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Protestant Dissent in Nazi Germany: The Confessing Church Struggle with Hitler's Government

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> Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgement on themselves. . . Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.[1]

This passage in Romans highlights the struggle many have faced over the centuries regarding the relationship between church and state. While most Christians believe that God has commanded them to obey the laws of their state, they do not know what to do if the law contradicts Biblical teachings. The Protestant churches within Germany faced this problem in the early twentieth century. They did not know whether to submit to the ruling legal authorities or stand up for the morals and beliefs that the church espoused. This moral dilemma led many to reconcile their beliefs with the Nazi laws, while others adamantly rejected government policies in order to stay true to their beliefs.

The changing political climate of Germany and the stresses it placed on German society left many unsure of where to stand. Prior to Nazi control, the German Evangelical Church was the main Protestant church in Germany. German Protestant churches were historically arranged under the same organizing body. Unlike other Western countries, German Protestant churches did not split into various factions. Following the National Socialist takeover of Germany in 1933, many within the German Evangelical Church rose up in support of the Nazi regime. A small number disagreed with Nazi policy and decided not to ally with the government. Although there is no known statistic as to the number involved, many of these people came together to form

the Confessing Church. This church rivaled the growing movement of *Deutsche Christen*, "German Christians," who combined their religious teachings with those of the Nazi State. In an effort to bring to light the work of those few who were actively opposed to the policies of National Socialism, this paper will follow the development of the Confessing Church and its conflicts with early Nazi policies. In order to illustrate the role of individuals in the movement, Otto Dibelius' life and work will be examined. While he is not the most well known pastor in the Confessing Church movement, Dibelius' role or lack thereof in the church struggle is representative of the mainstream church movement. Martin Niemöller's and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's actions will be compared to those of Dibelius in order to demonstrate the variety of viewpoints that were encompassed within the Confessing Church movement.

In discussing this time period, it is important to maintain objectivity regarding the actions undertaken by the various church groups. Since anyone researching this topic knows the horrors of the Holocaust and the destruction of many of Europe's minorities, it is often hard not to be unjustly critical of those in Germany in the 1930s who made the decision not to speak out when Hitler began his Jewish persecution. These people had no idea what was going to take place because of their unwillingness to protest early on. Many scholars who have researched extensively on this period have made the conscious effort not to judge individuals for not recognizing that Hitler's anti-Semitic ideas would greatly impact their society and way of life.

The role of the church in Nazi Germany was largely ignored by academia in the aftermath of the war. Scholarly research primarily focussed on the totalitarian regime in Nazi Germany and the terror apparatus. That changed when J.S. Conway published his

text, The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-45, in 1968. Conway's book chronicles the struggle of German churches to define their role amidst the growing Nazi power. His overview of the church struggle opened the door for further study into the role of the church in Nazi Germany. In 1979, Ernst Christian Helmreich further enlightened scholarship on this topic through his book, The German Churches Under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue. Current works such as Victoria Barnett's 1992 study of the Protestant resistance, For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler, have continued the search towards a better understanding of the role of the churches in Germany. While this subject has been given greater attention in the last few years, the role of the Protestant church and the development of the Confessing Church in Germany have left researchers ambivalent at best. The seemingly contradictory actions of the church inhibit the ability of scholars to draw conclusions about the church's role in the Nazi era. This paper will draw together the findings of a wide variety of scholarship in an attempt to shed light on the role of the Confessing Church in Germany during the Nazi era.

The German Evangelical Church prior to NSDAP control

The German Evangelical Church had a longstanding partnership with the German government. While German citizens were not required to participate in religious services, the government collected taxes specifically set aside for church funding and related activities. Therefore, although the Evangelical Church was not state sanctioned, most Germans were involved in one of its numerous congregations. Of the 65 million people living in Germany in 1910, this church boasted a membership of nearly forty

million members,[2] while the Catholic Church, with its large following in Bavaria, had a membership of twenty million.[3]

Even though they were not a part of the state government, pastors were strongly identified with governmental authority due to the historically close relationship between church and state. Many clergy stressed that they wanted to remain politically neutral due to the fear of "clericalism" that had swept the country in the Middle Ages. The medieval clergy not only held spiritual influence over the people, but they also had considerable legal control. The abuses of this power left bitter memories in the minds of many and were the impetus for Martin Luther's break with the church. The growing separation of church and state following the Protestant Reformation placated those who were hesitant at the thought of a strong connection between the church and the government.

