

# *The Confessing Church and the Nazis: A Struggle for Theological Truth*

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The growth of the Confessing Church in Germany during the Nazis' rise to power constitutes one of the most fascinating phenomena in modern church history. Its development, confusions, and partial disintegration raise crucially important issues for the church in every era, and the lessons to be learnt are relevant far beyond the boundaries of Germany. In this article I shall firstly present a brief outline of the history of the Confessing Church and its struggle with the evils of National Socialism, before going on to draw out some of the key theological issues which such a study raises.

## **The Confessing Church**

During its rise to prominence, the National Socialist Party was very careful not to denounce Christianity or the churches. In their 'unalterable' programme of 1920 they stated that they would uphold a 'positive Christianity' without tying it to any one confession. They were of course only too keen in the course of time to exploit the looseness of the notion of 'positive Christianity' to suit their political ambitions. Hitler himself was basically indifferent to theological questions and complexities, but was well aware of the power and influence of religion in shaping social morality. Thus with regard to the churches he was primarily motivated by political opportunism and during the 1920s hoped that by professing support for their position in the state, and by emphasizing the nationalistic, unifying aspects of his programme, he might win the allegiance of both Catholics and Protestants. It was this combination of national appeal and tactical deceit which led thousands of Christians to support Hitler: we must remember that many Christians also shared the Nazis' concern about the decay of morality, the threat of Communism (and the Jews), and the lack of national unity.

However, just before assuming power, the Nazis rejected their policy of impartiality. The Catholics having aligned themselves with the moderate Centre Party, the Nazis turned to the Protestant churches for support. Throughout the 1920s, many Protestant clergy had 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. These movements were eventually amalgamated to form the German Christian Faith Movement, launched in May 1932. Their great desire was to reawaken German Lutheran sentiment in the church, to combat Marxism, to stress the need for racial purity (all members were to be of Aryan descent), and to bind together National Socialism with Christianity in order that the people of Germany could be offered 'one God, one *Volk* and one Church'.

When Hitler assumed power on 30 January 1933, although he issued reassurances about protecting Christianity, he began to effect his programme for the unification of Germany with characteristic thoroughness, utterly determined to bring all political parties, trade unions, business organizations, professional groups and the army into line with the policies of National Socialism. His attempt to submit the churches to this procedure resulted for many Christians in a long and complex church struggle (*Kirchenkampf*). We can divide this struggle broadly into three periods, each of which we will deal with in turn.

### 1933-1935

During this period, we see among the 'non-conformists' a struggle primarily to maintain Christian truth against heresy. In other words, church resistance to the Nazis began first and foremost as a *church* struggle, without any question of *political* resistance.

The necessity for resistance became increasingly obvious during the first few months of 1933. In February, Hindenberg issued an emergency ordinance restricting freedom of speech, assembly and communication. A national boycott of Jewish business began in April as a means of reducing Jewish 'over-representation' in business life, medicine, law and culture. Some local Nazi leaders had begun to wage a war against churches in Pomerania and Bavaria. Most controversial of all however was the enactment of a law prohibiting clergymen of non-Aryan descent to hold orders in the church, and forbidding the marriage of Aryan clergy to non-Aryans.

Eventually a small resistance movement grew and a consolidated opposition of sixty pastors pledged their support for what was to be known as the 'Pastor's Emergency League' under the leadership of Pastor Martin Niemöller. Invitations were sent throughout Germany to pastors to join the League by signing a four-point pledge which opposed the notorious 'Aryan clause' and called for obedience to Holy Scripture as the primary source of authority for Christians.

By the end of 1933 the League had amassed a membership of some 6000, presenting the newly appointed 'Reich Bishop' Ludwig Müller with a significant problem, particularly as many of his own 'German Christians' had deserted to the resistant church. Furthermore, the Nazis were becoming embarrassed at the fanatical enthusiasm of the German Christians by this time,<sup>1</sup> realizing the divisiveness of their extreme

antisemitism and patriotism among Christians. From this time on Hitler embarked on a course of impartiality in church affairs, allowing no wing of the church to call on the state for support.

