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Jake Johnson

Cedarville University, jakejohnson@cedarville.edu

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Jake Johnson

Christianity, Rebellion, and *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*

“Week after week that train whistle would blow. We would dread to hear the sound of those old wheels because we knew that the Jews would begin to cry out to us as they passed our church... If some of the screams reached our ears, we’d just sing a little louder until we could hear them no more” (“Sing a Little Louder”). In the throes of World War II, German Christians had to choose between speaking out against the government’s evil actions or standing idly by and remaining secure in their life, liberty, and property. Regrettably, the majority of Christians in Germany, including this quote’s anonymous source, chose the latter. Select individuals with courage and moral fortitude fought this tide of complacency and spoke out against the evil perpetrated by Hitler’s government. One such individual, Sophie Scholl, gave her life resisting the clear injustices of the Third Reich. German filmmaker Marc Rothmund honors her memory through his masterpiece *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*. While the movie accurately characterizes the influence of Christianity on Sophie’s resistance efforts, it fails to portray the most common Christian response towards the Nazi regime during the 1940s—complacency.

Sophie’s rebellion against the German government began in 1942 and continued until her death a year later. Instead of taking up arms against the government like a typical rebel, Sophie joined her brother Hans and a small group of other individuals in a

peaceful, intellectual resistance movement. Their group, called The White Rose, authored a number of dissentious leaflets that exposed and denounced the pervasive injustice and oppression under the Nazi regime. The members of The White Rose believed in the equality of all German people and were outraged at the government's oppression of Jewish citizens and its annihilation of mentally disabled individuals. According to Toby Axelrod, the White Rose "was the first, if not only, resistance group within Germany to explicitly criticize the Nazi government for what it was doing to the Jews. Their recognition of the atrocities being committed shows that many more Germans could have known—and probably did know—what it meant when their Jewish neighbors were disappearing, but they chose to look away" (22-23). Sophie and the other White Rose members did not look away but instead took action and devoted their lives to the fight against tyranny.

Sophie's involvement in the German resistance movement proceeded from her fervently held Christian beliefs. She and her brother came to a real, personal faith in Jesus during their time at the University of Munich after being raised in a nominally religious German home (Stonestreet and Kunkle 60). With a real and personal faith, Sophie surely knew and understood the implications of the Biblical passage which calls Christians to "[g]ive justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute" (English Standard Version, Ps. 82.3). Sophie used this and other Scriptural commands as a launching point into her life of rebellion. In her diary, she emphatically wrote, "For each of us, no matter in what age we live, have to be prepared

at a moment's notice to be called to account by God... We must fear for the existence of mankind only because men turn away from Him who is their life" (Scholl 48). Fortunately, Sophie recognized the gross injustices committed by the Nazi regime and felt called to resist this oppression as a result of her faith.

Rothemund's film, *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, accurately depicts Sophie's strong reliance on her faith during the events leading up to her execution. In one of the many interrogation scenes in the film, Gestapo investigator Robert Mohr pointedly asks Sophie, "What can we rely on if not the law no matter who wrote it?" To this, she replies, "On your conscience... The law changes, conscience doesn't." Through this dialogue, Rothemund shows that Sophie's rebellion finds its roots in her faith: she argues that the law of conscience—or the moral law of God—supersedes the law of Germany and that she has an obligation to uphold God's law rather than man's. Throughout the movie, Sophie does not stray from this moral argument and even tells Mohr, "I'd do the same again. You have the wrong worldview, not me." This cinematic depiction of her faith provides a great picture of faith-based rebellion.

Not only does Christianity serve as a rational basis for Sophie's actions, but it also serves as an immense source of emotional strength within the film. During Sophie's incarceration, she ardently prays, "Dear God, all I can do is stammer to you. I can do nothing but hold out my heart to you. You created us in your likeness. Our hearts are uneasy until they find peace in you." Rothemund does not diminish the impact of these fervent prayers; but instead, he emphasizes the comfort and peace that result from

them. This vivid portrayal of the source of Sophie's strength elicits even more surprise since Rothemund considers himself a devout atheist. In the words of the renowned film critic Richard Alleva, "Director Rothemund has no ax to grind; he is an atheist. That he is so willing to admit that the roots of Sophie's heroism were in her faith is a mark of his veracity and the big heartedness of this movie." Although he does not believe that Christianity is true, Rothemund effectively and accurately interweaves Sophie's religious beliefs and her rebellious actions in a way that accentuates both.