The social and political situation in Germany drastically changed after the First World War and these changes further affected the role of the church in Germany. The demoralized nation faced severe reparations, loss of territory, and the end of a monarchy. Suddenly the people were unsure whom to turn to and in what to place their trust.[4] New political groups vied for the attention of the disaffected German citizens and these groups often led the people astray from their Protestant faith. The Social Democrats and the Communists, in particular, emerged as leaders in atheistic working class revolts against the church and state establishments. These political groups undermined the German Evangelical Church's power and prestige. The desire of Protestant clergy to revert back to the heyday of church influence under the German monarchy led to the development of a kind of German nationalism within many in the church. This nationalistic desire, combined with the latent anti-Semitism that, in greater or lesser degrees, had always run

as an undercurrent throughout the church, helped to support the emerging Nazi movement.

Protestant church leaders were often suspicious of new political movements for fear that these groups would further promote a break with the church. The emergence of the National Socialist German Worker's Party, or *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, was no exception. Even before making its bid for power, the NSDAP placated these religious skeptics by appearing to be a proponent of the Christian faith. Nazi statements on religion were ambiguous at best, leaving individuals with the opportunity to determine their own theories on the NSDAP's stance. The NSDAP party platform, as stated in its twenty-five-point program of February 24, 1920, specifically endorsed the idea of "positive Christianity:"

> We demand the freedom of all religious confessions in the state, insofar as they do not jeopardize its existence or conflict with the manners and moral sentiments of the Germanic race. The party as such upholds the point of view of a positive Christianity without tying itself confessionally to any one confession.[5]

This undefined "positive Christianity" worked to the advantage of both sides. The German Protestant Church could rest easy in the fact that the Nazi Party specifically supported Christianity, while the Nazis could leave their true stance on Christianity intentionally vague until it needed to be dealt with later. No one could have understood at the time what form of Christianity Hitler would encourage in the 1930s.

The Development of the *Deutsche Christen* and "Positive Christianity"

Even after he had gained power in 1933, Hitler advocated a "conservative revivalist theme."[6] Hitler's ideas appealed to many Germans who wanted to revert back to the values commonly held prior to the First World War. While the government had become democratic under the Weimar Republic, much public opinion did not support the

new government system. Many people still wanted a strong leader such as they had had prior to the war. Upon gaining power in 1933, Hitler further encouraged those interested in a nationalistic revival in his speech on February 1, 1933:

> The national government sees as its first and foremost task the restoration of the unity of spirit and will of our people. It will preserve and protect the fundamentals on which the strength of our nation rests. It will preserve and protect Christianity, which is the basis of our system of morality, and the family, which is the germination cell of the body of the people and state. . . It will use reverence for our great and glorious past and pride in our ancient traditions as a basis for the education of the German youth. In this way it will declare a merciless war upon spiritual, political, and cultural nihilism.[7]

Hitler's speech promoted the necessity of retaining the tradition of Christianity in Germany. He repeatedly spoke on his seemingly pro-Christian stance early in his tenure as Chancellor. On August 17, 1934, Hitler assured his audience that "The National Socialist State professes its allegiance to positive Christianity."[8] Again on August 26, 1934, Hitler insisted, "There has been no interference with the doctrine of the Confessions or with their religious freedom, nor will there be any such interference . . . the State protects religion, though always on the one condition that religion will not be used as a cover for political ends."[9] Hitler's positive, yet guarded, statements about Christianity further bolstered his support from many of the conservatives within Germany. Hitler's true goals for the Protestant Church would not be realized until years later when it seemed nearly impossible for anyone to do anything to stop him.

While not immediately apparent to the general public, Hitler had definite plans for German society and the Protestant Church in particular. His goal of uniting German society under a common set of ideals developed into the policy of *Gleichschaltung*. *Gleichschaltung*, meaning the " 'shifting into the same gear, line, or current,' was to produce a uniform, harmonious, and militant *Volksgemeinschaft*, a national community based on cultural and racial kinship and pursuing the common goal of national

reconstruction."[10] The idea of *Volksgemeinschaft* was extremely popular in Germany and, therefore, people were willing to make sacrifices in the process of *Gleichschaltung* in order to achieve *Volksgemeinschaft.* As the *Gleichschaltung* policy developed, the government began discouraging divisive elements and removed them from society. Groups such as the Jews and the Marxists were specifically targeted.

