



2016

The Orthodox Betrayal: How German Christians Embraced and Taught Nazism and Sparked a Christian Battle.

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**The Orthodox Betrayal:
How German Christians Embraced and Taught Nazism and Sparked a Christian
Battle.**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
History.

By:

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Under the mentorship of Brian K. Feltman

Abstract

During the years of the Nazi regime in Germany, the government introduced a doctrine known as *Gleichschaltung* (coordination). *Gleichschaltung* attempted to force the German people to conform to Nazi ideology. As a result of *Gleichschaltung* the *Deutsche Christens* (German Christians) diminished the importance of the Old Testament, rejected the biblical Jesus, and propagated proper Nazi gender roles. This thesis will argue that *Deutsche Christen* movement became the driving force of Nazi ideology within the Protestant Church and quickly dissented from orthodox Christian theology becoming heretical. The *Deutsche Christen* heresy was unique to Germany and could have only been formed within the borders and historical context of the German nation. This heresy created a division within the established Protestant Church. As the division grew the heretics and the orthodox members struggled for power. This struggle between orthodox German Protestants and the *Deutsche Christens*, known as the *Kirchenkampf* (church struggle), resulted in the orthodox Christians forming the Confessing Church. Subsequently, the Confessing Church insured that the Protestant church, as an institution, rejected the Nazi's attempt to force the German citizens to comply their ideologies.

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Spring 2016

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Chapter One: Introduction: The German Christians and Their Unique Heresy

As May 1934 drew to a close many of Germany's most prominent theologians and pastors met in a small German city called Barmen. The birthplace of Fredrick Engels, Barmen was actually a suburb of the larger city, Wuppertal, on the Wupper River. The fact that the one of the fathers of Communism, Engels, was born in Barmen was only appropriate, because the work that was done by these pastors and theologians constituted nothing less than a revolution. After three days of meetings, the Pastor's Emergency League produced a document that they called the Barmen Declaration.

With the Barmen Declaration a church movement known as the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church) was born. The Confessing Church would become an opposing force to the National Socialist party and the splinter Nazi movement, the *Deutsche Christens* (German Christians). The primary author of the document was the most respected theologian of the twentieth century and one of the most formidable academics in German history, Karl Barth. After the document was finally complete, Barth remarked that his writing had been, "fortified by strong coffee and one or two Brazilian cigars."¹ As Barth finished his expensive cigars and the smoke cleared from the room full of theologically conservative Protestant pastors and professors, the *Kirchenkampf* (church struggle) officially began. Although it took until May 1934 to distinguish clear battle lines of the *Kirchenkampf*, the formations of the struggle began over a year earlier.

1933 was a pivotal year in German history. This was the year that the German government landed firmly in control of the National Socialist party and Adolf Hitler. Shortly after coming to power, the Nazi party, led by Hitler, introduced a doctrine known

¹ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 222.

as *Gleichschaltung* (bringing into line). This Nazi policy intended to bring all parts of German society into coordination with the National Socialist ideology, making what Hitler called a “Total State.”² In other words, the National Socialists wanted to nazify Germany. The Protestant Church, among other institutions, was not exempt from this expectation of conformity.

As *Gleichschaltung* began, the National Socialists had a particular interest in bringing the church into line with Nazi principles. However, this was not because the Nazis were Christians. The National Socialist movement could never be defined as a Christian movement.³ The foundational ideologies of the two movements were absolutely incompatible. Hitler detested Christian teaching, primarily because it offered him no obvious political advantage and gave of the aura of weakness. Christian teaching was useless to Nazi ideology because it taught “meekness and flabbiness.” This was the exact opposite of a Nazi ideology that taught “ruthlessness and strength.”⁴ Nevertheless, as the Nazi party sought to bring the German society into line with its ideological extremism, it sought to conform the Protestant Church. In reality, the Nazis sought the institution’s forty million members more than the establishment itself.

The Protestant Church inside Germany at the beginning of the 1930’s was made up of twenty-eight regional church bodies that were evangelical, and for the most part, theologically conservative. Although the rise of textual criticism in German theological universities brought in a wave of liberalism that grew rather rampantly in the German church, this new found freedom in Biblical scholarship left some institutions within the

² Michael Burleigh, *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945* (Cambridge University Press: 1991), 10.

³ Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (New York: Cambridge, 2003), 3.

⁴ Joseph Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries 1942-1943*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1948), 375.

theological framework of the Protestant Church easily susceptible to the Nazis' *Gleichschaltung* doctrine. Historian Robert Erickson tells us that theology as a discipline was easily pressured by the *Gleichschaltung* movement and certain Protestant theologians easily incorporated Nazi principles into their theology.⁵ However, the Protestant Church as a whole was not so easily enticed by the Nazi worldview.

In an attempt to make the Nazi ideology more prominent within the church, a splinter movement of the Nazi party called the *Deutsche Christens* became the battering ram of Nazi principles inside the protestant community. As Richard Steigmann-Gall explains in *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945*, the German Christian movement was “intent on suffusing Protestant Christianity with the anti-Christian tenets of its parent movement.”⁶ With the *Deutsche Christens* eager to please the Nazi elites a heresy soon developed, a heresy that was unique to any before it.

History shows us that any time a teaching breaks from orthodoxy and becomes heretical a struggle for the truth ensues. Time and again the early church confirmed this; whether it was Ignatius battling the Gnostics or Augustine battling Pelagius, when a betrayal of the truth happens a war over the correct doctrine is inevitable. The same was true in Nazi Germany when the Protestant Church was challenged by the heretical pro-Nazi German Christians. As the theological and ecclesiastical battle ensued, the Protestant Church was ripped apart by the *Kirchenkampf* (*church struggle*). Thus, the *Kirchenkampf* would become the battle for the Protestant Church in Germany during the years of the Nazi regime.

⁵ Robert P. Erickson, “The Gotten University Theological Faculty: A Test Case in Gleichschaltung and Denazification.” *The Journal of Central European History* 17, no. 4 (December 1984): 356.

⁶ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 2.

The two sides of this battle consisted of the German Christian movement and the Confessing Church movement. One side of the battle, the German Christians claimed, “Hitler stood under a divine command to save the German people, both economically and spiritually,”⁷ while the other side, the Confessing Church, exclaimed, “The men who have seized the Church leadership in the Reich and the states have divorced themselves from the Christian Church.”⁸ Despite both divisions remaining within the official Protestant Church, the *Kirchenkampf* grew intense as the battle for rightful leadership of the church ensued.⁹

The battle for the Protestant Church within Germany during the Nazi reign is no historically insignificant matter. When the scope of the battle is considered, the historical significance is obvious. The Protestant Church consisted of forty million members during this time, most of whom remained neutral.¹⁰ Had any one side prevailed during the *Kirchenkampf*, Germany’s future may have looked drastically different.

The historical narrative surrounding the German Church struggle has traditionally focused on the Nazi state’s oppression of the Confessing Church and the persecution of some of its most prominent members. While this field is certainly important, scholars have not focused on the ultimate resistance of the Protestant Church to the Nazi state that is present in the Confessing movement. Likewise, there has been an incredible amount of research centered on the betrayal of the German Christian movement. However, very

⁷ Susannah Heschel, “Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Christian life,” *Church History* 63, no. 4 (December 1994), 588.

⁸ The Confessing Church: Excerpt from the Declaration of the Second Confessing Synod of the German Protestant Church in Berlin-Dahlem (October 20, 1934). http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1569 Accessed January 14, 2016.

⁹ Doris L. Bergen, “Germany Is Our Mission—Christ Is Our Strength!” The Wehrmacht Chaplaincy and the “German Christian” Movement,” *Church History* 66, no. 3 (September 1997): 523.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

little scholarship has addressed the uniqueness of the German Christian heresy and its impact on the Protestant Church as it moved to force Nazi ideology among German Protestants. This thesis will argue that the *Deutsche Christen* movement was a unique heretical movement that could have only occurred in the confines of Nazi Germany. Furthermore, it will also argue that the *Deutsche Christen* movement was the largest asset to the Nazi doctrine of *Gleichschaltung* doctrine within the Protestant Church, and because of their push for conformity to Nazi ideology, the *Kirchenkampf* was formed.