Although *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* truthfully portrays how Sophie's Christianity spurred her to rebellion, the film fails to depict the most common Christian response towards the Nazi regime during the 1940s. At the beginning of Hitler's rise to power, 60 million people lived in Germany, and almost all of those individuals considered themselves Christians. The Roman Catholic Church had close to 20 million members and Protestant churches had around 40 million members ("The German Churches"). With Rothemund's cinematic depiction of Sophie's catalytic faith, one would expect that most Christians in Germany opposed the Nazi government as well. Unfortunately, most Germans did not and acted contrarily to Sophie. Instead of fervently advocating for the oppressed individuals within their society, the vast majority of German Catholics and Protestants refrained from dissension which might cost them their life, liberty, or property. The complacency of German Christians largely stemmed from the popular German theology of the day and the political positions of Catholic and Protestant churches.

Popular German theology during the early 1900s in both the Catholic and Protestant church consisted of a pessimistic view of mankind's nature (Barnes 59). The Bishop of Saxony, Ludwig Ihmels, championed this theology. Since Scripture teaches that humanity is lost, sinful, and doomed to eternal separation from God without the saving grace of Jesus, Ihmels viewed the ability of humans to improve the temporal order of Creation in an extremely pessimistic light and believed that injustice and imperfection would continue to exist despite actions taken by Christians (Barnes 60). Kenneth Barnes, professor of history at the University of Central Arkansas, describes the dominant German theology of the 1940s in the following manner: "The Germans awaited no Kingdom of God on earth. In contrast to British views, German pessimism about human nature and lack of hope for the future disallowed any call for church-social activism" (59). Since church leaders did not believe in social activism, most members of their congregations did not either.

The political position of the Catholic church within Germany exacerbated this disbelief in activism. In 1933, the ties between the Catholic church and the Nazi government grew much stronger with the signing of the Concordat—a document which promised the security and liberty of the Roman Catholic Church within Germany as long as it did not interfere with or preach against the government's social policy (Trueman). The signing of the Concordat along with continued support for the German government from church leaders had deleterious consequences for the nation of Germany. Professor Emeritus of History at the

University of British Columbia, John S. Conway, explains the impact of the Catholic church's actions in the following way:

[I]t can hardly be denied that the signing of the Concordat; the subsequent enthusiastic readiness of German Catholics to support the Nazi regime in all aspects of its policy except in its religious policy; the bishops' continual stress upon their national loyalty, their readiness to lend their open support to the war, and their belief that the Nazi attacks on the church were only due to the excesses of a few radicals, or that the regime could be recalled to legally secured and morally defensible positions—it cannot be denied that all this played into the Nazis' hands (385-386).

The Roman Catholic Church's choice to only secure the needs and safety of itself as an institution rather than look out for the good of all German citizens caused irreparable harm in Germany.

Interestingly, Director Rothemund depicts the Catholic Church incorrectly in *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*. Before Sophie's execution, a Catholic priest enters her cell even though she considers herself a devout Protestant (Allewa). She asks him for his blessing, which he subsequently provides. He encourages her by saying, "No one loves more than he who dies for friends." Although this scene holds great cinematic value, it does not accurately represent the Catholic Church's official position towards the government. The priest encourages Sophie in a way that justifies her rebellion, while Catholic priests in the 1940s would never have condoned such an action. Unless Rothemund intended to depict a rogue priest, this depiction fails to accurately

characterize the position of the Catholic church within Germany and its support for the German government.

In spite of this legitimate blame, the Roman Catholic church cannot be held entirely responsible; most leaders and members of German Protestant churches did not oppose Hitler's authoritarian regime either. The social complacency within the Protestant church stemmed from both its pessimistic view of mankind's nature and the Nazi government's influence on the church. Facing History and Ourselves, a non-profit educational organization, described the state of German Protestants in World War II: "In general, Protestants in Germany found a way to be both believers in Christianity and supporters of Nazism" ("Protestant Churches"). Rather than protecting the sanctity of Christianity, these Christians found a way to compromise their beliefs in order to remain in the government's favor.