The essence of *Gleichschaltung* was applied to the Protestant Church in an attempt to unite all Protestant congregations under a common belief system that was in line with the policies of the Nazi State. The long-term goal of the Nazis was to use the power of the Evangelical Church for Hitler's own purposes.[11] Soon after becoming Reich Chancellor in January 1933, Hitler began making policies that undermined the authority of the Protestant Church. On April 7, 1933, the newly ratified "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Bureaucracy" contained an "Aryan Paragraph" that required all Germans (with a few exceptions) not able to prove their "Aryan" ancestry to be removed from the bureaucracy. Since the Protestant Church was an officially recognized public body, it had to abide by the new legislation. This law was significant not in the number of pastors who were affected,[12] but in the government's attempt to force the church to take an active stand against "non-Aryans." Essentially, the government slowly took away decision-making power from church leaders.[13]

The Nazi policy of undermining church authority actually began prior to Hitler's coming to power with the National Socialist development of the *Deutsche Christen* movement. In the *Reichstag* elections of 1930, it was evident that the National Socialists would not be able to gain a majority in the parliament unless they allied themselves with a religious movement. The Catholic hierarchy had firmly placed its support in the Center

Party and so the Nazis turned towards the Protestants in hope of support. When it became clear that the Protestant Church would not support the National Socialist Party, the Nazis decided to circumvent the established church authorities by founding their own branch of the Protestant faith. William Kube, the head of the National Socialist Group in the Prussian diet, and the Reverend Joachim Hossenfelder, a Berlin pastor, decided to run in the Prussian church elections in November 1932. They ran under the name "Evangelical National Socialists," which was later changed to *Deutsche Christen* at Hitler's urging. This group rapidly gained influence by placing prominent members in important church positions throughout the nation. Hossenfelder became the *Reichs* leader of the *Deutsche Christen* movement as well as the technical advisor to the Nazi party on religious matters. By the time Hitler came to power in 1933, the *Deutsche Christen* movement was firmly ensconced within the bureaucracy of the Protestant Church.[14]

The *Deutsche Christen* supported an Evangelical Church imbued with a German *Volk* feeling. They rejected both the ideas of the older church leadership and those of the liberal Christian movements. The main goal of the *Deutsche Christen* was to strengthen the nation by the unity of common beliefs. Cajus Fabricius, a professor and National Socialist, explained his hopes for the *Deutsche Christen* movement: "Thus the German *Volk* in so far as it is Christian, will not weaken the strength of the Third Reich, but the more Christian it is, the more will it in its earnest piety form the noblest and most vigorous kernel of the nation."[15] Essentially, the *Deutsche Christen* wanted to form a militarist, anti-Semitic religious community that would be united in its fight against what it perceived as the divisive elements of society.

In order to accomplish its ends, the *Deutsche Christen* rejected some very basic tenets of Christian doctrine. They wanted to create a people's church based on unity and imbued with Nazi ideology. The church rejected basic religious rituals in favor of services that celebrated the community and group goals. Whatever remnants of traditional Protestant religious observance that were kept in the *Deutsche Christen* services were distorted in form and meaning in order to produce emotional responses in the participants that would strengthen the group dynamic. For example, baptism came to symbolize a parent's pledge to raise their baptized child in the community of German believers and with the beliefs of "positive Christianity." In essence, parents were giving their children over to the German, or Nazi, *Volk.*[16]

The *Deutsche Christen* also radically altered their viewpoint on the legitimacy of the Old Testament. Early on in the group's development, many *Deutsche Christen* leaders denied the canonicity of the Old Testament. They believed that it was just a "Jewish book" that had no place within the German church. Throughout the mid-1930s, a variety of compromises were reached about the role of the Old Testament in the church. While many completely rejected it, others found the Old Testament to be an anti-Jewish work showcasing the Jews' fall from God. A third group believed that certain kernels of the Old Testament were of value and should be retained irrespective of the whole.[17] This debate garnered enough attention among the *Deutsche Christen* to warrant the establishment of the "Institute for Research into and Elimination of Jewish Influence in German Church Life" on April 4, 1939.[18] The institute's main goal was to "dejudaize" Christianity through a reworking of church music and liturgy to fit the new anti-Semitic religious beliefs.

Although the group mainly focussed on Old Testament issues, the *Deutsche Christen* quickly found that the New Testament also provided problems for their anti-Semitic doctrine. The biggest problem of Jesus' Jewish heritage was easily dealt with. The church just denied it and in many cases they did not even provide reasoning for denying the heritage that is evident throughout the New Testament. Many *Deutsche Christen* leaders taught that Jesus was anti-Semitic because of his fight against the Pharisees and that there was no way Jesus could be Jewish if he fought against the Jews.[19] Other theories, such as the suggestion that an Aryan tribe inhabited the Galilee region at the time of Jesus' birth, were argued, but these theories were not as widely received.[20]

For the most part, the *Deutsche Christen* doggedly believed that anything within the New Testament that contradicted their teachings was the influence of the Jews. Many "perverted and superstitious passages" in the New Testament were eliminated simply because of the church's objection to them.[21] The church took the stance that it had to cleanse Christianity of the evil doings of the Jews. Throughout the 1930s and into the war, the *Deutsche Christen* became less and less affiliated with Protestant Christian doctrine and more and more associated with the Nazi government.