Chapter Two: Source Analysis

As a whole, the Church Struggle has not been the most heavily researched area from a historiographical stand point. Many theologians have examined the doctrinal impacts of the church division. However, few historical scholars have made significant headway into the field of the German Church struggle. Without doubt, Doris Bergen has done the most extensive research in this area, particularly in relation to the German Christian heresy. In her influential work *Twisted Cross*, Bergen correctly identified the German Christian movement as heretical, or in her words, “anti-Christian.”¹¹ Bergen also outlined the core foundations of the German Christian movement. Doris Bergen’s work in identifying the doctrines of the German Christian movement allows one to formulate an argument about the uniqueness of the German Christian heresy.

Although Bergen’s research lays the foundation for the largest part of this thesis, the historiographical conclusions reached in this work are slightly different than those that she proposes. Bergen argues that the German Christian movement should be seen as heretical based on two of its formational doctrines, anti-Semitism and anti-feminism. While the Christian faith in no way condones anti-Semitic teaching, this teaching alone cannot constitute heresy because of Christianity’s long and unfortunate history of violence against Jewish people. Although I strongly agree with Bergen about the heretical status of the German Christian movement, there must be more concrete evidence of dissent from orthodoxy to substantiate such strong claims.

I will argue that the German Christian movement’s obsession with race, not necessarily its anti-Semitism, was the foremost reason that the movement descended from

¹¹ Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement Inside the Third Reich*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 192.

orthodox theology. The German Christians' ideas of anti-Semitism stemmed from a heretical conception of race and ethnicity. The German Christians not only proposed anti-Semitic teaching, but the exclusion of Jewish people from the church body and the complete ecclesiastical restructuring of the church based solely on their conceptions of *Volk*. This represents a bold, obvious, and unique heresy. In light of my conclusions, this thesis contributes to the small but growing historiographical work on the German Christian movement by examining the relationship between the Nazi concept of *Volk* and how other institutions adopted this concept in response to *Gleichschaltung*.

In order to argue for the uniqueness of the German Christian heresy, largely using Bergen's research and primary source documents such as letters and propaganda, I will examine the foundations of the German Christian heresy and place them in the broader context of German history. Primary sources such as the aforementioned ones help provide a historical framework for the German Christian movement. When viewed in the proper historical narrative it becomes obvious that the heresy of the German Christians was destined to form in the German nation and thrived as a heresy that most likely could have survived nowhere else.

As I argue for the uniqueness of the German Christian heresy and its inevitable formations in the German state, I step into the largest historiographical arena in the field of German history, and the *Sonderweg* debate. *Sonderweg* is a German word that means "special path." As the history of Germany has been examined, particularly in light of the twentieth century catastrophes, scholars developed a theory that places Germany on a special path that reveals the continuity of certain moments within the history of the German lands. Helmut Walser Smith defines the *Sonderweg* debate well when he writes,

“As that debate turned on the question of what made Germany peculiar, it led historians to concentrate on even slimmer strands of continuity, as continuity defined as what was unique in German history and how that uniqueness carried over and contributed to mid-twentieth century catastrophes.”¹² Some historians consider the *Sonderweg* so crucial to German history that they go so far as to claim that the entire German experience was absolutely different than that of other country in Europe. A.J.P. Taylor summarized this position well when in his benchmark work on German history, *The Course of German History*, he wrote, “Over the course of one thousand years the Germans have experience everything except normality.”¹³

When it comes to the German Christian heresy, it is impossible not to discuss the *Sonderweg*. The German Christian movement was born out of the continuities that existed in Germany long before the Nazi rise to power. Similarly, the German Christian heresy would not have been a sustainable movement outside the framework of Nazi Germany. It was the continuity between the components such as liberal theology, a tradition of anti-Semitism, and German fore fathers such as Martin Luther, combined with a Nazi state the allowed the German Christian movement to mature.¹⁴ This thesis contributes to the discussion of the German *Sonderweg* by arguing that there was a continuity in German history that led to the formations of the German Christian movement.

¹² Helmut Wallser Smith, *The Continuities of German History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 12.

¹³ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Course of German History*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1945), 1.

¹⁴ One note on Continuity. Continuity does not necessarily mean the direct determination of historical events (x leads to y). Instead continuity represents a loose thread that ties one historical event to another (y is possible because x happened). Smith clarifies well, “Continuity was not a straight line to murder and genocide.” (Smith, *The Continuities of German History*, 215).

One other respect in which my research differs from Bergen's is related to usefulness of the German Christian Movement to its parent movement, National Socialism. In her book, *Twisted Cross*, Bergen argues that the German Christians were largely ignored and irrelevant to the Nazi party. She even goes so far as to argue that the German Christians, "disagreed with Hitler."¹⁵ However, this claim seems somewhat short-sighted considering the ideological foundations of the German Christian movement. The movement had almost identical purposes to those of National Socialism and was only able to flourish under Nazi ideology. The relationship between the Nazi state and the German Christians is best described by Karl Barth, writing in 1934. Barth claimed, "For them the recognition of the 'Supremacy of the National Socialist state' is not only a civic duty, not only a matter of political conviction, but a matter of faith, and they demand a church that agrees with them on this."¹⁶ It would be even more unwise to deem the German Christian movement irrelevant to the National Socialists. Particularly in the year 1933,¹⁷ and even more so during the buildup to and during the Second World War, the German Christian movement was the single greatest promoter of Nazi ideology in the Protestant Church.

In order to prove my claims about the significance of the German Christian's movement for ideological conformity to Nazi principles I will use primary sources that show the obvious drive the German Christians felt to push the Protestant Church into line with Nazi doctrine. Among those primary sources are speeches, revised additions of the gospels, revised German hymnbooks, and other German Christian theological works.

¹⁵ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 1.

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *Theological Existence Today*, 1934. Translated in Mary M. Solberg, *A Church Undone: Documents from the German Christian Faith Movement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 89.

¹⁷ This was the year in which the Nazis used the German Christians to control the church government.

The most popular examples of these sources come from speeches from German Christian leaders such as Reinhold Kraus and other German pastors, as well as German Christian propaganda that was spread throughout the Third Reich. Whether or not the Nazi government recognized the work of the German Christians is irrelevant; the sources show that the German Christians were the most significant source of Nazi education within the Protestant Church.

The resources for information on the Confessing Church are just as scarce as those for the German Christian field. Most work on the Confessing Church has been made by far more theologically concerned writers. It is for this reason many theological journals are referenced in this work. Despite significant lack of research into the topic of the Confessing Church as a movement, there has been much written about individuals within the Confessing Church movement, namely Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Consequently, biographical accounts of Bonhoeffer's life are significant in the development of Confessing Church research, and in particular that of the Confessing Church's response to the Aryan Paragraph. Arguably, the most important Bonhoeffer biography comes from Bonhoeffer's close friend, Eberhard Bethge. In his book, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, Bethge shows the response of Bonhoeffer and other Confessing Church members to the German Christian's attempts of Nazifying the Church.¹⁸

The primary resources used in the research concerning the Confessing Church are made up of letters of correspondence between members, essays and sermons written by active members, and, perhaps most important, the foundational document of the

¹⁸ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

Confessing Church—the Barmen Declaration. These documents provide an in-depth and first-hand account of the Confessing Church’s account of the Church struggle.

Chapter Three: The German Christian Doctrines

In order to accurately understand the *Kirchenkampf* there must be an adequate understanding of the German Christian Faith Movement. The formations of the German Christian movement were unique in comparison to other heretical movements. This movement could have only been formed within the confines of the German nation and could have only thrived under the Nazi regime. In order to understand this unique heresy it is important to understand two pieces of information. First, the primary doctrines or beliefs of the German Christians must be accurately explained; second, the influences upon the German Christian movement should be examined to understand the historical context surrounding the movement.

Doctrines

The doctrines of the German Christian movement dissented from orthodox Protestant Christianity and became the primary reason for the ensuing *Kirchenkampf*. The German Christian movement was centered on multiple pillars that would prove more important than Jesus, the Bible, or nineteen hundred years of Orthodoxy. First, the movement was founded primarily upon obsessive focus on the German *Volk* (or race for their purposes). Secondly, the German Christians obsessively promoted a Nazified militant version of masculinity and worked to diminish femininity in the church. The last foundational doctrine of the German Christians movement was their Supra-confessional aspirations.

The doctrine of greatest value to the German Christian movement was the centrality of the German *Volk*. The German Christians' removed the cross from the center of their religion and replaced it with ideas of *Volkstum* (race). This made the notion of

race the authoritative reasoning behind the German Christian movement, which is why the German Christian movement and National Socialism are so intimately intertwined. At their core both movements are centered on *Volk*, and *Volkstum*. Without these central doctrines, both movements do not exist.