Müller continued with his programme of unification, ordering the integration of the youth work of his German Evangelical Church with Hitler Youth and issuing a decree forbidding any attacks on the church government. The ferocious opposition among pastors of the Pastor's Emergency League led to many clergy being suspended, denied the right to preach, transferred to new posts or forced to retire. However, Müller's arbitrary decrees and his further ruthless attempts at centralizing church government only increased the fervency of resistance.

On 29 May 1934, 138 church delegates attended a synod at Barmen and pledged their support for a new 'Confessing Church' (*Bekennniskirche*), an enormously significant move towards consolidated resistance. Apart from settling questions of church structure, finance and administration, the synod resulted in the production of a masterly and concise confession of faith, written largely by Karl Barth.<sup>2</sup> 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.

Since the government was now appointing an increasing number of German Christians to the theological chairs in the universities, the Confessing Church was forced to establish its own theological training institutions to which a large number of students were quickly drawn. When it came to parish appointments, the local official church superintendents and church patrons would often co-operate and back the Confessing Church pastor, in spite of intimidation from the Nazi church authorities.

The Confessing Church was quite unique in structure, in effect comprising a conglomeration of churches, 'brotherhood councils' at various levels, synods, pastors' brotherhood circles, congregations, pastors and laymen. Above all it was a church rooted in and supported by members of the congregations.

On August 2, 1934, Hitler became Chancellor and Führer of Germany, which spurred on Bishop Müller towards his goal of 'one God, one *Volk* and one Church'. But now he found himself opposed by the bishops of Bavaria and Württemberg who strongly resisted any amalgamation and were arrested as a result. Although Hitler stepped in and ordered the release of the bishops, this marked the beginning of a series of severe measures aimed at restricting any political influence the church might wish to exercise on the government. The Barmen theology was consequently reaffirmed and strengthened at a second

Confessing Synod at Dahlem in October. As Barth put it, 'The resolutions of the Synod of Dahlem clarified the status of the Confessing Church in connection with church law. But this clarification was dependent on the dogmatic clarification achieved at Barmen and stood or fell with it'.<sup>3</sup>

### 1935-1938

In the face of this increasing opposition, it was clear to members of the Confessing Church that the church struggle could no longer carry on within the law as they had originally intended. Resistance, if they were to remain faithful to Barmen, meant civil disobedience.

In March 1935, special 'finance sections' were established in the various administrative bodies of the church by the state, meaning that church finances from now on were to be handled largely by the state. Further, in June of the same year, law departments designed to deal with specifically church affairs were set up, ending the independent courts which had usually decided in favour of Confessing Churches pastors and their claims. By this time also the 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.

It was for mutual support in the face of these measure that a third Confessing Synod was held in Augsburg (22-23 May 1935). Many disputes and differences were set aside and statements were written addressed to pastors, deacons, the government and those training pastors.

But state policies only worsened. In July, 1935 the 'Ministry of Church Affairs'<sup>4</sup> under Hans Kerrl was set up and immediately set about establishing church committees to direct the churches in Germany (membership of which excluded Confessing churchmen). The hard core of the Confessing movement reacted strongly, but the Provisional Directory<sup>5</sup> voted to co-operate with the committees 'in all possible ways'.

This illustrates the deep divisions which plagued the Confessing Church from this period.<sup>6</sup> The most serious split was between the 'disturbed' churches (advocating non-co-operation with the Reich committees) and the 'intact' churches (advocating compromise). Dibelius' hard-hitting pamphlet 'The State Church is Here' represented one side of this divide, and the 'moderate' bishops of Hanover, Bavaria and Württemberg represented the other. When at the fourth Confessing Synod in February 1936<sup>7</sup> a second Provisional Directory was named, the Lutheran leaders of the 'intact' churches (relatively unhampered by Kerrl's measures) decided to form their own organization – the Lutheran Council.