In order to further the support of Protestant Nazi sympathizers, Hitler appointed Chaplain Ludwig Müller to the position of Authorized Representative for Protestant Church Affairs soon after the release of the Aryan Paragraph.[22] Müller's main task was to encourage Protestant unification under Hitler's Aryan ideals. Three thousand self-proclaimed *Deutsche Christen* pastors agreed to unify all of the Protestant churches under Hitler's ideal of "one Volk, one Reich, and one Führer."[23] In order to further Müller's

aims, Pastor Hermann Kapler was appointed to head a commission devoted to establishing a united Protestant church constitution. Although Kapler's group acquiesced to Müller's ideas about an autocratic governing structure, it did not go so far as to give control of the church bureaucracy to Hitler and his followers. While the Kapler Commission endorsed Pastor Friederich von Bodelschwingh for the position of council bishop, Müller proposed that the Council of the Protestant Church Union elect him instead.

Hitler became personally involved in church politics when he gave a radio address the night before the election. In his speech, Hitler said, "I naturally wish that the new Church elections should in their result support our new policy for People and State."[24] He went on to support the stance of the *Deutsche Christen* movement and, in effect, endorse Müller's nomination. To Hitler's chagrin, in the meetings on May 26 and 27, 1933, the Council agreed to the constitution proposed by the Kapler Commission and elected Bodelschwingh as their bishop. In a meeting with church leaders on June 28, 1933, Hitler expressed his unhappiness with the council's election. He threatened, "The church should not have gone over my head. The church can not confront our times and movement with hostility."[25] In fact, Hitler was so enraged at the actions of the church that he decided to go to any length in order to gain full control over church leadership.[26] With the resignation of Pastor Kapler as chair of the Supreme Church Council in Prussia in June 1933, Hitler was able to appoint a pro-Nazi, August Jäger, in his place. Jäger, a lawyer, immediately began a policy of placing the Prussian Protestant Church under Nazi control by removing non-compliant church leaders and putting the church under police supervision.[27] Thus Jäger began the effective takeover of the Protestant Church elite.

With the election of Ludwig Müller as the Reich-Bishop of the German Protestant Church in July 1933, the main core of the Protestant Church now seemed firmly under Hitler's grasp.[28]

Beginnings of the Confessing Church

A small number of Protestant Church leaders became increasingly concerned with the influx of Aryan supremacy ideas into church doctrine. They opposed the "Aryan Paragraph" and Jäger's attempts to sanitize the church of all "non-German" Christians. These men, led in part by Pastor Martin Niemöller of Berlin, formed the Pastors' Emergency League in September 1933. Their main goal was to provide support and reassert common biblical beliefs between their various denominations. The group received almost instantaneous support from over 2,500 pastors throughout the nation and, by January 1934, nearly 6,000 pastors had joined the League.[29] As more pastors agreed to stand up against the *Deutsche Christen*, Jäger became even more determined in his attempts to undermine the growing dissent.[30] He threatened pastors with forced retirement if they were not willing to comply with *Deutsche Christen* ideology.[31]

The *Deutsche Christen* movement further alarmed church moderates in November 1933 when its leaders held a rally at the Berlin Sports Palace. The group proposed removing the Old Testament from the Bible and revising the New Testament for an "Aryan" interpretation of scripture. In order to justify this biblical reinterpretation, *Deutsche Christen* leaders reasoned, "If we National Socialists are ashamed to buy a necktie from the Jew, we should be utterly ashamed to accept from the Jew anything that speaks to our soul, to accept from him the deepest things of religion."[32] In addition to these theological changes, the *Deutsche Christen* passed a resolution declaring that the

church immediately act upon the Aryan paragraph.[33] The rally was a "turning point in the church struggle." Many Protestants now realized how fanatical the *Deutsche Christen* had become. *Deutsche Christen* membership dropped significantly following this rally and many formerly indifferent Protestants became active in the resistance to the *Deutsche Christen* movement.[34]

From May 29 to 31, 1934, these opponents of the *Deutsche Christen* movement met at Wuppertal-Barmen for the first Confessional Synod in the attempt to establish their own doctrine on the foundations of the Christian faith.[35] These church leaders believed that the *Deutsche Christen* had gone astray from the true faith as written in the Bible. After much deliberation, they developed what is now referred to as the Barmen Declaration. This declaration proclaimed the German Christian theology to be heresy and permanently distanced the movement from the Nazi state.[36] The writers of the Barmen Declaration were very clear about the fact that they did not support *Deutsche Christen* policies. In the very beginning, the Declaration laid out the beliefs of the group:

> In opposition to attempts to establish the unity of the German Evangelical Church by means of false doctrine, by the use of force and insincere practices, the Confessional Synod insists that the unity of the Evangelical Churches in Germany can come only from the Word of God in faith through the Holy Spirit.[37]

With this one document, these church leaders effectively broke away from the *Deutsche Christen* church and formed their own church: the Confessing Church.