The German Christians' ideas about race were as authoritative as the Bible would have been in most other Reformed traditions.¹⁹ This represented the essence of the German Christian heresy to the great theologian Karl Barth. Barth wrote, "Our protest must be directed at the source of all these individual heresies: at the fact that, next to the holy scripture as the sole revelation from God, the German Christians claim *Volkstum*, its past and political present, as a second revelation."²⁰ The German Christians had found a new authority for the Christian life and it was not the Protestant Bible, it was the German *Volk*.

Race determined everything within the German Christian church. The German Christians felt that they had a divine responsibility to uphold the racial laws God had revealed to them. When the German Christians published their ten guidelines in 1932 most of them were centered on race. The seventh point read, "We see in race, *Volkstrum*, and nation, laws of life that God has bequeathed and entrusted to us. It is God's law that we concern ourselves with their preservation. Mixing of races, therefore, is to be opposed." Likewise, point nine read, "In the Mission to the Jews we see a serious threat to our *Volkstum*. That mission is the entryway for foreign blood into the body of our *Volk*. We reject missions to the Jews as long as Jews possess citizenship and hence the danger of racial fraud and bastardization exists. Marriage between Germans and Jews

¹⁹ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 23.

²⁰ Quoted in *Ibid*, 21.

particularly is to be forbidden.”²¹ The German Christian’s stance on intermarriage would be clarified in 1933 in *The Handbook of the German Christians*, there the movement declared a marriage of mixed nationalities to be against the will of God.²²

It would turn out that Anti-Semitism was the main way that German Christian ideas about race were expressed. It should come as no surprise that the German Christian movement readily accepted anti-Semitism. Despite Orthodox Christianity's claims as a religion of love and acceptance there is a tradition of contempt for Jews within church history. Gregory Baum summarizes this tradition well when he said that there has always been, “an abiding contempt among Christians for Jews and all things Jewish.”²³

This tradition of anti-Semitism within the church had even manifested itself in physical violence toward Jews. In writing about the history of the old church, church historian David MacCulloch recounts how Franciscan and Dominican monks were perhaps the largest, “exponents of anti-Semitism in medieval western Europe and were deeply involved in some of the worst violence against Jewish communities.”²⁴ Thus, with a tradition so intimately intertwined with anti-Semitism it should not surprise us that the German Christians so easily accepted hatred of the Jews. In fact, Walser Smith claims that German anti-Semitism became even more, “deeply structured,” when it was combined with the community of the church.²⁵

The German Christian movement had already fortified its position on race and anti-Semitism before the Nazi party took power in 1933. However, as the Nazi Party’s

²¹ Joachim Hossenfelder, *The Original Guidelines of the German Christian Faith Movement*, 1932. Translated and cited in Solberg, *A Church Undone*, 43-52.

²² *The Handbook of the German Christians*, 1933. Translated in Solberg, *A Church Undone*, 172.

²³ Saul S. Friedman, *The Oberammergau Passion Play: A Lance Against Civilization*, (Carbondale, 1984,) 119.

²⁴ David MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004,) 24.

²⁵ Smith, *The Continuities of German History*, 220.

power grew stronger, the German Christians sought to improve their standing with their parent movement by showing their willingness to persecute Jews. The German Christian movement sought to further exclude Jews from church life and keep the church “racially pure” when adherents of the movement opened the Institute for Research into and elimination of Jewish Influence in German Church life.²⁶ The German Christian movement also protected its membership and its *Volk* from Jewish “defilement” with certain screening precautions. In 1933 the applications for memberships within German Christian movement required a pledge of Aryan descent.²⁷ Then, one year later, in 1935 a newly adapted Combat and Faith Movement within the German Christian organization included a more detailed clause that proclaimed, “I declare that I am of Aryan blood, as well as that of both of my parents and my grandparents are of pure Aryan blood.”²⁸

The discrimination against Jews by the German Christians grew stride in stride with Nazi discrimination. The Nazis began to legally discriminate against Jews in 1935 with the advent of the Nuremberg Laws, which legally defined Jewishness as a race. After the Nuremberg laws, many German Christians began to demand new churches where congregations of “baptized Jews” could worship.²⁹ The Nuremberg Laws ensured that Jews were officially segregated from the rest of German society. The German Christians wanted to make this true in the church life as well.

In order to reconcile their faith with this harsh anti-Semitism and church structure built on race, the German Christians tried to purge Christianity of all things Jewish. This would prove to be an infinite project and almost altogether futile. They accordingly

²⁶ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 24.

²⁷ Solberg, *A Church Undone*, 177.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Henrich Detel to Hossenfelder, 16 Sept. 1935, Bresalu, BA Potsdam, DC-I, 1933-35. Cited and translated in Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 333.

removed certain orthodox elements of Christianity and changed others to fit their conception of the divine church structure. One element of Orthodox Christianity that was almost entirely removed from the faith in the German Christian movement was the existence of the Old Testament. The German Christians rejected the Old Testament by denying its canonicity.³⁰ In the 1933 Handbook of the German Christians the movement called the Old Testament “the apostasy of the Jews and in that apostasy, their sin.”³¹

In other cases the German Christian movement did not deny canonicity, it simply rewrote scripture to provide more anti-Semitic tones. In 1936 the Protestant Bishop of Bremen tried to fortify the concept of anti-Semitic Christianity by publishing the first edition of the anti-Semitic gospel of John.³² Others rewrote the gospels and excluded any references to the Old Testament and any remarks of Jesus that seemed to give approval to the Jews. Perhaps, the most shocking change that the movement produced was its portrayal of Jesus. After the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, the movement was increasingly interested in “the question of whether was a Jew by blood.”³³ To the German Christians Jesus could not have possibly been a Jew, because Jesus opposed Judaism. Thus, Jesus was adapted to fit the needs of the German Christian movement.

The German Christians redefined Jesus with one simple claim; he did not have Jewish ancestry. The German Christians claimed Jesus was actually an Aryan. The movement formulated that Jesus had been born to an Aryan Tribe in Galilee, and it got support from theologians such as Emanuel Hirsch and theorists like Houston Stewart Chamberlain. The core of the German Christians Christology centered on the

³⁰ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 143.

³¹ Solberg, *A Church Undone*, 174.

³² Bergen, “Anti-Semitism in Germany,” 334.

³³ Organization for German Christianity, *Jesus and the Jews*, 1936. Translated in Solberg, *A Church Undone*, 435.

presumption of Jesus' anti-Semitism.³⁴ In this movement Jesus was not only Aryan; he was the Arch Anti-Semite. Many in the movement followed Joseph Goebbels calling Jesus the, "first great enemy of the Jews."³⁵ Thus, the German Christians were able to call themselves a Christian movement; however, the Jesus they identified with was, by all accounts, a historical fallacy.

The anti-Semitism and *volkish* obsession within the German Christian movement is unique because it only could have formed and flourished under conditions that were equally obsessed with the *Volk* and equally anti-Semitic. Those conditions were absolutely present in Nazi Germany. Thus, the German Christian movement became a micro version of National Socialism within the Protestant Church, discriminating against Jews and promoting the concept of the Aryan *Volk*.

Another foundational doctrine that made the German Christian movement unique in its heresy was its obsessive promotion of militant masculinity. The traditional Protestant Church did indeed have a hierarchy where gender roles were important, but in the German Christian movement gender roles fed on a special time of hierarchy, one fueled by Hitler's militarism. The German Christian church aimed to include all Aryan Germans, but within that inclusive Aryan Church the German Christians envisioned a hierarchy based solely on gender.³⁶ The German Christian movement preached a masculine form of Christianity that was intended to attract young men, particularly men in uniform.³⁷ This concept of the manly church was intended to redeem the church from

³⁴ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 156.

³⁵ Joseph Goebbels, *Michael* (Verlag Fraz Eher, 1934), 82. (English: *Michael: A Novel*, Trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Amok Press, 1987).

³⁶ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 61.

