "inciting unrest, provoking the state, and encouraging traitorous activities." Commuting his sentence in lieu of his seven month imprisonment, he was required to pay a fine and then was released. When Hitler heard of the leniency of Niemoeller's sentence, he was so enraged that he commanded the Gestapo to apprehend him as the "special prisoner" of the Fuehrer. Remanded to Sachsenhausen concentration camp and later to Dachau in 1941, Niemoeller was imprisoned until 1945, when the war ended (Barnett, p. 92).

Another heroic voice against the Nazi regime was that of Kurt Scharf, a Confessing Church pastor, who, through numerous newsletters to Confessing Church pastors, spoke out against the Confessing Church's succumbing to Nazi ideology. As early as 1934 the Berlin consistory disciplined Scharf for his outspoken views. Subsequently German Christian officials tried to have him removed from the parishes he served in Sachsenhausen and Friedrichstal and replaced by a pastor who would be more sympathetic to Nazi ideology. Then after joining in a Confessing Church liturgical service rejecting National Socialism and voicing the Church's opposition to the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia on September 30, 1938, Scharf's church consistory suspended him from his pastoral office. Refusing to accept the suspension, Scharf was placed on trial and denounced by court verdict. Refusing to accept the court's verdict, Scharf defiantly continued to officiate in services in his church, even when the church consistory tried to replace him with another pastor. Then when in response to his defiance his church was sealed off by the Gestapo, he and a group of church members who remained loyal to him arranged to meet elsewhere.

With his parsonage only a short distance from the edge of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, Scharf could observe everyday the Nazi brutality to its prisoners. On Sundays he preached sermons to his congregants about the atrocities he witnessed and reported in church services the number of persons imprisoned in the Sachsenhausen camp. Then he prayed for the "persecuted brothers and sisters of Israel." Each evening he rang the church bells in solidarity with them. It is reported that the prisoners of Sachsenhausen, hearing the nightly ringing of the church bells, knew that they were being rung prayerfully for them. Further, when Scharf's parishioners heard the ringing of the church bells, they knew that their pastor was ringing them in solidarity with those suffering as victims of the Nazi regime, and that by ringing the bells each evening their pastor was proclaiming to God and the world his indomitable opposition to the Nazi regime's tyrannical crimes against its people (Barnett, p. 88-89, 100-102).

### **C. *Kristallnacht*, Hitler's Final Solution and the German Protestant Church's Response**

With practically absolute freedom to pursue his anti-Semitic purpose, the assassination of the Legation Counselor to the German embassy in Paris, Ernst vom Rath Graf Welczek, by Herschel Grynszpan in retaliation for the deportation of his Jewish parents, gave Hitler the excuse to launch his final solution to the "Jewish Problem." On the night of November 9, 1938, ever since known as *Kristallnacht* ("night of broken glass") Nazi forces went on a devastating and murderous rampage, torching or completely demolishing over 100 synagogues, plundering 7,500

Jewish businesses, and arresting and transporting some 26,000 to 30,000 Jews to concentration camps. And adding insult to injury the Nazis' forced the rest of the Jews to clean up the damage to apartment houses and businesses caused by the Nazi rampage (Gerlach, p. 142f.).

News of the *Kristallnacht* savagery shocked and shook many in the Confessing church, but the reaction against the pogrom was decidedly muted. Recalls one Confessing Church vicar after the war (Barnett, p. 140):

At the time I was in a parish in the countryside. . . . Why it somehow didn't upset me inwardly I can explain only in retrospect: the range of vision was too narrow. We stood under observation. . . . I frankly admit to you that sometimes you had to push yourself not to be a coward. . . . I had married in 1936, and then, perhaps, one isn't so—I'm speaking unguardedly here, but I'd rather say it that way than weigh every word on a scale. When you have a child, then you're not as courageous as the Catholic priests, with their light baggage..

The Confessing Church's silence in the days that followed *Kristallnacht* was even more dumbfounding. There was virtually nothing mentioned in the churches the Sunday afterwards or on the following Wednesday, November 16, the annual observance of the German Church's Repentance Day. Few pastors addressed the devastating Nazi pogrom in sermons. Two pastors that did were Helmut Gollwitzer and Julius von Jan.

