

Globethics Repository



Theological Misinterpretations of the Confessing Church

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Spurlock, Matthew
Publisher	Maranatha Baptist University and Maranatha Baptist Seminary
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-15 01:19:26
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/160739

Theological Misinterpretations of the Confessing Church

Matthew Spurlock¹

Before the Third Reich obtained full political power in Germany, there was an effort to unify the Protestant churches, mostly Lutheran, into one church, merged with the ideologies of the Nazi state. Though there was much support from a large portion of Protestants, known as the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians), who supported such an effort, there were also those who opposed the effort. The opposition would eventually form what became known as the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church). Though they were astute enough to recognize the dangerous propositions being purported by the German Christians and the Nazi regime, their significant misinterpretation regarding Lutheran theological positions and the development of a creed based upon the neo-orthodox positions of Karl Barth left the Confessing Church with little more than a weak protest against the Nazi government and a weak stance on the atrocities the Third Reich committed. An examination of the origination of the Confessing Church, its actions (or lack thereof) throughout the Nazi rise of power, and its demise in the aftermath of World War II will demonstrate that such theological positions hindered the Confessing Church from aggressively opposing *de Führer*.

¹ Matthew Spurlock is a student at Maranatha Baptist Seminary. *Maranatha Baptist Theological Journal* usually publishes one article each year written by a seminary student.

The Need for the Confessing Church

As the Nazi party began to rise, so did the German Christian movement. This movement was officially known as *Glaubensbewegung Deutsche Christen* (the German Christian Faith Movement).² Though the Nazi party did not desire to back a particular church group initially, there was a growing number of Protestant clergy who felt a strong need for a “conservative, Lutheran and above all German form of doctrine, and various church groups were formed throwing their confessional weight behind the Nazi movement.”³ The result was that “by June 6, 1932, the German Christian Faith Movement had an organizational structure similar to that of the National Socialist party.”⁴ Such a hierarchy of structure, found similarly within the Catholic Church and other denominations, no longer seeks to allow Christ to be head of the church, but sinful man. This was the case for the German Christians. Before they began to follow Hitler, they were devoted to the doctrines of Martin Luther.

As this movement began to gain momentum, the German Christians desired to incorporate “the twenty-seven Protestant regional churches into a united German Evangelical Reich church headed by a Reich bishop with close ties to Hitler.”⁵ It is clear that this forfeited the autonomy of the local church. Hockenos elaborates on this fact, stating that “their goal to integrate Christianity and National Socialism in a racially pure ‘people’s church’ was a

² Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), 127.

³ Jeremy Begbie, “The Confessing Church and the Nazis: A Struggle for Theological Truth,” *Anvil, A Journal of Theology and Mission* 2.2 (Summer 1985): 117–118.

⁴ Helmreich, 127.

⁵ Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 15.

direct challenge not only to the autonomy of the regional churches but to Lutheran and Reformed doctrinal principles as well.”⁶ The adherence to Lutheran theology gripped the people tightly; and as Hitler became Chancellor, the excitement behind the Nazi movement fanned excitement among the German Christians.

Hitler became Reich Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. At this time, “nearly all of those pastors who would become members of the Confessing Church anticipated cooperation rather than confrontation with National Socialism.”⁷ At Hitler’s rise to Chancellor, “Protestant churchmen across the country shared in general enthusiasm for his nationalist, anticommunist and anti-Semitic rhetoric.”⁸ Soon after Hitler became Chancellor, he appointed Ludwig Müller as Reich Bishop of the German Christians and initiated the Reich Civil Service Law of April 1933. Civil servants who were not of Aryan descent, as well as opponents of the Nazi regime, were forced to retire from civil service. This included clergy, as they were financially supported by the state.⁹ At this point, there was unrest in those who would form the Confessing Church. Begbie notes that “church resistance to the Nazis began first and foremost as a *church* struggle, without any question of *political* resistance.”¹⁰ Such political resistance was unthinkable at this time, since it would be contrary to the Lutheran two-kingdom doctrine!

The German Christian influence reached into the Old Prussian and Land Churches. These areas were where “the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Donald D. Wall, “The Confessing Church and the Second World War,” *Journal of Church and State* (Winter 1981): 15.

⁸ Hockenos, 17.