³⁷ Bergen, "Chaplaincy and the Christian Movement," 524.

the feminine view that it was part of the weak and feminine home front that cost Germany the war in 1918.³⁸

Germany had suffered a humiliating defeat at the end of the First World War, and many maintained that Germany had only lost because the people at home were too weak to finish the war. This forms part of the famous conspiracy known as, “the stab in the back.”³⁹ After the First World War, the German Christians adopted Nazi principles of masculinity and the movement began to teach that men should act with firm masculinity in both word and deed. Bergen explains how the movement began to become more masculine with its vocabulary, writing , “Statements from the movement, in particular those made by leading men, often used the adjectives *mannlich* and *mannhaft* to modify the nouns church, Christianity, and faith.”⁴⁰ The German Christians not only attached positive adjectives to the promote masculinity in church life they also used negative descriptions of femininity to ostracize men who did not measure up to the standard of German Christian masculinity. Words such as *weichlich* (weak) were used in contrast to *mannlich* to show the superior qualities. By attaching masculine adjectives to the Church the German Christians made attempts to associate the church with images of masculinity and manliness. The language of embracing struggle also added the German Christians’ masculine vocabulary. Hossenfelder, in battle language, called for the German Christians to embrace struggle and fighting as part of natural life in his 1933 work *Our Struggle*.⁴¹

³⁸ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 66.

³⁹ Paul von Hindenburg's Testimony before the Parliamentary Investigatory Committee ["The Stab in the Back"] (November 18, 1919). From GHDI website. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3829. Accessed January 18, 2016.

⁴⁰ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 62.

⁴¹ Joachim Hossenfelder, *Our Struggle*, 1933. Translated and cited in Solberg, *A Church Undone*, 230-248.

In order to provide the church with visual images, or deeds, of masculinity the German Christians expressed the idea of combat within the church. The connotations of manliness included a plethora of soldierly traits. Men in the German Christian church should, “fight ruthlessly, exhibit hardness and heroism, and follow orders with discipline and enthusiasm.”⁴² Over and over again, German Christian pastors called for men to embrace their masculine destiny. In 1935, one German Christian pastor specifically called from his church to be, “a church of men, not a church of women of both sexes.”⁴³

It should be obvious that the German Christians’ concepts of masculinity are almost synonymous with National Socialism’s ideas of manliness. In fact, German Christians believed that National Socialism perfected the ideal German man. As the Nazi’s promoted the ideal man, the German Christians attached themselves to Nazi manliness in order to define a masculinity fit for a German Christian. For example, in 1933 Hossenfelder fondly proclaimed the German Christian movement the, “storm troopers of the church,” clarifying, “both groups fight in the spirit of National Socialism for the manly external and internal realization of the Third Reich.”⁴⁴

The German Christian movement also had specifically designated roles for women almost identical to those of National Socialism. While the men were supposed to be the epitome of a German soldier and masculinity, the women were resigned to the offices of the familial roles of wives and mothers. One historian summarizes the popular stereotype that dominated gender roles writing, “Women were (supposedly) more

⁴² Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 63.

⁴³ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 63.

⁴⁴ Hossenfelder, “DerSonntagdes Hausvaters,” *Evangelium im Dritten Reich*, no. 49 (Dec. 1933). Translated and cited in *Twisted Cross*, 516.

emotional, less rational, and more spiritual than men.”⁴⁵ Because of their supposed superior spirituality the women were made the moral compass of the German Christian movement.

When all of the German Christians ideas about Gender roles are considered, the dissentions from orthodoxy become clear. Traditional Christian doctrine teaches that men and women were of complete equal dignity, both made in the image of God (*Imago Dei*). While gender roles are not necessarily unique to the German Christian movement, German Christians’ were unique from other Christian movements in their promotion of militant masculinity and suppression of femininity. Women were suppressed in many aspects of societal life, but promoted as virtue bearers. Men, on the other hand, were crude and soldierly, showing no signs of emotions or anything else that could be mistaken for femininity.⁴⁶ This promotion of a superior sexuality is nothing short of heresy.

The last foundational doctrine of the German Christian movement was its supra-confessional position. The goal of a united confessional church was an unavoidable byproduct of the German Christian’s beliefs about race. If the church were to truly be the “people’s church” it would have to encompass all the people of the German *Volk*. The movement saw divisions such as denominations and or sects as a “renunciation of God.”⁴⁷ Although the majority of Germany was Protestant, almost one-third of the German population was Catholic, a fraction that represented twenty million people. Therefore, the German Christians needed to produce an ideal supra-confessional church

⁴⁵ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 125.

⁴⁶ See George Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴⁷ Otto Brokelschen, *What do German Christians Want?: 118 Questions and Answers*. Translated in Solberg, *A Church Undone*, 418.

that found its identity on German nationalism and the purity of their race rather than Catholic or Protestant doctrine. This fairy tale church would prove to be an unattainable aspiration.

In order to unite Protestants and Catholics, German Christians initially tried to focus on the things that the two confessions shared to provide a common ground for union. However, the German Christians would soon find that very little common ground existed. The German Christians began their quest for unity by examining common rituals; though, in most cases, rituals provided stark differences rather than similarity. The Catholics practiced seven sacraments; the Protestants practiced two in most cases. The Catholics practiced very strict services called Mass which centered on the sacrament of Communion; the Protestants were far less strict in their worship, centering it on the exposition of the Bible. The Catholics practiced public confession; the Protestants emphasized personal prayer. The quest for unity based upon similar rituals was seemingly hopeless. However, if the German Christians could not find an example of a shared ritual they would create one. One German Christian publication offered new forms of rituals to promote Christian unity among Germans. However, the only concrete example that he could offer was prayer using the Lord's Prayer as a model.⁴⁸

When the common ground could not be found in the ritual of the two confessions the German Christians often turned to conceptions of the state to provide a sense of unity. Perhaps the love of the nation could do what the individual churches could not. At one German Christian event the speaker proclaimed that confessional status or denomination was unimportant. What mattered, the speaker insisted, was whether or not members

⁴⁸ Fr. De Fries, Dortmund., "Aus der Bewegung," Briefe an Deutsche Christen, no. 17 (Sept. 1936): 195. Quoted in *Twisted Cross*, 104.

believed in the state of the, “eternal Germany.”⁴⁹ Indeed many advocates of the supra-confessional church inside the German Christian movement believed that defense of the state itself would serve the incentive for Catholics and Protestants alike to unite under the banner of One People—One Faith.⁵⁰

The German Christians did not rely only on love of the nation and rituals to provide the ground for confessional union. The German Christians believed that a common enemy would serve as a kick start toward confessional unity. That perfect enemy was already present in Germany—the Jews. Hostility toward the Jews connected the Protestant and the Catholics like few other things could. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. The Nazis and the German Christians used this old truth to their advantage. Otto Brokelschen summarizes the German Christian position well, noting, “The National Church Union of German Christians engages for the defeat and removal of everything having a Jewish or foreign spirit in church teachings.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, in the end not even this shared anti-Semitism would prove to be enough overcome the confessional differences within German churches. Some scholars have even argued that it only provided more grounds for confessional divide.⁵²

While the German Christians cannot be called heretical solely for their desire to see a united Christian church, the way in which they approached this goal screams heresy. The German Christians were completely willing to disregard doctrines, of both confessions, in order to unite the church. Orthodoxy was thrown to the wolves in the German Christians’ attempts to unite the church.

⁴⁹ No Author, “Schnellbrief für Glieder der Bekennenden Kirche,” no 21 (Berlin-Dahlem, 1 August 1935, 1. From “Anti-Semitism in Germany,” 337.

⁵⁰ Brokelschen, *What do German Christians Want?*, 418.

⁵¹ Brokelschen, *What do German Christians Want?*, 418.

⁵² Bergen, “Anti-Semitism in Germany,” 331.

Chapter Four: The Influence on the German Christian Movement

The German Christian movement was built around the foundational doctrines of *Volkish* obsession, Nazi militant masculinity, and supra-confessional aspirations. German Christians defined Christianity by race and exclusion of Jewish people. They formed their church structure based on obsessive masculinity and suppressive gender ideals. Lastly they defined themselves as a supra confessional church that sought to unite the true German church encompassing the entire German *Volk*. These three doctrines alone make the German Christian movement unique, but the historical context in which the movement formed, and the historical influences that shaped it, proved crucial to the formation and survival of the movement and make the German Christian movement truly unique to their time period and geographical area. In essence this uniqueness means that the German Christian Faith Movement could not have formed upon such radical doctrines and sustained itself upon them in any other time period and in any other geographical area outside of Nazi Germany. The German Christian movement represents the very idea of the continuity of German history. An examination of the historical influences will prove this to be true.