In Helmut Gollwitzer's sermon he, in an act of confession, bemoaned to his congregation what he was convinced was Christian guilt for the *Kristallnacht* pogrom (Gerlach, p. 146):

Today we are acquainted enough with the self-loathing we feel where Evil is not just evil, but is repulsively disguised as morality; where base instincts, hatred, and vindictiveness conduct themselves as something great and good . . . . All of us together are burdened by guilt. . . . We are all participants in this, the one through cowardliness, the other through the indolence that steers clear of everything, through the silent ignorance, the silence, the closing of the eyes, the inertia of the heart that becomes aware of anguish only when it can be seen clearly. . . .

Our own complicity is evident, as human beings who love their own lives and themselves, and have just enough love left over for God and their neighbor as can be dispensed without effort and bother. . . . Open your mouth for the speechless (Prov. 31:8) and for the cause of all who are forsaken. . . . God wants to see deeds . . . precisely from those who have escaped with the aid of Christ. . . . Our neighbor now waits outside, destitute, unprotected, without honor; hungry, hunted, and harried by fears for his naked existence, he waits to see whether the Christian community has really celebrated a day of penitence today. Jesus Christ is waiting for this!

The most famous sermon delivered that Repentance Day was preached by Julius . . . In that sermon he declared with the pogrom clearly in mind (Gerlach, pp. 144f.):

Here we have been repaid for the widespread break away from God and Christ, for this organized anti-Christianity. Passions are unleashed; God's commandments are despised; houses of worship that were holy for others have been burned down with impunity; the property of strangers robbed or destroyed. Men who served our German people faithfully and performed their duty conscientiously were thrown into concentration camps simply because they belonged to another race.

This injustice may not be acknowledged from above—but the sound common sense of the people feels it distinctly, even if no one dares to speak about it. And we, as Christians, see how this injustice incriminates our people before God and must bring new punishments upon Germany. . . . What a person sows, so he will reap! Indeed, it is a dreadful seed of hatred that is now being sown. What a dreadful harvest will grow from it, if God does not grant us and our people the grace for honest repentance.

Shortly after preaching that sermon, thugs beat up von Jan, he was arrested and spent four months in jail (Barnett, p. 142). When Otto Moerike, a Confessing Church pastor and outspoken critic of Nazism, appealed to Bishop Theophilus Wurm of Wuerttemberg to send reprints of von Jan's sermon to every pastor, he declined. However, he did write Justice Minister Guertner and protested the *Kristallnacht* pogrom, although the bishop qualified that protest by assuring Guertner in a statement Martin Luther would no doubt have signed off on (Gerlach, p. 149; cf. Barnett, p.142): "I contest with no word the right of the State to fight Judaism as a dangerous element. Since my youth, I have held the judgment of men such as Heinrich von Treitschke and Adolf Stoecker on the corruptive effect of Jewry in the religious, moral, literary, economic, and political spheres to be correct." Later Bishop Wurm wrote that he subsequently "bitterly regretted" those words "to the end of his life" (Gerlach, p. 149; Barnett, p. 142).

The Confessing Church's official journal, *Junge Kirche* (Young Church), failed to make any mention of *Kristallnacht*. The newspaper of the German Christians, by contrast, not only featured *Kristallnacht* but also proceeded to justify the pogrom and its inhuman, terrorizing acts as entirely consistent with Hitler's policies to solve the Jewish problem. A month following the *Kristallnacht* pogrom Wilhelm Jannasch, the Berlin Confessing Church pastor tried to get the Confessing Church gathered at an Advent Conference to issue a declaration condemning the Nazis for their persecution of Jews. But the conference refused to issue such a declaration (Gerlach, p. 151). On December 10-12, 1938 the Confessing Church in a national meeting, *Kirchetag* (Church Day), the participants drafted a declaration of concern "for our Christian comrades in faith among the Jews," but no mention was made of non-Christian Jews, thereby limiting the Church's concern narrowly to those Jews of the Christian faith (Gerlach, p. 150; Barnett, p. 150).

Five months after *Kristallnacht*, in April 1939, the German Christians, in concert with other Protestant clergy and laity produced the Godesberg Declaration which adamantly declared (Gerlach, p.179):

What is the relationship between Judaism and Christianity? Did Christianity develop from Judaism and thus become its continuation and fulfillment, or does Christianity stand in opposition to Judaism? To this question, we reply: The Christian faith is the insurmountable religious antithesis to Judaism." That proclamation was followed almost immediately on April 4, 1939 with a German Christians' proposal for the "establishment of an institute for the investigation and elimination of the Jewish influence upon the ecclesiastical life of the German people..