⁹ Jordan J. Ballor, “The Aryan Clause, the Confessing Church, and the Ecumenical Movement: Barth and Bonhoeffer on Natural Theology, 1933–1935,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59.3 (August 2006): 267.

¹⁰ Begbie, 118.

administration and governing authorities of the Land Churches came largely under control of German Christians, who accepted the policies of the National Church Administration headed by Bishop Müller.”¹¹ Jantzen notes that “despite these significant differences in their ecclesiastical contexts, however, all three districts endured significant levels of church-political conflict—not least in the form of strife between fellow clergymen.”¹²

The Beginning of the Confessing Church

Protestant clergymen, who were disturbed by the Nazi regime’s ecclesiastical policies, had joined Martin Niemöller’s Pastor’s Emergency League.¹³ On 29 May 1934, 138 church delegates attended a synod at Barmen and pledged supported a new “Confessing Church” (*Bekennniskirche*). This was a significant move towards consolidated resistance against the influence of the German Christians.¹⁴ Their main concern with the Nazi influence was the perpetration of its beliefs within the German Christian churches. The German Christians openly accepted the Nazi’s “highly politicized and secularized theology that subverted scripture and the inherited Lutheran and Reformed confessions with Führer-worship, German *völkischness*, and explicitly racial anti-Semitism.”¹⁵ Baranowski states that those that represented the Confessing Church “sought to preserve the purity of the gospel as stated in the Old and New Testaments and again brought to light in the historic Lutheran and Reformed

¹¹ Helmreich, 413.

¹² Kyle Jantzen, “Propoganda, Perserverance, and Protest: Strategies for Clerical Survival Amid the German Church Struggle,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 70.2 (June 2001): 297.

¹³ Wall, 16.

¹⁴ Begbie, 119.

¹⁵ Shelley Baranowski, “Consent and Dissent: The Confessing Church and Conservative Opposition to National Socialism,” *The Journal of Modern History* 59.1 (March 1987): 58.

Confessional statements.”¹⁶ This was accomplished primarily through Karl Barth and the Barmen Declaration.

The Barmen Declaration affirmed the Confessing Church’s loyalty to Christ and set forth the limits of secular government.¹⁷ Barth took this opportunity to insert much of his neo-orthodox positions, including the rejection of natural (general) theology. Ballor notes that “the relation of the Barmen Declaration to the Confessing Church and the relation of the Confessing Church to the broader ecumenical world both revolved around Barth’s ‘No!’ to natural theology.”¹⁸ This Declaration, although not ideal for all clergy involved in the formation of the Confessing Church, sought the preeminence of Christ.

The key-note of the confession was the unique Lordship of Christ over every area of life together with the rejection of any other ultimate authority in faith and conduct. The Confessing Church now regarded herself as the one true Evangelical Church in Germany, although *de facto* there were two churches: the Confessing Church and the German Evangelical Church under Müller.¹⁹

Though the Reformed, United and Lutheran churches came to a shaky agreement to the Barmen Declaration, many Lutherans opposed Barth’s theology because it “challenged four of the conservative Lutheran’s most sacred tenets: the law-gospel dialectic, the orders of creation or divine orders, natural revelation, and the orthodox Lutheran understanding of Martin Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms.”²⁰ Although they began moving in the right direction by separating from the Third Reich, the Lutheran ideology of church and state both appointed by God kept

¹⁶ Helmreich, 420.

¹⁷ Wall, 16.

¹⁸ Ballor, 276.

¹⁹ Begbie, 119.

²⁰ Hockenos, 23.

them from being “unable to conceive seriously of becoming a ‘free’ church, that is, one dependent entirely on the contribution of a voluntary membership.”²¹

Those in the Confessing Church were not only facing outside opposition, but there were also internal conflicts between the radical and conservative wings of the Confessing Church. Hockenos notes that “some pastors and church leaders in the Niemöller wing of the Confessing Church believed that it *was* necessary to publically protest state laws and decrees that interfered with the church’s control over its administrative, financial, legal, and pastoral offices.”²² Indeed, Karl Barth’s position had many opponents. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth disagreed on the Jewish question and the Aryan clause.²³ Barth saw the need to be separate from the state, but “many of the leaders of Confessing Church (especially bishops such as Hans Meiser, Theophil Wurm, and August Marahrens) wanted to be recognized by the state and thereby maintain contact with the rest of the Protestant Church.”²⁴ This continual desire to be tied to the government was rooted in their Lutheran theology.