The situation of the Confessing Church by the beginning of 1936 was

therefore distinctly unhappy due to internal strife. Nevertheless, spurred on by the Nazis' confiscation of 'The State Church is Here', in May, Confessing Church leaders addressed a brave written protest to Hitler himself, attacking his attempts to 'de-Christianize' Germany, the arbitrary measures of the *Gestapo*, the closing of church schools, and the whole Nazi *Weltanschauung* with its explicit antisemitism. The result was a bitter press campaign against the Confessing Church (part of a general anti-clerical campaign waged throughout 1936 and 1937).

Kerrl continued his attack on the Confessing Church by issuing a decree in February 1937 restricting the right of churches to take up any but officially prescribed collections. This hit right at the financial heart of the Confessing Church. In spite of courageous protests, there was a flood of arrests for disobeying the decree, including that of Martin Niemöller himself.<sup>8</sup> The intercession lists of the Confessing Church increased daily. To make matters worse, in August 1937 Himmler himself dissolved all seminaries and ministerial examination committees of the Confessing Church. Repeated protests were in vain.

Together with an increasing number of moves to strengthen their grip on the running of the churches, the Nazis made great efforts to deconfessionalize the Party and to make membership of the Nazi party and any church mutually exclusive. One aspect of this can be seen in education, where Christian religion instruction was either neglected or non-biblical Nazi-orientated material introduced.

### 1938-1945

During this third period the members of the Confessing Church found themselves in a crisis (theologically and practically) in an increasingly dangerous situation. There seemed to be only two options: secret resistance or some sort of compromise.

By 1938, many groups within the Confessing Church saw clearly the dangers of war. (The Second Provisional Directory circulated a service of intercession in September in which war was described as a punishment, and forgiveness was sought for the personal and national sins of the people). The relationship between the Confessing Church and the National Socialist State which had already developed was to follow the same kind of pattern during the war: limited co-operation interspersed with vicious harassment by the Nazis. Following the invasion of Poland by Germany, new moves against the churches were instigated and the leaders of the Confessing Churches were increasingly hard pressed to help suspended or imprisoned pastors and their families. By the end of 1939 the last of the church publishing houses was reduced almost to extinction, and restrictions followed which virtually ended the publication of all religious books (including the Bible). Restrictions were also placed upon the contact between pastors and mobilized members of their parishes, and upon pastors' work in hospitals, nursing homes and sanatoria. Many theological colleges were closed. In

November 1940 the *Gestapo* ordered that all ordinands trained or ordained at Confessing Church colleges should be considered unemployed and allocated to some other 'useful' employment. Church holidays were subject to legal interference. Much church property was confiscated and church subsidies drastically cut. The notorious 'finance sections' increased their power throughout the war: Hitler was often to use the threat of cutting finance as a means of intimidation.

Although the Confessing Church was slow to react to the appalling anti-Jewish measures of the Nazis, it did much to succour non-Aryan pastors and their families during and after the war. There was also a strong reaction against the 1942 Chancellory Edict segregating Aryan and non-Aryans (particularly from Bishop Wurm of Bavaria) but to no effect. In July, 1943 Wurm protested to the Church Ministry about the extermination policy of the Nazis (news of which was by then circulating in Germany), but again his cry was unheeded.

It became very clear during this period to the Confessing Church, that although initially it never saw itself as a political opposition movement or as a refuge for political malcontents, it was going to be forced into these roles by the very course of events. Many members paid harsh penalties for their defiant actions. Thousands were imprisoned and many were later to die in concentration camps (by no means clergy alone). Dietrich Bonhoeffer is perhaps the most notable pastor in this respect, carrying his Christian convictions into the field of conspiratorial actions against Hitler. He was arrested months before an assassination attempt on Hitler in 1943 but was not executed until April 1945.