That was followed by a pronouncement by German Evangelical Church on May 26, 1939 (Gerlach, p. 182):

National Socialist ideology struggles with all possible ruthlessness against the political and spiritual influence of the Jewish race on the life of our people. In obedience to the divine order of creation, the Evangelical Church affirms its responsibility to maintain the purity of our people and traditions. Beyond this, there is no sharper contrast in the

sphere of faith than that between the message of Jesus Christ and the Jewish religion of legalism and political hope in the Messiah.

The Confessing Church divided now as it was in its response to the Nazi tyranny against the Jews became incapable as a body to stand up against Nazi pogroms with either statement or action. But in this vacuum of Christian moral conscience and fearless righteous nerve some of the Confessing Church's pastors and laity took it upon themselves to act individually and independently of their parent church body and came to the aid of the besieged Jews by offering them asylum in their basement, attics, cabinets, and closets, along with other acts of merciful aid, often at considerable risk to their own lives. In this regard the actions of certain women pastors, Charlotte Friedenthal, Maria Gerhard, Klara Hunsche, Helene Jacobs, Marga Meusel (mentioned earlier), Dr. Hilde Schaeder, Gertrude Staewen, Kathie Staritz, Elsie Steck, and Melanie Steinmetz are particularly noteworthy (Gerlach, pp. 160ff)..

Helene Jacobs, an adamant opponent of National Socialism, along with others, got an artist, whom she had hidden in her apartment, to forge passports for Jews. Gertrude Staewen gathered "Mother's Crosses," which the Nazis gave as gifts to women who bore many children. Staewen gave the crosses to Jewish women to wear when they tried to flee Germany with forged passports so that the border guards, in observing them wearing the Nazi's distinctive and honored symbol of woman's achievement, would not become suspicious of the forged legal papers they were carrying (Barnett, p. 150). Kaethe Staritz, as a vicar in Breslau, worked secretly with the Confessing Church pastor Heinrich Grueber, who helped Jews and Jewish Christians to emigrate, and openly defended the Jewish Christians' right to participate in church services. For that she was arrested and delivered to a concentration camp, without any protest on her behalf voiced by church officials (Barnett, p. 152; cf. pp.144-146).

In contrast to these women in their support and aid to Jews, along with others such as Franz Kauffmann who tried to rescue Jews by bribing the Gestapo (Barnett, p. 151), officials of Anhalt, Luebeck, Mecklenburg, Saxony, Scheswig-Holstein on December 17, 1941 took this position on Jewish Christians: "The severest measures [are] to be taken against the Jews, . . . [They are] to be expelled from Germany. . . . Racially Jewish Christians have no place and no right in [the church]" (Gerlach, p.194).

With the early Nazi military success in the war, Hitler became emboldened and moved ruthlessly to squash the little opposition within the Church that remained. There were increasing numbers of Confessing Church pastors and other leaders arrested for their anti-Nazi sentiments or failure to support the Nazi cause. Resistance to the Nazi tyranny was drastically reduced. In 1980 Gollwitzer, reflecting back upon that time, recalled that it soon became dangerous to know anything about the persecution of the Jews. When he would raise the issue of the tyrannical persecution of the Jews by the Nazis, people would say to him: "Please, don't tell me anything! I don't want to know." "Simply knowing," Gollwitzer submitted, "was dangerous. One could betray oneself; one might express, without stopping to think, one's horror. That's why a great proportion of the people held this knowledge away from themselves. And after 1945, they could, in a subjective sense, correctly say: 'We didn't know.' Because they didn't want to know," so terrified were they of the Nazis (Barnett, p. 148).