The influence of Lutheran theology was significantly strong within Germany and their ideology and theology contributed towards many of the actions (or inactions) of both groups. Begbie notes that “theologians and clergy in the Lutheran tradition had thus long been schooled to preach obedience to the ruling authorities, basing their arguments on traditional interpretations of Romans 13 and 1 Peter 3:17.”²⁵ Also, it must be noted that the Confessing Church was never completely cut off from state funds. Helmreich states that “in general, the Confessing church pastors and congregations continued to be financed through the

²¹ Baronowski, 65.

²² Hockenos, 17.

²³ Ballor, 270.

²⁴ Ballor, 380.

²⁵ Begbie, 125.

customary church taxes, church money (*Kirchgeld*), income from lands, state subsidies, and church collections.”²⁶ Barth recognized this, as “he held that the failure of the Confessing Church to offer a ‘more comprehensive resistance’ to the political evil of National Socialism was rooted deeply in traditional Lutheran theology.”²⁷

Although the Confessing Church was rooted deeply in Lutheran theology, their association with Barth’s neo-orthodoxy did not aid in their efforts. Ultimately, the Confessing Church was unable to effectively stand against the rise of Nazism. Begbie notes this by stating that “an enormously significant factor was that the churches were *theologically* ill-equipped and unprepared to come to grips with the immense power of Nazi ideology and the profound issues it raised for the life and witness of the church.”²⁸ Wall concurs by stating that the Church’s “commitment to the fatherland and sense of loyalty to the German people were at least as strong as its moral indignation against National Socialism.”²⁹ This commitment no doubt derived from the influence of Lutheran theology. However, the anti-semitism which also derived from Lutheran theology was far more disastrous.

Silence of the Confessing Church

On August 2, 1934, the German President Hindenburg died. The previous day, the cabinet had enacted the “Law Concerning the Highest State Office of the Reich.” This law abolished the office of the President, merging the position’s powers with those of the Chancellor. Thus, Hitler was now the head of state as well as of the government in a newly titled position, Führer of Germany. “This action gave Hitler ultimate power over Germany, which gave Bishop Müller

²⁶ Helmreich, 416.

²⁷ Wall, 18.

²⁸ Begbie, 123.

²⁹ Wall, 33.

further motivation towards his goal of ‘one God, one *Volk* and one Church.’”³⁰ The aggression by the Nazi regime intensified. Begbie notes that “police were harassing pastors not only in the Prussian Confessing Churches but also in other Land Churches. Many were denied the right to preach, their houses were searched, some were dismissed or pensioned, some 700 were arrested, and some placed in concentration camps.”³¹ Martin Niemöller, one of the Confessing Church founders, was imprisoned on 1 July, 1937. The Church was also being influenced from within as well. Members of the Lutheran Council were moderates within the Confessing Church. Although they considered themselves a part of the Confessing Church, they were winning others to their Lutheran positions.

Using the two kingdoms doctrine, these moderates could, on the one hand, celebrate the German revolution and the national awakening, and also accept anti-Jewish laws, while they could work, on the other hand, inside the church against the Aryan paragraph. The political sphere was given independence. It was thus impossible to criticize the political order. Thus both conservative and liberal moderates could affirm the Nazi policy.³²

Niemöller’s imprisonment, along with the moderates’ determination to accommodate the Nazi regime, caused many within the Church to become increasingly cautious.³³ However, actions by the Nazi regime such as “the arrest of pastors and church members who acted on their own religious convictions were not viewed in a political framework

³⁰ Begbie, 119.

³¹ Ibid, 120.

³² Arne Rasmusson, “‘Deprive Them of Their Pathos’: Karl Barth and the Nazi Revolution Revisited,” *Modern Theology* 23.3 (July 2007): 373.