The German Christians formed within the borders of the German nation. There are three key movements and people that are found within Germany that shaped and influenced the manifestation of the German Christian Faith Movement. The first influence upon the German Christians was the father of the Reformation, Martin Luther. In Germany, Christianity itself is tied to Martin Luther. As Metaxas writes, “His (Luther’s) authority to define what it meant to be German (and) Christian was

unquestioned.”⁵³ Luther’s authority to define such large roles would be advantageous to the German Christians as they looked to Luther to provide legitimacy to their own radical doctrines. In Luther the German Christians found enough anti-Jewishness to validate their ideas about race and exclusion of the Jews from the ecclesiastical structure. Metaxas points out Luther’s history and attitude toward the Jews is “confusing, and not to say, deeply disturbing.”⁵⁴

In the beginning of Luther’s career, his attitude toward the Jews was somewhat progressive, especially considering the time in which he lived. Luther never doubted that a Jew could become a Christian. There are even cases when Luther lamented the way in which modern Christians treated the Jewish people. In one essay commenting on the Christians’ bigotry, Luther wrote that had he been born a Jew he would have rather, “become a hog than a Christian.”⁵⁵ Although Luther was initially favorable toward the Jews, as his health began to unravel his attitude toward the Jewish people, along with his attitude toward almost everything else, deteriorated.⁵⁶

Luther struggled with gastrointestinal issues his whole life. Hemorrhoids and constipation alongside an already unhealthy German diet caused many days of intense pain for Luther. By 1528, Luther conspired in his head that Jews had tried to assassinate him after he had an unfortunate digestive episode following a kosher meal. As his health problems ballooned so too did his nasty attitude toward the Jewish people. It was in this context that he wrote “Von den Juden und Iren Lugen” (On the Jews and Their Lies). In

⁵³ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 91.

⁵⁴ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 91.

⁵⁵ Martin, Luther, "MARTIN LUTHER, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew" (1523)," Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, accessed April 2, 2015. <http://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/primary-texts-from-the-history-of-the-relationship/272-luther-1523>.

⁵⁶ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 98.

this essay it was obvious that Luther's feelings towards the Jews had come full circle. At one point in the essay Luther described them as a "base and whoring people."⁵⁷ The man who had once admired the Jews sank into a dark abyss of hatred.

The German Christians often quoted Luther as the foundation for their bitter anti-Semitism. One German Christian pastor went so far as to say, "In Martin Luther we have received the spiritual foundations for German Christianity."⁵⁸ It was exceptionally easy to justify their claims about Luther. To do so they just turned to their favorite Lutheran work, "On the Jews and Their Lies." Often times Luther was presented as the first champion of German Christian anti-Semitism.⁵⁹ Luther's attitudes toward the Jews in his latter life formed the perfect example of the ideal anti-Semitic attitude of a German Christian. In fact, one German Christian publication called for all German Christians to embrace an attitude of hardness toward the Jews similar to that of Martin Luther's.⁶⁰ The German Christians so longed for the Christians in Germany to adopt Luther's attitude that there were even religious instruction books in circulation by 1940 that quoted Luther's direction to "set their synagogues and schools on fire, and whatever will not burn, heap dirt upon."⁶¹ Without this long standing history of intolerance and hatred the German Christians would not have been able to sustain their movement.

Another major influence that made the formations and flourishing of the German Christian movement possible was the invention of liberal theology and Biblical criticism. Liberal theology was birthed in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century and

⁵⁷ Martin Luther, "Anti-Semitism: Martin Luther - "The Jews & Their Lies," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed April 2, 2015. http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/anti-semitism/Luther_on_Jews.html.

⁵⁸ Siegfried Leffler, *Christ in Germany's Third Reich: The Nature, the Path, and the Goal of the German Christian Church Movement*, 353. See Solberg, *A Church Undone*, 353.

⁵⁹ Bergen, "Anti-Semitism in Germany," 333.

⁶⁰ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 28.

⁶¹ Bergen, "Anti-Semitism in Germany," 333.

flourished under theologians such as Adolf von Harnack. Harnack had himself questioned the canonicity of the Old Testament long before the German Christian movement formed. Some historians have even claimed that Harnack maintained the Old Testament should be removed from the Bible altogether.⁶²

Another famous liberal theologian that would in time be beneficial to the German Christian cause was Emanuel Hirsch. In Hirsch's most notable work, *Deutschlands Schicksal*, he took a series of speeches delivered to his students and formed a history of the German lands from a theistic perspective. However, his liberalism and *Volkish* obsession were obvious. In the introduction to his work he proposed a theme of unity that the German Christians would later adopt in efforts to overcome confessional divides. Hirsch wrote "the only point of unity in Germany, for the more noble among us is the concern for Germany's fate."⁶³ Hirsch would later go on to rewrite three of the four gospels to provide less Hebraisms and Jewish elements.⁶⁴

The liberal theologians of Harnack and Hirsch's day described themselves as historically-critical. Theological historical criticism was born in Germany. Historically critical theologians found it unscientific to speculate on things outside of the text of scripture itself. The nature of God was not important, as what mattered were the texts and the historical events those texts revealed. However, what these theologians failed to understand was that when their study was separated from the nature of God, they left God open to be refashioned by whatever they deemed relevant in the texts. Instead of letting the text reveal the true nature of God, these theologians formed a picture of the

⁶² Robert Erickson, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 50.

⁶³ Erickson, *Theologians under Hitler*, 127.

⁶⁴ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 127.

God they wanted by making sacred religious texts changeable and optional. Opponents of the liberal theologians, such as Karl Barth, would later argue that the text were not only historical document, but “Agents of Revelation.” Therefore, they could not be subject to change.

Such a rich history of biblical criticism and liberal theology made it exceptionally easy for the German Christians to decide for themselves what should and should not be a part of the Bible. The German Christians were not doing anything new when they rewrote scripture or rejected it all together. The history of liberal theology in Germany made it possible for a movement that rejected large portions of the Bible and rewrote other parts to flourish within a society. Indeed, the field of historically critical theology allowed German Christendom to easily redefine the nature of God in order to benefit the German Christian movement and National Socialism. When the German Christians scratched large parts of sacred texts they were simply adopting an element that already existed within their society.

The life and legacy of Martin Luther, as well as the traditions of liberal theology that existed in Germany, were exceptionally influential to the formation and survival of the German Christian movement. Yet, no other movement was as influential to the German Christian Faith Movement as the National Socialist Party. The German Christians were already an established movement before the National Socialists came to power in 1933. Nonetheless, the movement was absolutely irrelevant before the rise of the Nazis. The National Socialists gave the German Christian Movement its purpose for existence. The very life of the faith movement stemmed from the Nazis. Furthermore, the Nazi party gave the German Christian party a certain amount of legitimacy that it had not

had before and would not have had otherwise. With the Nazis proclaiming the same doctrines as the faith movement, it gave the German Christians a significant amount of influence. As this legitimacy grew, the German Christians attached themselves to the Nazi party and grew bolder in their already controversial doctrines.

As the National Socialist Party began to assert its ideas of anti-Semitism the German Christians began to gain confidence in their proclamations of hatred toward the Jews. Their conceptions of *Volk* and anti-Semitism were in large part formed to please their parent movement. There is also no doubt that the German Christians' obsessive promotion of militant masculinity and restrictive femininity were further cemented by the Nazi's ideas of the home front and an ideal masculine German soldier.⁶⁵

The supra-confessional aspirations of the German Christian movement stem from the Nazi movement as well. The National Socialists' main goal was to unite the German *Volk* as one. Although the German Christian movement was established before the Nazis came to power, it is absolutely certain that it would not have flourished had it not been for the Nazi movement. In fact, this movement could not have been produced in any other historical context outside of the one Germany offered through Martin Luther's legacy, liberal theology, and the Nazi party.

With its foundations firmly rooted in Nazism and its goals seemingly identical to Nazism's, the German Christian Faith Movement would prove to be useful, at least initially, to the Nazi party. With the National Socialists attempting to bring the totality of German society into line with its radical racism the Nazis were going to need help in institutions across the nation. One institution that would be difficult to infiltrate would be the Protestant Church; however, with heretical German Christians on board they would

⁶⁵ Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland* (New York: Routledge, 1987).

have a driving force of Nazification in the Protestant Church. Thus, the German Christians would become the supreme educators of the Nazis in the German Evangelical Church.