In Nazi Germany in the early 1940's, a general sense of helplessness hung like a cloud over those Protestants who opposed the Nazi tyranny. Few Protestants were willing to risk opposing Hitler's final solution to the "Jewish Problem" for any reason, or even acknowledging guilt over their complicity. There were a few rare exceptions. In August 1943 delegates at a Confessing Church Synod did express guilt over their silence in the face of the injustices Jews suffered. In the fall the Confessing Church Prussian Synod protested Jewish Christians being excluded from participation in the Church (Barnett, p. 152). Otherwise leaders and members of the Confessing Church felt there were but two effective options open to them: (1) play it safe and

“keep their “heads in the sand,” as indicated in Gollwitzer’s anecdote, or (2) choose death as the instrument of resistance. The latter was the option chosen by the Confessing Church leader and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer came to the belief that the only faithful response a Christian could make in the face of the Nazi atrocities to the Jews and to Christians who opposed, for the sake of the Jews, the Nazi final solution was to join with others in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer came to the conviction that resisting the Nazi tyranny and its murderous atrocities against the Jews required a Christian to risk everything in obedience to Jesus and his life and death as the model to be emulated. Bonhoeffer wrote at one point: “When Christ calls a man, he calls him to come and die” As early as 1933, in his essay, “*Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage*” (“The Church and the Jewish Question”), Bonhoeffer had seen that the Church had three options for addressing the Nazi anti-Semitic policies: (1) to remind the government that it has specific legitimate authority and responsibilities, (2) to aid the victim’s of the government, and (3) “to fall in the spokes of the wheel itself,” i.e., to halt the wheel in its tyrannical path through resistance, the option Bonhoeffer chose for himself. In April 1943, he was arrested and imprisoned when money he had given to Jews to escape from Germany to Switzerland was linked to him. On April 19, 1945 he was executed, along with co-conspirators against Hitler, by torturous hanging, apparently for being an accomplice in the plot to kill Hitler, a plot which ultimately failed on July 20, 1944 when Hitler escaped from the explosion of a bomb which was intended to eliminate him (Barnett, pp. 182-184; 199-202f., 207f..)

#### **IV. Protestant Declarations of Blame and Confessions of Guilt**

The end of the war brought upon German Protestants of the Confessing Church a quickening recognition of blame and guilt of the state and Church for the Holocaust and the failure of the Church to save the Jews from Hitler’s final solution. The eight declarations of blame and/or confessions of guilt that follow are representative of the soul searching that took place among Protestants in the aftermath of the war and the Holocaust (see Gerlach, pp. 223-230)

##### **A. Eight Declarations of Blame and Confessions of Guilt**

###### **1. May 8, 1945: Statement by Bishop Wurm**

On May 8, 1945, two days following the Nazi’s surrender to the Allied Armies, Bishop Theophilus Wurm, bishop of the Wuerttemberg Protestant Church and spokesperson for the whole Confessing Church, ended his sermon by addressing these words to the people:

How much distress and suffering could have been avoided if those who had held leadership in Germany had used their power conscientiously, justly, prudently. From the side of the two Christian churches, there was no shortage of attempts to remind the rulers of their responsibility to God and to human beings. But these admonitions either were not noted or were rejected as interference in state affairs.

###### **2. August 15, 1945: Statement by Bishop Marahrens**

On August 15, 1945, in a letter to his congregations Bishop August Marahrens, bishop of the regional church of Hannover shared with his flock the burdens on his conscience:

It weighs particularly heavily upon me—I have already said this several times—that the church did not find the redemptive word in the first storm that broke

over the Jews of Germany. However divided from the Jews we may be in our beliefs and although a number of them may have brought severe harm upon our people, they ought not to have been attacked in an inhuman fashion. . . .

Were we struck dumb by our initial astonishment at the ominous impending conflict, or did we not see the true facts clearly enough? In any case, it becomes evident that guilt lies upon our path and that we cannot perform our work without living our lives on the basis of forgiveness.

### **3. August 21-24, 1945: Statement by the Reich Council of Brethren**

On August 21-24, 1945 the Reich Council of Brethren held a conference and issued this statement to pastors:

Moral standards do not suffice to measure the magnitude of the guilt that our people has brought upon itself. Newer and newer deeds of inhumanity become known. Many people still cannot believe that all of this is supposed to be true. In this abyss of our guilt, the body and soul of our people are mortally threatened. We confess our guilt and submit ourselves to the burden of its consequences.

