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The Confessing Church

By:

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World at War

Dr. Bethany Hicks

In the wake of the rise of Hitler's National Socialist state a church struggle took over Germany. The "German Christians," placed by Hitler, under the leadership of Ludwig Muller, fought to blend Christianity with nationalism and political oppression. Muller and the German Christians followed an ideology of Aryan superiority and taught that the Jewish people were sub-human. During the confusion throughout the Protestant church, theologians, pastors, and professors rose up based on their own theology to combat the German Christians. This movement was called the "Confessing Church" and at its peak consisted of about 3000 members. Though the German Christians brought opposition that consisted of political oppression and mass arrests, the Confessing Church fought to teach the Germans that Christ loves the Jewish people and that his word has taught that since before Luther and Hitler.

The conflicting works of the Confessing Church and the Socialist German Christian movements are impossible to distinguish and understand without first looking at the context of German Protestantism going into the 1920s and 30s. Beginning with the 1871 unification of Germany under Otto Von Bismarck, the German Protestant churches blended religion with nationalism. As the Germanic states began to come together, the churches attempted to do the same. The new German Protestant church began its unification in an attempt to clearly separate itself from the Catholic French and those who still believed in the divine right of kings.¹ By the end of the 19th century the pulpit was a confusing mix of German nationalism and Luther-based theology.² The German churches attempted to unify themselves by grasping hold of the German

¹ John S. Conway, "The political role of German Protestantism, 1870-1990," *Journal of Church & State*, Autumn 1992, Vol. 34 Issue 4, Historical Abstracts, EBSCOhost (accessed December 17, 2014), 819.

² *Ibid*, 820.

state and allowing nationalism to bring them together. Not only did this movement fail to unify the churches, but it also mixed unwanted ideologies into theology.

At the time, Adolf Von-Harnack was one of the leading German theologians followed by both scholars and laymen. Since the time of Luther, Protestantism was guided by Germany's consistency in producing intelligent theologians. Harnack, for the first time, began to blend church and state in his own theology and taught that the German church had a responsibility to spread German culture.³ The church's dependency on the German state caused hermeneutics to be completely overlooked and allowed for racism to enter the congregations. By the outbreak of World War I, both the general German population and the German congregation believed that the German state was meant to be the supreme state. Many Germans believed that God had hand-picked the Germans to be the master race and the world leaders. Because of this belief, the defeat brought in 1918 was brought with even more pain and confusion. The Germans could not fathom that they had lost the war so they convinced themselves that they had been deceived or "stabbed in the back" during negotiations.⁴ From the Germans' disbelief in their losses, the charismatic Adolf Hitler was essentially given power.

Hitler promised the masses that the Aryan race would finally be seen as what it was—the master race among all men. When Hitler was first given power he began to mix every aspect of German life with his National Socialist Gleichschaltung. In this massive "coordination," Hitler attempted to combine the German state with trade unions, agriculture, trade, industry, education, propaganda, and church.⁵ Though German Protestantism was successfully integrated with a

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 822.

⁵ Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany 1840-1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 735-738.

Nationalistic pride, it failed to be politically unified without a single leader. At the time that Hitler came to power, twenty-eight land churches existed within the National Socialist state.⁶ Hitler took it upon himself to be that unifying agent and rallied churches under him to form together. The Nazi party allowed the German church to find their identity in the state and in the nation's future.⁷ Immediately the Nazis gained a quick following of Protestants who were more interested in the spread of German ideology than hermeneutic based theology. German theologian, Karl Barth, recognized the problem that the Nazis brought to the church and openly began to present opposition. He believed that the Germans were attempting to combine their loyalties to God and the state but were instead replacing God with the state.⁸ His conclusion was soon agreed with by other Christians and the Confessing Church was birthed.

Meanwhile, Hitler was laying down his framework to push true Christians out of the picture. In 1933 Hitler held the German Christian Elections, ran by those who would later become his Ministry of Church Affairs. In the 1933 elections most of the church leaders were replaced by young and inadequately trained "ministers".⁹ This was Hitler's first of many attempts to seek to bury those who opposed him. In 1933, Karl Barth along with theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and church leader Martin Niemoller, began the Confessing Church. From the beginning it was poorly organized and never completely unified. In truth, it is difficult to tell even today exactly how the Confessing Church was meant to be set up. Due to the constant

⁶ Ibid, 739.

⁷ Conway, 822.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Shelley Baranowski, "Consent and Dissent: The Confessing Church and Conservative Opposition to National Socialism," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 59, No. 1 March, 1987, (The University of Chicago Press. JSTOR accessed 12-17-2014 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1880377>), 63.

hiding of church documents and participants' names, most information is known only by letters and post-war personal accounts.