Chapter Five: The German Christians Become Nazi Educators

In order to understand the *Kirchenkampf* and its lasting significance it is essential to understand how the German Christians acted as the main force of Nazi education within the Protestant Church. The German Christians were, without a doubt, the driving force for Nazi *Gleichschaltung* in the Protestant church. To the Nazi party, and to Hitler in particular, the churches within Germany were seen as tools that could be used to promote Nazi ideals after the initial synchronization with Nazi beliefs. Thus, it would have done Hitler little good to totally destroy the churches, instead it would be easier to reform them and benefit from the cultural influence they possessed.⁶⁶ With this insight it is not at all surprising that Hitler called for national church elections to be held on July 23, 1933. This was only seven months after his appointment to the office of chancellor.

The church elections of 1933 accomplished two goals that would be pivotal for Hitler if he wished to bring the Protestant Church into line with his national goals. The first goal the July 23 elections accomplished was the formation of a *Reichskirche* (Reich Church). With Hitler's church officials voted into office it was now a seamless transition from the twenty-eight regional churches within Germany to become one national church. The church elections also planted the Reich Church firmly in control of the German Christians. All but three of the nation's twenty-eight regional Protestant Churches had governing bodies that were dominated by German Christians after the elections.⁶⁷ With the German Christians in control of the Protestant Church, the process of ideological conformity soon followed.

⁶⁶ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 166.

⁶⁷ Bergen, "Chaplaincy and the Christian Movement," 526

While Hitler's church elections appeared to give the people of Germany a choice in the leadership of the church, it was only an illusion. Hitler methodically planned out the elections to work toward his goals. Bonhoeffer biographer, Eric Metaxas, sums up Hitler's church elections well, writing,

“There was little question who would win. Intimidation of every kind was brought to bear on the situation, with the serious threat that anyone opposing the German Christians could be accused of treason. And there was only one week between the announcement and the elections, making it virtually impossible to organize a viable opposition.”⁶⁸

Hitler's plan worked well. The German church hierarchy was now firmly in the hands of the German Christians led by their newly elected *Reichsbischof*, Ludwig Muller. By all accounts Muller was a gruff and crude individual who, “reduced his own power by his total incompetence.”⁶⁹ A combination of Muller's devout Nazi membership, military background and close relationship with Hitler made him the perfect candidate for the head of the Nazi state church.⁷⁰ Despite Muller's almost total incompetence, he would become the vocal chords for the German Christian movement as it sought to convert the rest of the Protestant church to Nazism. As Bergen argued “His coarse, earthly manner and conspicuous enthusiasm for the Nazi cause typified the German Christian leadership style.”⁷¹ Following the lead of their elders in the church hierarchy, the lay people within the German Christian movement began to promote their doctrine in the church.

It is crucial to understand that the German Christians were sincere adherents of the Protestant Church; however, their ultimate goal was to create a seamless connection

⁶⁸ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 180.

⁶⁹ Bergen, “Germany is our Mission—Christ is our Strength,” 524.

⁷⁰ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 16.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 17.

between National Socialism and Christianity.⁷² In order to make this connection the German Christians began to teach their foundational doctrines of anti-Semitism, anti-feminism, militant masculinity, liberal theology, supra-confessionalism, and nationalism. Orthodox doctrines such as the nature of the atonement and the use of the sacraments mattered little to none in the eyes of the German Christians. To this heretical movement all that mattered was advancing Nazi *Gleichschaltung* and bringing the rest of the Protestant Church into line.

Many events reveal the German Christian attempts to educate the rest of Protestant Germany about Nazi ideals, but one event defines the German Christians educational drive within the Reich and the church. That event was the German Christian rally the night of November 13, 1933 at the *Sportpalast* in Berlin. Twenty-thousand people packed into the *Sportpalast* on the cold November night to support the German Christian cause. The stadium was decorated to match the German Christian propaganda that was about to be promoted with banners that read, “One Reich. One People. One Church.”⁷³ The key speaker for this rally was a high school teacher and German Christian leader in Berlin named Reinhold Krause. In 1933 Krause revealed the true colors of the German Christian movement as he took the stage and blasted certain pillars of the Christian faith as unacceptable marks of Jewish influence. Krause ranted against the Old Testament, the Apostle Paul, and the symbol of the cross.⁷⁴ Fundamental elements and doctrines of the Christian faith were expendable and offensive to Krause and many German Christians. Although the German Christian movement had worn a more

⁷²Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 171.

⁷³Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 193.

⁷⁴Kyle Jantzen, *Faith and Fatherland: Parish Politics in Hitler's Germany*, (Fortress Press, 2008), 4-5.

moderate mask until this point, the heart behind the German Christian movement was revealed that November night.

It was evident that Krause's Nazi ideology was far more influential in the formation of his theology than the Christian Bible. Krause's attack on the Old Testament was based on the idea that the Protestant Church needed to become an organization that embraced and welcomed all National Socialist members. Reinhold said,

We must win over the flood of those returning to the church. For that to happen, those people need to feel at home in the church. The first step in developing that feeling of belonging is liberation from everything un-German in the worship service and the confessions-- liberation from the Old Testament with its cheap Jewish morality of exchange and its stories of cattle traders and pimps.⁷⁵

Krause's attempts to promote German Christian doctrine did not stop with attacks on the Old Testament. He soon turned to the center piece of the Christian religion, Jesus. Krause said that Jesus too must be presented as, "corresponding entirely with the demands of National Socialism."⁷⁶ *The New York Times* reported that Krause began to call for a "return to a heroic conception of Jesus" before asking Germans to picture Jesus only as a, "fearless fighter and leader."⁷⁷ The foundational doctrines of the Christian faith proved to not be very foundational to the German Christians. After Krause proposed to redefine Jesus he turned his attention to the cross and crucifixion of Jesus. A San Antonio newspaper reporting three days after the German Christian rally stated that Krause even

⁷⁵ Reinhold Krause, *Rede des Gauobmannes der Glaubensbewegung "Deutsche Christen" in Groß-Berlin Dr. Krause*: gehalten im Sportpalast am 13. November 1933 (nach doppeltem stenographischen Bericht), 6-7. (Translation Belongs to Doris Bergen. Cited in *Twisted Cross*)

⁷⁶ Reinhold Krause, *Rede des Gauobmannes der Glaubensbewegung "Deutsche Christen" in Groß-Berlin Dr. Krause*: gehalten im Sportpalast am 13. November 1933 (nach doppeltem stenographischen Bericht), 6-7. (Translation Belongs to Doris Bergen. Cited in *Twisted Cross*).

⁷⁷ "Revision of Scripture is urged on Germans", *The New York Times*, November 14, 1933.

went so far as to say that Germans should not, “exaggerate Christ Crucified.”⁷⁸ Over and over again Krause demanded that the Protestant Church cleanse itself of all weaknesses and hints of Jewishness and come into full doctrinal agreement with the Nazi party. The stenographic record shows that the German Christian audience had sustained applause as Krause promoted his Nazi doctrine behind the disguise of a German Christian platform.⁷⁹

Reinhold Krause’s speech at the *Sportpalast* was the German Christian’s first attempt at mass education of the German Protestant population. The German Christian movement hoped to use the enthusiasm generated from the rally to move the Protestant Church in direct coherence with the Nazi party. However, the German Christians miscalculated the readiness of the German population to receive such a radical transformation of the Christian faith. Instead of gaining traction in the Protestant Church the educational rally at *Sportpalast* cost the German Christians initial support from the German Protestant population. Newspapers across Germany ran the story of the radical German Christian’s ideal and doctrines. According to Eric Metaxas:

It was one thing to wish for a church that was relevant to the German people and that inspired Germans to rise for their defeat at the hand of the international community and the godless Communists. But to go as far as Krause had gone, mocking the Bible and St. Paul and so much else, was too much.⁸⁰

Following Krause’s fumble, many moderate members of the German Christian party withdrew their membership. One Security Service report claimed that two hundred and fifty pastors quit the movement in Württemberg alone.⁸¹ Despite the initial response of horror to the German Christians’ radical ideas, the night at the *Sportpalast* should not

⁷⁸ “Nazi German Christian Leaders Reaffirm That Semitic Influences Must Be Kept Out of New Church”, *San Antonio Express*, November 16, 1933, 1-3.

⁷⁹ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 17.

⁸⁰ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 194.