### **4. August 27-30, 1945: Statement by the German Protestant Church Conference at Treysa**

On August 27-30, 1945 at Treysa a German Protestant Church Conference was held and was attended by representatives of various Protestant communions nationwide. Martin Niemoeller, as spokesperson for the Reich Council of the Brethren, addressed the conference with these words:

I must strike a note here that undoubtedly has been neglected in all that we have heard up to now. Certainly, we stand before a state of chaos and, in many cases, we are already in the middle of it. But we must ask what has brought us to this. Our distress is not due to the fact that we have lost the war. . . . Nor is our situation today primarily the fault of our people and of the Nazis; how could they have followed a path that they did not know; they simply believed, after all, that they were on the right path!—No, the real guilt rests with the church, for it alone knew that the path being taken would lead to ruin, and it did not warn our people; it did not expose the injustice that occurred, or did so only when it was too late.

And here the Confessing Church bears a particularly large measure of guilt, for it saw most clearly what was developing; it even spoke about it, and then became tired and feared men more than the living God. And so the catastrophe has broken over us all and drawn us, with everyone else, into its turbulence. But we, the church, must beat our breast and confess: my guilt, my guilt, my enormous guilt!—This is what we must say today to our people and to Christendom, that we do not stand before them and approach them as the pious and just; on the contrary, we are guilty, and want to try in the future to recognize our duty correctly and to carry it out faithfully. . . .

What is at issue is not just that we, as a church, have done this or that wrongly in the past . . . but that, through disobedience, we fundamentally neglected the office with which we were charged and with that have become guilty.

Subsequently the Treysa conference issued “Word to the Congregations,” in which was stated:

Amidst the failures of the church and the people, God granted men and women of all confessions, classes, and parties the power to rise up against injustice and arbitrariness, to suffer and to die. Where the church took its responsibility seriously, it summoned human beings to observe the commandments of God, addressed breaches of law and wickedness, the guilt in the concentration camps, the mistreatment and murder of Jews and the sick, and sought to prevent the seduction of the young. But it was driven back into the realm of the church, as into a prison. Our people were separated from the church. The public was no longer allowed to hear its word; no one heard what it proclaimed. And then came the wrath of God. It took from us what human beings wanted to save.

#### **5. October 18-19, 1945: Statement by the Council of the Evangelical Church of Germany**

On October 18-19, 1945 the Council of the Evangelical Church of Germany met at Stuttgart, with a number of ecumenical representatives from outside Germany in attendance. From that ecumenical gathering emerged the Stuttgart Confession, in which the German Protestants present made a point of informing their foreign guests that they had “often testified to [their] congregations” regarding great endeavors to oppose National Socialism’s evil spirit. In that document they went on to state, with their guests clearly in view:

We are all the more thankful for this visit because we know ourselves to be not only in a great community of suffering with our people, but also in solidarity of guilt. With great anguish, we say: Through us, infinite sorrow has been brought upon many peoples and countries. What we have often testified to our congregations we express now in the name of the entire church: To be sure, we have fought in the name of Jesus Christ through many long years against the spirit that found its terrible expression in the brutal government of the National Socialists; but we accuse ourselves that we did not confess more courageously, did not pray more faithfully, did not believe more joyously, and did not love more passionately.

During the course of the Stuttgart conference Martin Niemoeller also addressed the gathered delegates and declared:

We know that we, with our people, have followed a false path that has implicated us, as a church, in the fate of the entire world. We ask that God might forgive us this guilt and, by forgiving, might let this guilt become a new motor for the entire world. He can forgive all guilt that is confessed to Him, and He forgives it in such a way that this forgiven guilt becomes a source of new power. . . .

We will bear this guilt for a long time to come. Nor do we want to minimize it, but help us so that the blessing is not lost because Christians throughout the world perhaps believe: your confession of guilt cannot be taken very seriously. The men who are in the leadership of the church desire that under no circumstances should the blessing of a confession and the blessing of forgiveness be lost to our people and to the community of nations.

Likewise, English Bishop George Bell of Chichester, one of the ecumenical representatives spoke prophetically to the gathering, when he recognized the failure of the participants to clearly and specifically identify the Jews, along with others, as victims of the Nazi’s brutal, inhuman crimes. Speaking forthrightly, directly and explicitly to the specificity being avoided, Bishop Bell declared:

“No human being can close his mind to the enormous amount of cruelty that was done to the Jews, the displaced persons, and the political persons, the well-nigh millions of slaves.”