As a result of this compromise and complacency, Hitler easily inculcated the Protestant church into his plan to seize complete control of Germany. This incorporation began in 1931 when a powerful and organized group of Nazi Protestants, named the Deutsche Christen, called for the amalgamation of Germany's twenty-eight provincial churches (Barnes 94). This call led to the formation of a constitution for a new national evangelical church, which was approved by delegates from the twenty-eight different provinces. The new church, named the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche, quickly fell under the influence of the Nazi government. In 1933, Hitler's adviser in church matters, Ludwig Müller, took control of the church only a few, short years after its creation (Barnes 94). The centralization of the church and appointment of

Müller as its head facilitated the practical unification between the church and the Nazi government and greatly hindered social activism within German Protestant circles.

In addition to hindering congregation members from speaking out against the government, the nationalization of the Protestant churches furthered the cause of the Nazis by becoming an extended arm of the government. Barnes describes the relationship between the two entities by saying, “For the German [Deutsche Evangelische Kirche] spokesmen, the church must obey the state. The state was not bound by Christian concepts but operated according to its own rules” (139). Instead of acting as a check on immoral, governmental actions, the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche operated in complacent submission to the Nazi government. For example, the German government created the infamous Aryan Paragraph in 1933, which dismissed any German citizen of Jewish descent from civil service. Soon afterwards, the Protestant church accepted the Paragraph, modified it, and proceeded to defrock any pastor or church official who was of Jewish descent or married to a non-Aryan (Campbell). Even though most Protestants remained members of the national church after these developments, some courageous individuals broke off and formed their own church—the Confessing Church.

The creators of the Confessing Church believed that the beliefs and actions of churchgoers should not be controlled by the German government. In essence, they believed that the church needed to remain the church and the government ought to remain the government. As could be expected, the Third Reich had a different ideology. It saw this division between church and state as

a resistance movement and attempted to dismantle the Confessing Church by surveilling its members, imprisoning them or even sending them to concentration camps (Siegele-Wenschkewitz). The government's staunch resistance served as an effective sieve to distinguish between individuals who had the courage to stand for personal and individual faith and those who valued personal security over religious veracity.

Despite its objection to the nationalization of German protestant churches and the government's influence on the new church, the Confessing Church did not object to most elements of Nazism ("Protestant Churches"). The members of the nationalized church and the Confessing Church primarily disagreed on how much influence the government should have over how they practiced their faith rather than the political elements of the Nazi regime. Sadly, this means that most leaders did not denounce or encourage their congregations to protest the government's actions. Even within the ranks of the Confessing Church, complacency existed.

A few leaders existed within the church who ardently denounced the Nazi government, however. One of these leaders, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sharply disagreed with the church's complacency regarding the Third Reich's oppression of Jews. Through his writings, he condemned the Third Reich's oppression and eventually conspired to assassinate Adolf Hitler with several others. For this rebellion, the government sentenced him to death. Sadly, Bonhoeffer represented a small minority of the overall Christian German population who were willing to take a stand for those who could not stand for themselves. Along with Bonhoeffer,

Sophie Scholl disagreed with the church's complacency within Germany and rebelled against the government without its support. She once declared, "How can we expect righteousness to prevail when there is hardly anyone willing to give himself up individually to a righteous cause?" (Burns). Sophie's theology, like Bonhoeffer's, called her to resist oppression and devote herself to a righteous cause, which she emphatically did.

While *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* accurately depicts the influence of Christianity on Sophie's rebellion, it does not truthfully represent the dominant Christian response towards the Nazi government. The movie portrays Sophie—a Christian—standing in opposition to the German's gross mistreatment of Jews. Sadly, the vast majority of Christians acted dissimilarly to Sophie. The Roman Catholic Church signed an agreement with the government to abstain from political accusations and the government practically controlled the nationalized Protestant church. Most members within these churches complacently allowed the government to oppress the Jews and the social outcasts of Germany and sang a little louder when they heard of these injustices. Rothmund's film impactfully and accurately depicts the plight of Sophie Scholl who stood up to the tyrannical Nazi regime on the basis of her beliefs, but fails to portray the complacency towards Hitler's oppression that prevailed in German Christian circles.

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