⁸¹ “Lagebericht Mai/Juni 1934,” T-175/415/2940753. (Translation belongs to Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross*)

be seen as an educational failure on the part of the German Christian movement. Nor should any historian think, as some do, that the night at the *Sportpalast* reduced the German Christian movement to fragments or sentenced their project to doom.⁸² Despite the German Christian's miscalculation of the German populations' readiness to receive such radical doctrines, the night at the *Sportpalast* served as an educational event that revealed to the German population, and primarily the German protestants, what a religion intermixed with Nazism would look like. It would look exactly like what Reinhold Krause had described. Indeed, by the late 1930's Krause's once appalling ideas were, "common currency."⁸³

The German Christians also found other ways to educate the German population outside of public rallies. The German Christian Movements also capitalized on the office of military chaplaincy for educational opportunities. At one time it was assumed that German Christians had little to no presence inside the office of German military chaplains. In fact, Eberhard Muller once stated that German Christians were an "insignificant minority," who, "struggled without success for influence."⁸⁴ However, more recent research seems to prove the opposite. Bergen argues that the German Christians were far from irrelevant in the military chaplaincy.⁸⁵ One way the German Christians spread their pro-Nazi Christianity through the military was in their use of religious literature.

⁸² Doris Bergen and Eric Metaxas make this argument in book examining the German Christian movement. See Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 18. and Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 194.

⁸³ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 17.

⁸⁴ Eberhard Muller, "Feldischof unter Hitler," in Hermann Kunst ed, *Gott labt sich nicht spotten Franz Dohrmann, Feldbischof unter Hitler*, (Hanover: Germany, 1983), 23. Translated and cited in Doris Bergen, "Chaplaincy and the Christian Movement"

⁸⁵ Bergen, "Chaplaincy and the Christian Movement," 523.

It has been well documented that the German Christians were willing to conform to the Nazi ideas of race by jettisoning the Old Testament. This was even truer in the military. The German military faced severe restrictions on religious literature delivered to the front after 1942, but some materials were available, mainly New Testaments.⁸⁶ Although the German Christian movement did not control the printing and regulation of the religious material, the use of only the New Testaments does suggest, as Bergen observes, a compromise between the propaganda ministry and the German Christian agenda.⁸⁷

Another example of the religious literature promoted by the German Christian military chaplains is the *Evangelisches Feldesangbuch* (Protestant Soldier's Songbook). This hymnal contained fifty-six hymns, twenty-six songs, the Lord's Prayer, and a prayer for the *Führer*, *Volk*, and military.⁸⁸ This song book was filled with elements that fueled the German Christian message. Many of the hymns in the Songbook displayed the German Christians preoccupation with purging Hebraisms and references to the Old Testament from their Protestant hymns.⁸⁹ All of the songs within the *Feldesangbuch* were purified of any "Hosannas" and "Hallelujahs". There was one exception, that being the "Hallelujah" found in the second stanza of the famous Christmas carol "Silent Night."⁹⁰ The Songbook was filled with standard German Christian hymns. They promoted loyalty to God, Hitler, and the Reich. At the end of the "Holy God We Praise Thy Name," the words were added, "May our slogan ever be: "Loyalty to the Führer, the

⁸⁶ Bergen, "Chaplaincy and the Christian Movement," 528.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 529.

⁸⁸ *The Evangelisches Feldgesangbuch*, (Berlin,1939).

⁸⁹ Bergen, "Chaplaincy and the Christian Movement," 530.

⁹⁰ "Stille Nacht," *Evangelisches Feldeesangbuch*, 59.

Volk, and the Reich.”⁹¹ With things like the intentional omission of the Old Testament and the racially purified hymnals, the German Christians served as Nazi religious educators among the Protestant soldiers on the front lines.

Another form of German Christian education is found in the writings of German Christian leaders. Perhaps the most famous of these is the work of Reich Bishop Ludwig Muller. In 1936 Muller published, *God's Word in German*. In his work Muller rewrote the entire Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' instructional words became Muller's instructional words. Christ's words, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," became Muller's words, "Happy is the man who is always sociable. He will amount to something in the world.”⁹² Writings such as Muller's reveal the extent to which German Christian leaders were willing to go to educate Germans with proper Nazi theology.

There is one more form of education that must be examined; the most obvious avenue for German Christian propaganda: sermons. When the German Christians stood to preach, everyone in hearing distance of their words would be indoctrinated with the German Christian heresy. It was typical for German Christian pastors to preach hate filled messages against Judaism and communism. One German Christian's sermon from 1942 stated:

Judaism has been dashed to pieces on the person of Christ. And the Soviet state too shatter on Christ, this state that crucified Christ a second time that erected a monument to Judas Iscariot-- and has demanded the blood of thousands upon thousands of martyrs. So we stand in the midst of the fires of the world as protectors and defenders of the German Christian legacy. We stand before God as Germans and as Christians.⁹³

⁹¹ "Grober Gott", wir Loben Dich," no. 19, Evangelisches Feldesangbuch, 36.

⁹² Ludwig Muller, *God's Word in German*, 386. In Solberg, *A Church Undone*, 386.

⁹³ Niemann Christentum und Deutschtum Predigt im Reformationsmonat, Theologischer Arbeitsbrief, October 1, 1942. Translated and cited in Bergen, "Chaplaincy and the Christian Movement," 10-13.

Although the German Christian pastors preached particularly hateful messages, they also advanced their messages just as much through what they prohibited in their sermons. German Christian military chaplain superintendent Heinrich Lonicer supervised the messages that other chaplains preached. One historian reports that in 1942 Lonicer criticized a chaplain's sermon as, "too Christian." He claimed it was acceptable to "preach God but not Christ." Lonicer also objected to praying in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."⁹⁴

The German Christians were the National Socialists of the Protestant Church. When the Nazis began bringing German society into line with their ideology the Protestant Church was not exempt from expectation of conformity. However, the Nazis did not have to expend much energy to promote Nazi doctrine in the churches. They found a movement all too willing to take up the swastika and move it to predominance in the Protestant Church. The German Christians were nothing more than Nazi educators who hid themselves behind the cross of Christ but pledged loyalty to Hitler and Volk. Without doubt, the German Christian Faith Movement was the driving force of *Gleichschaltung* in the German Protestant Church.

⁹⁴ Bergen, "Chaplaincy and the Christian Movement," 525.

Chapter Six: Nazi Resistance and the Confessing Church

The German Christians may represent the worst of the Christian faith during the Third Reich, but thankfully there were many Germans who stood up to fight the rising tide of National Socialism. A group of German Pastors and Christians stood together against the heresy of the racially motivated German Christians and declared allegiance to orthodoxy and Christ alone. Much of the German Christians' early activity caught the attention of more conservative pastors and theologians within the German Church; however, the German Christians' preoccupations with race and *Volks* seem to be the turning points on which the *Kirchenkampf* was formed.

With new German Christian leaders firmly in control of the direction of the church a push toward National Socialist ideals began. In September, the newly elected leaders attempted to apply the restrictions of the Aryan Paragraph to the Protestant Church.⁹⁵ The Aryan Paragraph was a newly instituted governmental requirement that excluded non-Aryans from any civil service positions.⁹⁶ The second clause of the first paragraph in the Aryan Paragraph stated that, "Those of Non-Aryan decent or married to someone of Non-Aryan decent are not to be called clergy."⁹⁷ This clause would exclude about thirty-five of Germany's 18,000 pastors.⁹⁸ It seems almost preposterous that an action that affected such a small portion of Germany's pastors would be the thing that lead to the greatest church division and struggle since the Reformation. The German Christian leaders did not yet know it, but in their attempt to further Nazi doctrine they

⁹⁵ Erickson, *Theologians under Hitler*, 48.

⁹⁶ Ulrich Duchrow, "The Confessing Church, and the Ecumenical Movement," *The Ecumenical Review* 33, no. 3 (April 2010): 267.

⁹⁷ The Aryan Paragraph in the Churches and Responses. See Solberg, *A Church Undone*, 57.

⁹⁸ Erickson, *Theologians under Hitler*, 48.

had just formed the basis for the opposition that would resist *Gleichschaltung* in the Protestant church.