### **6. April 9, 1946: Statement by the Ecclesiastical-Theological Society of Wuerttemberg**

On April 9, 1946, the Ecclesiastical-Theological Society of Wuerttemberg issued this confession:

We succumbed despondently and idly as the members of the people of Israel among us were dishonored, robbed, tormented, and killed. We allowed the exclusion of our fellow Christians who originated from Israel ... from the offices of the church, even permitting the church to deny the baptism of Jews. We did not contest the prohibition of the mission to the Jews. We encouraged racial arrogance indirectly by issuing innumerable certificates of Aryan descent, and thus impaired our service to the Word of the Gospel.

### **7. July 1946: Statement by the Westphalian Provincial Synod**

In July 1946, the Westphalian Provincial Synod meeting for the first time since the end of the war declared:

We did not raise our voice loudly enough against the extermination of the Jews and other ostracized people.

### **8. April 23-27, 1950: Statement by the Evangelical Church's General Synod**

On April 23-27, 1950, the Evangelical Church's General Synod issue a statement which included the following:

We believe in the Lord and Savior who, as a man, is descended from the people of Israel.

We profess the church that is joined together into one body made from Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, and whose peace is Jesus

We believe that God's promise regarding Israel, his chosen people, has remained in effect even after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

We state the fact that, through neglect and silence before the God of compassion, we

have become guilty of complicity in the crime that has been committed by persons from among our people against the Jews.

We warn all Christians against desiring to set God's judgment upon us Germans over

against that which we have done to the Jews; for in judgment, God's grace seeks the one who is repentant.

We ask all Christians to abjure every kind of anti-Semitism and to resist it with all earnestness where it makes itself felt, and to meet Jews and Jewish Christians in a spirit of fellowship.

## **B. The Inadequacies of the Declarations of Blame and Confessions of Guilt**

There are significant inadequacies in all of the eight declarations of blame and confessions of guilt as they relate to the cause of the Holocaust and its aftermath. Aside from the failure of a number of the statements to identify specifically the horrifying inhuman crimes against the Jews (the Treysa Conference's "Word to the Congregation" is a noted exception, # 4) and the failure in several of the statements to even mention the Jews by name as the victims of the crimes, the statements fail to address adequately the root causes of the Holocaust which were endemic to German Protestantism of the time and still persist today in much of Protestantism and Christianity worldwide. The problems are Protestantism and Christianity's historic and inherent racial, religious, moral, and redemptive prejudice and arrogance.

### **1. The Problem of Racial Prejudice and Arrogance within the Church**

By racial prejudice is meant, with respect to the Holocaust, anti-Semitism. This essay has well documented the history of German Protestant anti-Semitism with its roots in Martin Luther's doctrinaire anti-Semitism. Luther's anti-Semitic position helped inculcate in the German psyche the superiority of the Aryan race and the denigration of the Jewish ethnicity. Only two of the statements above address the issue of racial arrogance (the Ecclesiastical-Theological Society statement, #6) and anti-Semitism (the Evangelical Church General Synod's statement, #8) as an evil, racism that must be rooted. The others ignore any guilt on the German Protestant Church's part for anti-Semitism.

### **2. The Problem of Religious Prejudice and Arrogance within the Church**

By religious prejudice and arrogance is meant in the context of the Holocaust the claim of Christianity that it is the only one true faith, the only road to salvation and acceptance by God. Inherent in German Protestantism and Orthodox Christianity's history, identified in part in the Evangelical Church's General Synod's statement (#8) and implied in Bishop Marahren's statement (#2), is that, while the Jews were at one time God's chosen people, they lost and forfeited that divine election by their rejection and condemnation of Jesus, followed by their turning him over to Pilate to be crucified. In effect, according to the Orthodox Christian view, the Jews killed Jesus. Therefore, the Jews have been punished and continue to deserve punishment by God for their crime against Jesus. Thus, implicit in this view is not just anti-Semitism, racial condemnation, but anti-Judaism, religious condemnation. The only hope now for the condemned Jews, per the arrogance of Christianity, is to repent of their sin against Jesus, believe in Jesus as their savior and Lord and be baptized into God's new elect people—the height of Christian religious arrogance and hubris. All of these statements still presuppose this route of deliverance for the Jews.