³³ Wall, 17.

by which Christians could have connected these arrests to the growing oppression of Jews and others under Nazism.”³⁴

These violent acts increased through the months, and before “the Munich Agreement in September 1938, when war seemed imminent, three members of the provisional administration, Martin Albertz, Hans Böhm, and Fritz Müller, wrote and circulated a prayer service of confession and intercession.”³⁵ Within this prayer, there was an omission of prayers for Hitler, Sudeten Germans and a German victory. “Included were a confession of specific sins of the German people and prayers for all peoples of the world and for peace.”³⁶ The prayer was circulated in the SS newspaper, *Das Schwarze Korps*, where they received public criticism and disassociation.³⁷ Those in the Confessing Church were branded as traitors to their country and were continually drawing the Gestapo’s attention. Though the church’s desire in their minds was to be biblical, they were drawing political lines. Such actions were of little effect to turn the tide. “As war loomed and Nazi propaganda stirred national loyalties and revived the anger at Germany’s defeat in 1918, patriotism stirred in the churches as well as in the general population.”³⁸

Even though the Confessing Church rejected the German War Crusade, they could not publicly denounce Hitler’s aggressive attacks as unjust.³⁹ This was due to their theological position, as Barnett states: “Reaching back for the certainties of Lutheran tradition, church leaders felt

³⁴ Victoria Barnett, *For The Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 60.

³⁵ Wall, 19.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Barnett, 92.

³⁹ Wall, 21.

bound by their loyalties to throne and altar.”⁴⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian who was opposed to war, “was explicit that the Confessing Church should not yield on any point to the Nazi state or those elements in the official church that cooperated with the state.”⁴¹ Though there were some such as Bonhoeffer that opposed the Nazi regime, the Church as a whole was silent on Germany’s encroachment toward war. Wall states that “there was no response at all to Hitler’s dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in March, 1939, or to the Polish crisis in the summer of that year.”⁴² Hockenos identifies this sin of omission by the Confessing Church:

Although a unified response from the Confessing Church was virtually impossible, the real stumbling block to an official Confessing Church protest was not the confessional, organizational, or even political divisions but the traditional antipathy toward Judaism derived from centuries of Lutheran teaching that the Jew was a godless outcast who would always be a danger to a Christian nation unless he converted to Christianity.⁴³

This disdain for the Jewish people, plagued by centuries of Lutheran theology, not only supported a criminal government, but also stood silent as Jews were being eradicated. Begbie concurs, stating that “the traditional quietist attitude of Lutheranism towards the state had a large part to play, together with a significant anti-Semitic strain within contemporary Lutheran theology.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Barnett, 37.

⁴¹ Ibid, 96.

⁴² Donald D. Wall, “The Confessing Church and Hitler’s Foreign Policy: The Czechoslovakian Crisis of 1938,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44.3 (September 1976): 436.

⁴³ Hockenos, 36.

⁴⁴ Begbie, 128.

As the war progressed, some within the Confessing Church “came to the realization that the evil of National Socialism demanded something beyond the strictly ecclesiastical opposition prescribed by Lutheran theology and loyalty to the fatherland.”⁴⁵ However, by this time, it was too late for any action to be effective against the Nazi war machine. Though Confessing Church members would defend Hebrew Christians against such Nazi policies, it was not for humanitarian reasons they did so, but for theological reasons; they only saw a Jewish Christian as a brother or sister in Christ, rather than a person made in the image of God. The success of Hitler’s anti-Semitic propaganda can be credited to “the unrelenting anti-Jewish Christian theological discourse that linked Nazi propaganda with the traditions and moral authority of the churches.”⁴⁶

It is important to note that there were many bold individuals fighting against the Nazi government. Though the greatest significance of the Confessing Church was their opposition to the German Christians and the Nazi regime, they could never oppose Nazi doctrine because of the theological chains of Lutheranism that bound them.

The Confessing Church, by its own admission, fell short of fulfilling the mission of the church. It acknowledged that the Third Reich was an immoral state in which evil was not simply an accident but a principle. Yet the theology of the church called for implicit obedience to the duly constituted authorities and discouraged political resistance.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Wall, “The Confessing Church and the Second World War,” 29.

⁴⁶ Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and The Bible In Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 7.

⁴⁷ Wall, “The Confessing Church and the Second World War,” 33.

Conclusion

Though the Confessing Church recognized the dangers and atrocities of the Third Reich, their theological bond to Lutheranism disallowed them from questioning the government. Their hatred towards Jews kept them silent during the darkest hour in German history. Instead of abandoning their Lutheran doctrine, they incorporated Barth's neo-orthodox theology into their Lutheranism as their foundation during this trying time. Such a misinterpretation of the history of biblical theology reveals the dangers of adding any other authority to the Word of God, whether that be an unfounded doctrine, a biased creed, or a faulty theology.