Early on, some pastors and theologians in the Protestant Church had decided that allegiance to a racially constructed church would not be an option should Nazi doctrine infiltrate the church. One example of those men was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Many men stood in opposition to the Nazi regime, but Bonhoeffer's life and actions in opposition to the German Christians and the Nazi regime have become the symbol of what it means to stand in the face of opposition. One of Bonhoeffer's biographers notes that he had concluded by August 1933 that, "beyond doubt that there could be no question of belonging to a church that excluded the Jews."⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer was positive that any church that agreed to anything as preposterous as the Aryan Paragraph would usher in a time of confession for the true church and warrant immediate action from the true Christians within the false church. In fact, Bonhoeffer insisted that the only proper response to such an act would be an immediate "exodus" to maintain theological consistency.¹⁰⁰

In light of the push to conform to the racial ideals set forth by the Nazi Aryan Paragraph, Bonhoeffer wrote his lifelong friend and mentor, Karl Barth, seeking help and support for what Bonhoeffer saw as *status confessionis* (state of Confessing). In other words, Bonhoeffer was ready to separate from the German Evangelical Church and he was looking to Barth for support. Bonhoeffer wrote with passion as he appealed to Barth. "The can be no doubt at all that the *status confessionis* has arrived,"¹⁰¹ Bonhoeffer wrote. However, it became clear that not all were as convinced that the time for confessional division had arrived.

⁹⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 273.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 308.

¹⁰¹ Letter to Barth (9 September 1933) In *No Rusty Swords*, 230.

In their correspondence it became obvious that Barth did not have the same resolve to seek an open schism. Barth replied to Bonhoeffer, “I am for waiting. When the breach comes, it must come from the other side.”¹⁰² Barth wanted to wait for a greater division point than racial exclusion. Perhaps Barth wanted to call forth repentance from within the established church.¹⁰³ Either way Barth decided, as Eberhard Bethge writes, “to wait on even greater heresies than the racial conformity of the civil service law.”¹⁰⁴ Although Germany’s most famed theologian since Luther himself, Karl Barth, lacked the initial resolve seen in Bonhoeffer, many others agreed with Bonhoeffer. The time to act was now.

The initial response to the Institution of the Aryan Paragraph was the formation of the Pastor’s Emergency League (*Pfarrernotbund*).¹⁰⁵ The leader of the movement was Martin Niemoller, a prominent German pastor who was opposed to the Nazification of the German Church struggle. Out of this movement the Confessing Church was born. In the last days of May 1934 the Pastor’s Emergency league met in Barmen to discuss the formations and beliefs of the true German church.

The document produced at Barmen would be one of the most significant theological treatises of the twentieth century, and it symbolized the largest form of resistance the Nazis had faced to date. The drafting and acceptance of the Barmen Declaration represented the resistance of the Protestant church to Nazi doctrine and ideology. At least a portion of the Protestant Church in Germany was resisting *Gleichschaltung*. Upon reading the document, the language of resistance becomes clear.

¹⁰² Letter to Bonhoeffer (11 September 1933) In *No Rusty Swords*, 231.

¹⁰³ Jordan Baylor, “The Aryan Clause, The Confessing Church, and the Ecumenical Movement,” 268.

¹⁰⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 273.

¹⁰⁵ Erickson, *Theologians Under Hitler*, 48.

Although the movement started as a response to racial exclusion, the Barmen Declaration now voiced a total resistance of Nazification and swore allegiance to Christ alone. For example, the Declaration calls believers to support pastors who are loyal to the confessions of the real Christian faith.¹⁰⁶ In another instance the Declaration counters Nazi claims of unification as one *Volk*, writing, we are “bound together by the confession of the Lord one of the, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”¹⁰⁷ In article 8.07 the Confessing Church claims that the German Christian doctrine, which is subsequently Nazi doctrine, has grievously imperiled the German Evangelical Church.¹⁰⁸ The Barmen Declaration is a repetitive attack on the Nazification of the German church and the educations of the Nazi movement. In a country where many were swearing an oath of loyalty to Hitler, der Führer, the Confessing church was swearing loyalty to Christ alone. As Keith Clements notes, “The basic issue (of the Declaration) was clear enough: the Christian Church had to declare its allegiance and its identity in terms of the gospel and not the dictates of the state or nationalistic impulses.”¹⁰⁹

The spirit of the Barmen Declaration was accurately summarized by Dietrich Bonhoeffer some years later in his milestone work, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer wrote, “The Church is not to be a national community like old Israel, but a community of believers without political or national ties.”¹¹⁰ The German Christians may have wanted the church to be a political ally to the Nazis, but the Confessing Church had no such aspirations.

¹⁰⁶ “Barmen Declaration.” <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm>. Accessed January 28, 2016

¹⁰⁷ “Barmen Declaration.”

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Keith Clements, “Barmen and the Ecumenical Movement,” 8.

¹¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 141.

The Confessing Church held another synod later in the year of 1934 in which they were bolder in their opposition to the Nazi run state church. The Second Confessing Synod reads, “We summon the Christian communities, their pastors and elder, 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.”¹¹¹ The Confessing Church hoped to influence the entire German Protestant Church to denounce any and all relationships with those loyal to the Nazi state church and the German Christians. The resistance of the Confessing Church was no small force.

The Confessing Church went on to become what Bonhoeffer called a “spoke in the wheel of government.”¹¹² Bonhoeffer meant that the spoke would become a force of opposition to the movement of the entire wheel. Bonhoeffer thought that this kind of opposition to the state from the church was warranted when “the church sees the state fail in its functions of creating law and order.”¹¹³ Ultimately, however, Bonhoeffer and several other Confessing Church proponents went on to lose their lives for opposing the Nazi state.

The German Christians had originally intended to merge the German Evangelical Church with the higher aspirations of the Nazi German state; however, in an attempt to force Nazi ideology onto the Protestant Church, the German Christians woke the sleeping giant of Christian orthodoxy. The German Christians, although unintentionally, provoked the German church struggle and set off a war for the Protestant Church inside of

¹¹¹ Excerpt from the Declaration of the Second Confessing Synod of the German Protestant Church in Berlin-Dahlem (October 20, 1934).

¹¹² Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” In *No Rusty Swords*, 225.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

Germany between 1933 and 1945 because of their goals to bring the German Protestant Church into line with Nazi ideology.

Conclusion

The *Kirchenkampf* was a significant part of German history. It involved two movements within the German Protestant church that struggled to attain power between 1933 and 1945. Although neither side achieved a decisive victory, the Confessing Church won by default when Germany surrendered in 1945. With the Nazi party in shambles the German Christian movement had no government to provide legitimacy to its radical doctrines. Orthodoxy prevailed and the Confessing Church's doctrines would continue to be the guiding principles of the German Evangelical Church. Despite fading into oblivion, the legacy of the German Christian Movement is significant.

The German Christian response to defeat was varying. In some cases German Christians continued to proclaim their radical doctrines as truth and refused to recant. Other members of the movement recanted half-heartedly. Still other German Christian members claimed ignorance all together.¹¹⁴ In some cases the defiance of the German Christians even went so far as to deny that the Holocaust had even happened.¹¹⁵ However, it should not be assumed that the German Christian's ideals simply vanished.

Some of the German Christians' doctrines and foundations were still readily accepted in the German church, after all many of the German Christians' ideas were derived from principles already readily found in German culture. The doctrines that easily survived and flourished in the postwar German church were the ones that centered on the German Christian's ideas of gender.¹¹⁶ Not only did elements of the German Christian movement's doctrine survive, but many pastors and leaders did as well.

¹¹⁴ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 220-222.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

The German Christian movement may have died in 1945, but the people who were the soldiers of the movement continued on in their normal roles in the Protestant Church. While some pastors who subscribed to the German Christian movement were dismissed, for the most part German Christian pastors remained.¹¹⁷ It is therefore easy to see that the German Christian movement faded with the fall of the National Socialist party and began to assimilate back into the orthodox Protestant Church, but it did not disappear altogether. Nevertheless, despite continuity in the established church the German Christian movement should not be remembered in a positive light.

The German Christian Faith Movement is a stark reminder of what happens when a religious faith is blinded by the promises of government and deceived to follow the ramblings of men and nationalism. The German Christians formed a church structure that based membership solely on the race and ethnicity of people. The movement also demeaned women and promoted males as the superior gender. Lastly, the German Christian movement blatantly disregarded and in some cases destroyed Christian scriptures. These failures qualify the German Christians as heretics and the movement should be remembered in no other light. Doris Bergen summarizes this argument well writing, “For genuine Christians, (the) German Christian(s) represented heresy of the worst sort.”¹¹⁸ Indeed for genuine Christians, the German Christian movement was anything but Christian. The legacy of the German Christians should always be remembered as a betrayal of the worst kind.

¹¹⁷ Luke Fenwick, “The Protestant Churches in Saxony-Anhalt in the Shadow of the German Christian Movement and National Socialism, 1945-1949,” *Church History* 82, no. 4 (December 2013), 888-890.

¹¹⁸ Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 229.

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