### **Pertinent Theological Issues**

While recognizing the immense courage and tenacity of certain members of the Confessing Church in their resistance to the Nazis, one cannot help being struck by the widespread failure of the majority of the churches in Germany to offer effective and sustained opposition to the evils of the Third Reich. After the war the 'German Christians' lamented, 'we know ourselves to be one with our people in a great company of suffering and in a great solidarity of guilt . . . We accuse ourselves for not witnessing more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently.'<sup>9</sup> The Confessing Church, for all its uniqueness, was from its earliest days beset with divisions between the compromisers and the non-conformists. Bonhoeffer poured out a corporate confession of guilt in his *Ethics* on behalf of the churches,<sup>10</sup> and believed the conspiracies against Hitler were attempted far too late in the day. Why then were the churches so slow to act and speak out? How was it that many in the churches should willingly have abetted such a regime?

Many reasons for their failure have been offered, among them being

ignorance, fear of retaliation and a certain sympathy with the political measures which appeared to be unifying and strengthening Germany. However, it emerges clearly from any study of the period 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. Therefore I conclude by highlighting three crucial theological issues which arise out of an examination of the German church struggle.

### *Natural Theology*

Firstly, we see clearly the acute dangers inherent in any attempts to build a 'natural theology' (i.e. a theology constructed on a basis other than the revelation of God in Christ).

Thousands inside and outside the churches found in Nazi ideology a world-view of enormous appeal and power. The intellectual roots of National Socialism were deeply rooted in nineteenth-century thought: Nietzsche's 'will to power', the racial theories of Gobineau and H.S. Chamberlain, the 'faith in destiny' of Richard Wagner, Haushofer's 'geo-politics' all exercised as much influence as the more immediate ideas of Paul le Lagarde, Julius Langbehn and Moeller van den Bruck. The conception of the German *Volk* as the dominant racial community resulted in a mystical faith in Germany's destiny that exercised enormous influence long before Hitler came to power. Hitler, together with Rosenberg<sup>11</sup> and Dietrich Eckart, strengthened with a new virulence the incipient anti-semitism in German culture (the Jews were the primary threat to the success of the 'master race'), reaffirmed the traditional myth of the Messianic Führer who would lead the *Volk* out of bondage, and thus provided the raw materials for an ideology which acted as a vortex for millions of Germans during the frustrated post-war days of the Weimar Republic.<sup>12</sup> As G. L. Mosse expresses it:

The *völkisch* ideology cannot be viewed as a transient phenomenon; it was a new religion whose roots . . . not only entered men's subconscious but penetrated deeper and became a whole new way of life . . . Hitler only promised to fulfil the concept of life which much of the nation shared before he ever entered the scene.<sup>13</sup>

It is hardly surprising therefore that there were Christians who sought to combine the Gospel of Christ with this highly attractive philosophy of 'Blood and Soil', to seek a theology which would accommodate the Nazi movement's ideals. This of course was the path the 'German Christians' chose to follow. If we turn, for example, to the 'German Christian' programme launched in 1937, we read of their desire to create a religious unity of the German people, rejecting all church teaching and organization which is Jewish or un-German. Jesus is the deadly enemy and conqueror of Judaism. They committed them-

selves without qualifications to the Führer, and to the Nazi myth of Blood and Race which was not considered to be at variance with the essence of the Christian faith. In 1933 they had proclaimed:

Germany is our task; Christ is our strength . . . For our people . . . the eternal God had fashioned a peculiar law. It took the form of a Leader, Adolf Hitler. . . The way to the fulfilment of the German law is the believing German community . . . From this community of German Christians in the National Socialist State of Adolf Hitler must the 'German National Church' arise to embrace the whole people. One people . . . one God . . . one Reich . . . on Church.<sup>14</sup>