Ambiguity aside, it is clear that the Confessing Church originally attended for the church to be very well organized behind a central leader and to be wholly unified.¹⁰ What is known is that at the peak of its existence the church has about 3,000 members throughout Germany and consisted of mainly three groups of people. The first group was the minority and consisted of prominent clergymen including Karl Barth and Martin Niemoller.¹¹ The second group was made up of young theologians of high social status including Dietrich Bonhoeffer and many of his seminary students. The last and most abundant group was accomplished lay church officials with high ranking vocations.¹² It is clear that the bulk of Confessing Church participants were middle-upper class men whose professions were adequate enough to pull their families through the depression and into World War II.

In late 1933 the Confessing Church began to compose a declaration in opposition to the German Christians. At The Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church, in May of 1934, the Confessing Church drafted Barth's declaration. The opening paragraph defended the Confessing Church's original stance of be in conjunction to the German State and supporting a unified German church. "Be not deceived by loose talk, as if we meant to oppose the unity of the German nation! Do not listen to the seducers who pervert our intentions, as if we wanted to break

¹⁰ Ibid, 60.

¹¹ Ibid, 59.

¹² Ibid.

up the unity of the German Evangelical Church or to forsake the Confessions of the Fathers!”¹³ Next Barth used scripture to defend the Confessing Church’s stance on the German state and attempted to rally Protestants to view the state as inferior to Christ. The majority of Barth’s declaration was to show through scripture that the church should always come before the state and that there must be an element of separation between the two.¹⁴ The Confessing Church’s goal was to rally Protestants to their side and to provoke a response from the Nazi party.¹⁵ It is not entirely clear how much Hitler knew of the declaration, but the Nazi party’s response was in-existent and the Protestants failed to rally to the Church’s call.

Originally the Confessing Church was created in order to radically change the existing German “church” and did not want to be independent of the government.¹⁶ Though the church leaders felt that separation from government politics was necessary, they still wanted to be intertwined with the German culture. Throughout the church conflict, there was no issue greater than the question of what to do with ethnic Jews. The Confessing Church believed that baptism alone was what brought church members together and was not changed in any way by ethnicity or nationality.¹⁷ As the Germans made clear their thoughts on the Jewish people the Confessing Church realized the need for complete separation.

¹³ Karl Barth, *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, (Barmen 1934), accessed web. 12-17-2014, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Baranowski, 64.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

On October 20, 1934 the Confessing Church brought forth their second statement of existence titled: “Declaration of the Second Confessing Synod of the German Protestant Church in Berlin-Dahlem.”¹⁸ At this point, for his protection, Karl Barth withdrew himself from most of the Confessing Church documents. The second synod stated much more clearly the Confessing Church’s complete separation from the German Christians. “The men who have seized the Church leadership in the Reich and the states have divorced themselves from the Christian Church... We summon the Christian communities, their pastors and elders, to accept no directives from the present Church Government and its authorities and to decline cooperation with those who wish to remain obedient to this ecclesiastical governance.”¹⁹ For the first time the Confessing Church made it clear, they were the true German church and in opposition to the German Christians.

Hitler’s response to the second synod echoed the first—silence. However, while Hitler may have not been speaking to the Confessing Church, he was busy bringing the Jewish question even more into play. The 1935 Nuremberg laws further showed publically Hitler’s opposition to the Jewish race and his belief that they were sub-human. The main point of contention between the Confessing Church and the German Christians was Aryan Paragraph and its attempt to dictate that no Jew was allowed in church. The Confessing Church’s view of the Jews is most easily seen in the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Since the Great Awakening Martin Luther was quoted in Germany to argue both theology and life style. Fortunately for the Nazis, toward the end of Luther’s life he said some very anti-

¹⁸ Martin Niemoller, *The Declaration of the Second Confessing Synod of the German Protestant Church in Berlin-Dahlem*, (Berlin-Dahlem: October 20, 1934) English translation: Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919-1945, Vol. 2: State, Economy and Society 1933-1939*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000, p. 390.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Semitic remarks. Hitler used many of these quotes as propaganda to push his own hatred towards the Jews. In Bonhoeffer's essay "The Church and the Jewish Question," Bonhoeffer combated Hitler's propaganda. Bonhoeffer opened his essay with two of Luther's quotes. One states: "If the apostles, who also were Jews, had dealt with us Gentiles as we Gentiles deal with Jews, there would never have a Christian among the Gentiles. Since they dealt with us Gentiles in such a brotherly fashion, we in our turn ought to treat Jews in a brotherly manner."²⁰ Bonhoeffer then moved on to talk about the relationship between the state and the church. In his view, the church should not directly get involved in the politics, but individual Christian men should strive to keep the state following Godly ethics.²¹ Then Bonhoeffer moved to his second and more contentious point. He stated plainly, "The church cannot allow the state to prescribe for it the way it treats its members. A baptized Jew is a member of our church. For the church, the Jewish question is therefore different from what it is for the state."²² Bonhoeffer felt starkly that Jews are part of the church.