### **3. The Problem of Moral Prejudice and Arrogance within the Church**

By moral prejudice and arrogance is meant the German Protestantism's (and Orthodox Christianity's, as well) presupposition that, since it is now God's chosen people by virtue of its belief in Jesus Christ, it has squatters' rights to the moral high ground. It knows how to adjudicate between what is just and unjust, what is right and wrong in Church and society. So, for example, Bishop Wurm in his statement (# 1) claims that the Church was right in its approach to the state of affairs in Germany during the Third Reich. It was the state that was wrong in not listening to the Church. Therefore, since the Church did not do anything wrong, it is not to blame for what happened to the Jews. Thus the Church has no guilt to confess. This from the same Bishop Wurm who effectively silenced his own clergyman von Jan from speaking out against Nazi persecution of the Jews by refusing to allow his sermon to be printed and distributed to pastors? This from the same Bishop Wurm who in deference to the Nazi official assured him: "I contest with no word the right of the State to fight Judaism as a dangerous element"?

### **4. The Problem of Redemptive Prejudice and Arrogance within the Church**

By redemptive prejudice and arrogance is meant the German Protestant and Christianity's claim that when Christians or the Church is guilty of sin, it is assured of forgiveness, with the assumption that, having repented and been forgiven, it is fully restored in favor with God: its sins are washed away. The problem with that position is not that forgiveness is always a divinely proffered gift, but the assumption that forgiveness wipes out any responsibility for retribution for the consequences of the sin. Such an assumption is the basis of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," i.e., ask forgiveness, be assured of receiving forgiveness, and that is all there is to it (see Bishop Marahren's statement, #2). There is no action required to atone for the consequences of the sin. With the exception of the Brethren's statement (#3), that seems to be the implicit, if not the explicit, presupposition behind the confessions of guilt in the statements cited: confess honestly our guilt for the Holocaust, and we are assured of forgiveness. That's it. Nothing else is required. No reparations need to be paid to the victims of our sinfulness.

Of course, the Germans after the war did pay material reparations to the Jews via the 1953 reparations act, in which the State of Israel received reparation payment for the suffering Jews experienced under the Nazis (Barnett, p. 230). But more than material reparations is required to atone for the Christian sins of the Holocaust. What is required upon the part of Christians is moral and spiritual reparations, the renouncing of not only anti-Semitism, but also anti-Judaism. Even more to the point, what is required of the Church is its renunciation of the claim that Christianity is the only true faith and that no other religion can serve as a route to oneness with God, or the way to bring peace, goodness and harmony in the world. Such moral and spiritual reparations would require courageous action upon the part of Christians, even life-risking action, to oppose every semblance of tyranny, whether religious, cultural or political, that would rob any human being of his or her inherent dignity and rights to the equal privileges of full membership, unprejudiced by race, religion, class, sexual orientation or whatever, in the human family—inherent dignity and rights intrinsically derived by virtue of the fact that she or he is born a precious and sacred gift of God into the human family of God.

## V. Works Consulted

Barnett, Victoria, J. *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest against Hitler*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

"Dietrich Bonhoeffer." Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.

On-Line: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich\\_Bonhoeffer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer)

Ellis, Eliahu and Shmuel Silinsky. "Kristallnacht." Holocaust Studies.

On-line: <http://www.aish.com/holocaust/overview/Kristallnacht.asp>.

Gerlach, Wolfgang, *And the Witnesses Were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Persecution of the Jews*. Trans. Victoria J. Barnett. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.

"July 20 Plot." Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.

On-Line: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/July\\_20\\_Plot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/July_20_Plot)

"Kristallnacht." On-Line: <http://www://mtsu.edu/~baustin/knacht.html>

Luther, Martin. *On the Jews and Their Lies*. Trans. Martin H. Bertram. On-Line:

<http://www.humanitas-international.org/showcase/chronology/document/luther-jews.htm>

Luther, Martin. "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed" in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, pp. 655-703. Ed. Timothy F. Lull. Minneapolis:

**The Two-Thousand Year Road to the Holocaust**  
**Session 12: Christianity and the Holocaust—the Protestant Response**

Fortress Press, 1989.

*The Church Confronts the Nazis: Barmen Then and Now.* Ed. Hubert G. Locke. Toronto  
Studies in Theology, Vol. 6. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984.