As Nathaniel Micklem put it: 'This means, in effect, that the new theologian is to start, not from the revelation of God in Scripture, but from the demands of Race, Blood and Soil'.<sup>15</sup> It was this question of the starting-point of theology that was raised with enormous force by Karl Barth, and his vehement rejection of natural theology (his 'Nein!' to Emil Brunner, the Prolegomena to the *Church Dogmatics* which insists on moving from the actuality of God's revelation to its possibility and not vice versa) can only fully be understood against this 'German Christian' synthesis of *Volkegeist* and Gospel. He claimed that if the Barmen Confession of 1934 was taken seriously 'it meant a purification of the church not only from the *new* natural theology which was specifically under discussion, but from *all* natural theology'.<sup>16</sup> Any compromise with either the Nazis' autonomous world-view or the 'German Christians' could only mean a lapse back into the worst errors of nineteenth century neo-Protestantism.<sup>17</sup> This explains Barth's eventual dissatisfaction with the Confessing Church: he was convinced that many of his colleagues by acquiescing with the Nazis were betraying the Barmen theology.<sup>18</sup> His reasons were not personal, nor purely political, but theological, as he sought to recover and pursue to its fullest the Reformation's insistence on *sola gratia*, rejecting any assumption of the Gospel into some independently constructed *Weltanschauung*.

The ease with which thousands of Christians accommodated their Christian beliefs under the pressure of the Nazis' ideology should be a sinister reminder to us of the ease with which our minds and hearts are warped and shaped by prevailing ideologies, not simply the ideologies of a totalitarian state, but the quieter and subtler ideologies (e.g. scientism, nihilism) which vie for allegiance in our own land. This places an extra weight of responsibility on theologians in every age to examine constantly and ruthlessly their own systematic starting-points and to seek to establish theology on its proper ground. The 'natural theology' of the 'German Christians' arose only when theologians could offer nothing better.

### *Church & State*

Secondly, there emerges the issue of forging a biblical model for understanding the relationship between church and state, or between church and the governing authorities.

It is here that many Christians both inside and outside the Confessing Church found themselves singularly ill-equipped. The traditional Lutheran teaching was that the state, alongside the church, was God's great supporter of order and as an agent of God was to be obeyed. Its duty was to safeguard the interests of its citizens, and it was not to have its activity tampered with by the church. There was thus a tendency to restrict church affairs to the narrow field of personal redemption. The view received classic expression in a 'German Christian' document of 1933:

The Lutheran Church . . . cannot assume a hostile attitude vis-à-vis the National Socialist State. As the people's Church she must have full confidence in the State. The State grants the Church full and free action because both *State and Church belong to the two great forces of order in a nation.*<sup>19</sup>

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, but were unprepared to deal theologically with that rare situation of a criminal government. This fundamental dualism between church and state was also allied to a powerful theology of the 'orders of creation' (*Schöpfungsordnungen*) and 'orders of preservation' – i.e. the God-given structures of creation which bind mankind together – a theology which found strong support in the works of Wilhelm Stapel, Friedrich Gogarten and Paul Althaus,<sup>20</sup> but which was heavily criticized by Barth as early as 1929.<sup>21</sup>

The Barmen Confession signified a radical break with this tradition<sup>22</sup> with its strong insistence on the Lordship of Christ over church *and* state, redemption *and* creation:

We reject the false doctrine that there are realms of our life in which we belong not to Jesus Christ, but to other masters, realms where we do not need to be justified and sanctified by Him . . .

We reject the false doctrine that the State should or could go beyond its special task and become the sole and total order of human life, thus fulfilling also the Church's vocation.<sup>23</sup>

We see also here an attack on any attempt to drive apart creation and redemption. It was all too easy for the Lutherans to say that redemption perfects creation, that grace does not destroy Aryan nature, but brings it to fulfilment and perfection.<sup>24</sup> In the Barmen Confession however we see an attempt to weld creation and redemption together Christologically.

The novelty of this type of theology to the Lutherans accounts in part

for the many splits and divisions that developed within the Confessing Church, between the non-conformists and the compromisers. The enormous significance of Barmen was by no means fully appreciated by all those in the Confessing Church in 1934. We can also now understand the relative silence of the Confessing Church over some of the blatant injustices of the Nazi regime in its early stages, e.g. the wave of indiscriminate assassinations following the Röhm *Putsch* of 1934. A theology of political resistance – i.e. resistance to the state in the name of Christ as Lord – had not been worked out, although its seeds lay in the Barmen Confession. Therefore, with the arrival of the ‘finance sections’ and the Church Ministry in 1935, as we have seen, many compromised with the authorities, while those remaining true to Barmen resisted.