Concurring with his essay on the church, Bonhoeffer also wrote theses on the Aryan Paragraph. In his theses, Bonhoeffer stated what the German Christians did and what the Confessing church was going to do.²³ "The German Christians say: 'The German church people can no longer endure communion with Jews, who have done them so much harm politically.' We answer: 'This is the very point where it must be made crystal clear: here is where we are tested

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 12*, Nicolaisen ed. (Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 361.

²¹ *Ibid*, 362-363.

²² *Ibid*, 268.

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Theses on 'The Aryan Paragraph in the Church'," *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 12*, Nicolaisen ed. (Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 425.

as to whether we know what the church is. Here, where the Jewish Christian whom I don't like is sitting next to me among the faithful, this is precisely where the church is.'"²⁴ To Bonhoeffer it was not important what the Nazis thought and did, only what the true church did. Bonhoeffer wrote both of these works in the early 1930s. Bonhoeffer, Niemoller, and Barth all failed to rally the German Protestants behind them or to gain recognition from the government as "separate".²⁵ What the Confessing Church had not realized yet was that Hitler did not care an ounce if their arguments were theologically or rationally valid. Hitler only cared about ending the church struggle, and chose to do so by creating The Ministry of Church Affairs. From this ironically translated "ministry", Hitler vowed to destroy the Confessing Church's "ministry."

Beginning around 1937 the Ministry of Church Affairs attacked the Confessing Church on many fronts. It began with simple fines and suppression of church publication, but continued until arrests were made and pastors were banished.²⁶ Eventually, the Gestapo set up full surveillance, arrested many leaders, and killed several of those. Out of the estimated 3,000 members of the Confessing Church, around 700 were arrested by Gestapo agents. Those arrested include Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemoller. Barth escaped imprisonment by fleeing to Switzerland after being fired from the University of Bonn for refusing to say an oath to Hitler. Niemoller was arrested and soon imprisoned in multiple concentration camps where he stayed until liberation seven years later.²⁷ Bonhoeffer's arrest in 1943 ended the majority of attempts and the Confessing Church began to fall apart. The pastor himself, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was hanged at Flossenberg concentration camp on April 9th, 1945, just two weeks before U.S.

²⁴ Ibid, 428.

²⁵ Baranowski, 71.

²⁶ Ibid, 72.

²⁷ Ibid, 73.

liberation. Bonhoeffer wrote hundreds of letters while in prison to church leaders, his fiancé, friends, and the church worldwide.

During the time of the persecution of the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer along with about 20 Confessing Church members began plotting assassination attempts on Hitler's life. Though the attempts involved many different types of bombs, British special intelligence, and high ranking German generals, none of the attempts were successful. The most famous assassination attempt occurred on July 20, 1944. Though Bonhoeffer was involved in the planning of this mission, he had been imprisoned for almost a year at the time it was carried out.²⁸ In this assassination attempt a bomb was placed in a meeting that Hitler was attending. The bomb successfully went off (contrary to two previous attempts), but failed to kill the Fuhrer.²⁹ Throughout the concentration of killing Hitler, the Confessing Church was forced to consider some difficult ethical decisions. The first and most obvious was whether assassinating Hitler was ethically alright. Another ethical debate was fired by a few of the conspirators' inability to cope with the idea of being imprisoned by the Gestapo. This fear led to the discussion of suicide and in some cases the fear was only ended by means of a bullet. None-the-less, many of the conspirators were eventually captured and executed including, already mentioned Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of his brothers, and two of his brothers-in-law.³⁰ The decision to attempt assassination proved costly, but was deemed by the church to be the correct one.

²⁸ Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler, Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1979), 346.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

The war on Christians, led by the Ministry of Church Affairs, left many churches without pastors, families without fathers, and left the nation only one church, the German Christian church. Since the German Christian Church was no church at all, Protestantism briefly collapsed at the end of the war.³¹ Without any real churches, Protestants and the German liberators looked for ways to put the church back into motion. It did not make sense for the churches to be made-up based on occupational zones because that would create the same problem that Protestants were trying to unify against. Instead, the occupiers chose to reinstate the churches that already existed. Most congregations formerly under the German Christians demanded that their pastors leave. Conveniently for them, the majority of German Christian pastors had already resigned once their war duties were over.³² Due to communication with British intelligence, the Confessing Church leaders were seen as “responsible and able” leaders for the churches.³³ This was in blatant contrast to the German education system that was crippled by denazification procedures.

In the end it is seen that the Confessing Church’s impact on Nazi Germany, although bold and dangerous, made very little difference, especially in the short run of the war itself. The Church failed to achieve its main anti-Nazi acts as well as failed to rally the German people behind Christ. However, the Confessing Church did aid in the reconstruction process of Germany as well as the continuation of the Protestant church. Historically, the writings of the Confessing Church leaders have helped in understanding the German church struggle as well as

³¹ Ibid, 414.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

the thoughts behind the Ministry of Church Affairs. Many of Bonhoeffer's works have produced new theological ideas and his sermons are still read and studied.

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