Theologians such as Barth and Bonhoeffer therefore found themselves with a two-fold task: to hammer out a theology of Christ as Lord over creation and redemption, and to develop a theology of political resistance. Bonhoeffer is particularly instructive in this respect. With his strong Lutheran roots we find in his essay of 1932 on the nature of the church a traditional account of the role of the state *vis-à-vis* the church, the state being described as God’s great supporter of order (*Ordnung*): church and state exist side by side mutually limiting each other.<sup>25</sup> There is no question here of political resistance as a viable option. Yet the growing church struggle with the Nazis led him from this time to leave behind all talk of ‘orders’ or of preservation and creation, and turn to the issue of radical obedience to Christ within the Christian community.<sup>26</sup> In his *Ethics*, he moves further still and formulates a strong doctrine of Christ’s Lordship over the ‘world’<sup>27</sup> It is this dual emphasis which is so characteristic of his later thought – a Christ-centred ecclesiology and radical discipleship in the world. Now he can argue that the government ‘does not appear as a second authority side by side with the authority of Christ, but its own authority is only a form of the authority of Christ . . . The church has the task of summoning the whole world to submit to the dominion of Jesus Christ. She testifies before government to their common Master.’<sup>28</sup> Here we find the implications of Barmen worked out with a thoroughness that was eventually to cost Bonhoeffer his life. His involvement in political resistance was the logical consequence of his Christocentric theology. As Larry Rasmussen has pointed out, the key to the development of Bonhoeffer’s later thought is to be found in the words: ‘The more exclusively we acknowledge and confess Christ the Lord, the more fully the wide range of his dominion will be disclosed to us.’<sup>29</sup>

Barth’s famous essay ‘Rechtfertigung and Recht’ of 1938<sup>30</sup> argued in a similar way for a rejection of the traditional ‘two kingdoms’ theology, and the importance of relating church and government Christologically. It was only in this way that so much political quietism in the church could be avoided and the extreme case of a ‘demonic’ state be

adequately handled. For Barth 'the state . . . belongs originally and ultimately to Jesus Christ'.<sup>31</sup> 'When the New Testament speaks of the State, we are, fundamentally, in the Christological sphere.'<sup>32</sup> However it was not until after the war that Barth provided the outlines for a theology of political resistance in his essay 'The Christian Community and Civil Community',<sup>33</sup> in which he argued that church and government were to be understood as two concentric circles of different diameters, as an alternative to the 'side by side' model.<sup>34</sup> The state is 'outside' the church but not outside the range of Christ's dominion. This meant that political indifference on the part of the church was ruled out, and that Christians should enter the political arena 'anonymously'.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, it is clear that the experience of the church struggle led Christians such as Bonhoeffer and Barth to make a radical reappraisal of traditional models for relating church and government, and that the slowness of the churches to act is in large part accounted for by their being unready *theologically* to cope with such an extreme situation. The lessons learnt here are not restricted to post-war Germany, but are of abiding significance. For it emerged that the ineffectiveness of the Confessing Church's resistance to the 'beast out of the abyss' of Revelation 13 depended on profound and deep-seated theological issues, issues which have to be raised by every church in every age. Any suspicion of dogmatic theology as being a remote and irrelevant discipline has to be questioned afresh in the light of the experience of the members of the Confessing Church.<sup>36</sup> As they found, in the heat of a practical situation, it is all too easy to lose the dogmatic ground from under ones feet with disastrous results.

We recall that the Confessing Church began first of all as a movement to preserve Christian truth in the face of heresy. Some members were forced into political resistance, but only by working out the implications of its theology. Whether we are attempting to construct a 'theology of politics' or a 'political theology', when seeking an informed political *praxis*, we cannot afford to leave unquestioned our fundamental Christological and soteriological presuppositions.

### *A Theological Critique of Racism*

Thirdly, the question of a theological critique of *racism* arises.

As we have seen, antisemitism was deeply engrained in Nazi ideology. The Jewish race was seen as the arch-enemy of the German *Volk*, and the notion of a 'Jewish world conspiracy' was one of the most efficient fictions of Nazi propaganda. But the systematic persecution (and eventual extermination) of millions of Jews received remarkably little sustained attack from the Confessing Church. As a post-war ecumenical study expressed it, 'the Confessing Church resisted the Aryan paragraph in the church and the separation of Jewish Christians out of the Evangelical Church of Germany, but against antisemitism

they uttered no word'.<sup>38</sup> The Prussian wing of the Confessing Church issued a public declaration of protest in 1943, but otherwise the Confessing Church did not cover itself with glory over this issue. There were of course some notable exceptions such as Karl Barth. But even he lamented that Barmen had not made the Jewish question more central<sup>39</sup> and recognized that Bonhoeffer had stood alone in showing remarkable foresight in this respect.<sup>40</sup>

Once again, the traditional quietist attitude of Lutheranism towards the state had a large part to play, together with a significant antisemitic strain within contemporary Lutheran theology. What seems particularly tragic is that the implications of the Barmen Confession, particularly with regard to Christology, were not followed through more consistently. The crucial point here is that the Lordship of Christ (one of the king-pins of Barmen) must entail the Lordship of Christ *as man*. The Son of God took upon himself our humanity and in his perfect life of obedience culminating in his self-offering on the cross on our behalf and in our place, healed and restored our humanity in his own Person. Now he is the Risen Lord, and we, through his Spirit, are given a share in his perfect humanity. Because Christ died and rose again for us all, in Christ and in union with him 'there is no Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female' (Gal. 3:28). Thus Paul can speak of the Jew/Gentile divide having been overcome in Christ, the new man (Eph. 2: 14-18).

Therefore, if we take the Lordship of Christ *as man* seriously, racial prejudice in any form is condemned, because it denies that our broken humanity has been assumed, judged and restored in Christ.

In the light of Bonhoeffer's early insistence on attacking antisemitism theologically (rather than from a liberal humanist standpoint),<sup>41</sup> we might ask whether the church's attack on racism today would be better propelled by viewing racism as an assault on the humanity of Christ and our brother's humanity, rather than capitulating to notions of 'human rights'. The church is surely called, wherever it witnesses – whether against the militant racism of the National Front (with its own sinister *Volkegeist*), or against the apartheid system in South Africa<sup>42</sup> – to argue first and foremost from a distinctively theological standpoint, and to have the courage to think through the implications of a biblical Christology.

## NOTES

- 1 This was particularly noticeable after the famous Berlin Sports Palace rally of 'German Christians' in November 1933.
- 2 Cf. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth*, SCM, London 1976, pp 245ff.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p 253.
- 4 This replaced Bishop Müller who in fact officially never had any executive power.

- 5 Set up in November 1934, this was the administrative body of the Church.
- 6 Karl Barth resigned from the old administrative committee of the National Council of Brethren in November 1934 over what he saw as a betrayal of the Barmen line. However he continued to be active in the resistance movement, even when forced to resign his chair in Bonn and teach in Basle.
- 7 This was held at Oeyenhausen: some two hundred attended.
- 8 Niemöller was taken to concentration camps at Sachsenhausen and Dachau.
- 9 Quoted in S. Herman, *The Rebirth of the German Church*, SCM, London 1946, p 137.
- 10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, SCM, London 1978, pp 89ff.
- 11 Alfred Rosenberg (1893–1945) became Hitler's official ideological spokesman for the Nazis. His confused and bigoted views he enshrined in his famous *Der Mythos des 20 Jahrhunderts*, München 1934, which sold over half a million copies.
- 12 For a helpful summary of Nazi ideology, see Robert Cecil, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology*, Batsford, London 1972.
- 13 G. L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, Grosset, New York 1964, p 301.
- 14 Quoted in Nathaniel Micklem, *National Socialism and the Roman Catholic Church*, OUP, London 1939, pp 48–9.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p 50. Church Councillor Leutheuser went so far as to claim, 'Christ has come to us through Adolf Hitler.' Quoted in Cecil, *op. cit.*, p 99. For a classic statement of the German Christian doctrine, cf Cajus Fabricius, *Positive Christianity in the Third Reich*, Hermann Püschel, Dresden 1937.
- 16 Quoted in Busch, *op. cit.*, p 247.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp 230–1.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp 253ff. Barth did not of course deny the existence of 'natural revelations' of God. His rejection of natural theology must be understood methodologically. For a full discussion, see T. F. Torrance, 'The Problem of Natural Theology in the Theology of Karl Barth,' *Religious Studies* 6, 1970, pp 121–135.
- 19 J. S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933–45*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1968, p 353, *my italics*.
- 20 Althaus provided a systematic study of the 'orders' in his *Theologies der Ordnungen*, 2nd ed., Gütersloh, 1935, in which he speaks of the orders and ordinances (*Ordnungen*) of marriage, the state, nationality etc. which shape our corporate life.
- 21 Cf. Busch, *op. cit.*, p 188.
- 22 It is hardly surprising that Althaus and other Lutherans were to raise objections to the Confession so soon after its composition, accusing it of its pronounced 'Barthianism'. *ibid.*, p 246.
- 23 Articles 2 and 5, as quoted in A. Frey, *Cross and Swastika*, SCM, London 1938, pp 154, 156.
- 24 This was precisely how the Roman Catholics argued prior to the sealing of their Concordat with the Nazis, using the dictum of Thomas: *gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit et complet*.
- 25 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Chr.Kaiser Verlag, Munich, vol. V, pp 227–75.

- 26 Cf. *The Cost of Discipleship*, SCM, London 1959, pp 33–91.
- 27 In particular pp 38–42, 161–184. Cf. John A. Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World*, Collins, London 1967, pp 133–146.
- 28 *Ethics*, p 311.
- 29 L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1972, p 28.
- 30 K. Barth, *Community, State, and Church*, Doubleday, New York 1960, pp 101–148.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p 118.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p 120.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp 149–189. Barth had however foreseen the possibility of political resistance very early. Cf. Busch, *op. cit.*, p 274.
- 34 *Community, State, and Church*, pp 157ff.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p 184. For a socialist's extension of Barth's views, see Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths*, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, Munich 1972.
- 36 In spite of his active involvement in the resistance movement, Barth was often accused of spinning out rarified theology with his head in the clouds, a theology relevant only to moments of great political crisis, not everyday politics (cf. Charles West, *Communism and the Theologians*, SCM, London 1958). But the theological issues he and others raised still have to be faced head on.
- 37 The fourth section of Rosenberg's *Mythus* for example contains a classic argument for 'racial hygiene'.
- 38 *Kirchliches Jahrbuch*, 1945–48, p 222.
- 39 Busch, *op. cit.*, p 247f.
- 40 See Barth's letter to Bethge in Eberhard Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr*, Collins, London 1975, pp 65–6. In 1935, Bonhoeffer had failed to persuade a local synod of the Confessing Church to protest against the infamous Nuremberg laws (cf. H. D. Leuner, *When Compassion Was a Crime*, Oswald Wolf, London 1966, p 134).
- 41 Cf. his essay of 1933 'The Church and the Jewish Question' quoted in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928–1936*, Collins, London 1965, pp 221ff. Bonhoeffer stressed in his lectures of 1933 that we must always begin with the question 'Who is Jesus Christ?' (Cf. his *Christology*, Collins, London 1978, pp 30ff).
- 42 A number of theologians have pointed to the relevance of the German church struggle to the South African situation, most notably John W. Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, W. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1984 (cf. Bonhoeffer: *Exile and Martyr*, pp 26–42, 167–178). I am indebted to Professor James Torrance of Aberdeen University for his profound insights in this area.

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