While the Barmen Declaration laid a good theological foundation for the Confessing Church, the church still had a long way to go in order to achieve autonomy from the *Deutsche Christen* church and the state. Reich Bishop Müller and his accomplice, Jäger, escalated their attempts to force capitulation from the Confessing Christians. Regional churches resisted their efforts to unite all the congregations under a

common German Evangelical Church. Müller and Jäger responded by removing resisting church leaders and replacing them with political appointees. In October 1934 at the Reich Synod in Dahlem, Confessing Church leaders proclaimed the Church Emergency Law and pronounced the Confessing Church to be the true German Evangelical Church. In essence, the Confessing Church leaders were saying that the government could not have control over how the church ran its internal structure or developed doctrine.[38] The church, in effect, had established a boundary for their defiance. Unless the government crossed this boundary and interfered with the church, the church body would not likely directly defy government policy.[39] The enormous opposition that developed against government interference following the Dahlem Declaration led the state to remove Jäger from his post and to withdraw support from Müller. However, this turned out to be a hollow victory. These government actions, in effect, hurt the development of the Confessing Church because many Christians felt that the battle had been won. They viewed the oppression as originating from Müller, not from the state itself. The ease in state restrictions during the following months was only a calm before the storm of further state control.[40]

Examples of True Christian Service

Throughout this trying time of church persecution, some individuals personally experienced the church division and struggle that resulted from the National Socialist rise to power. Bishop Otto Dibelius was one of these men. Born in Berlin in 1880, Dibelius grew up in a pious Protestant home. As the third son in a large family, Otto Dibelius had never intended to go on to higher education, but as a young adult he felt called to go into the ministry.[41] Following his studies at the University of Berlin and the Preachers'

Seminary in Wittenberg, Dibelius began his work as a pastor in 1906. He served at a variety of posts across Germany and, in 1925; he was given the honor of being chosen as the Superintendent-General of the Kurmark. This was a position that involved overseeing the diocese of Potsdam and the agricultural area around Berlin.[42] Due to the struggle between the National Socialists and the Evangelical Church, Dibelius was forced into retirement in 1933 and he subsequently became a member of the Councils of Brethren of the Confessing Church in 1934. His involvement with the Confessing Church throughout the war led to his postwar appointment as the Bishop of Berlin. During his service as Bishop from 1945 to 1961, Dibelius also served as Chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany and as the President of the World Council of Churches.[43] Bishop Dibelius' experiences during the Nazi regime provide a framework from which to draw conclusions on the active involvement or lack thereof of church leaders in the resistance to Hitler.

In his autobiography, Otto Dibelius recounted his experiences with the growing National Socialist movement. While Hitler's early speeches about "positive Christianity" did not persuade Dibelius, many of his colleagues and parishioners were taken in by Hitler's ambiguous words and desire for change. Stories about Hitler's supposed piety became widespread and many accepted as fact that these rumors were true. One well-known story was that Hitler always carried a New Testament in his pocket and that he read Bible verses every morning. While this story was completely unsubstantiated, many people desperately wanted to believe that Hitler had no intention of interfering with the church. As Dibelius explained, "The longing for some positive change in the government of the German State created its own myth."[44]

Martin Niemöller was one of these Protestant leaders who originally supported Hitler, but later realized his mistake. Niemöller came from a long line of Protestant believers. Raised in Westphalia as the son of a minister, he strongly identified with the Protestant movement and the struggles that it had to face in opposition to local Catholic control. Niemöller was very proud of his Protestant heritage and his German nationality. He had been taught from childhood to revere the Kaiser and it was in part for this reason that he joined the German navy in 1910. Niemöller excelled in the navy and commanded his own submarine during World War I, when he bravely served his country until the armistice. Following the war, Niemöller was among the many who felt that Germany's surrender discredited everything it had fought for during the war. His disillusionment with the events surrounding Germany's defeat led to his resignation in 1919. After debating whether to leave Germany and attempting to start a farm, Niemöller decided to go into the ministry and enrolled at the University of Münster in 1920.[45]

During this period, Niemöller struggled with reconciling his loyalties to the displaced Kaiser and to the new German State. His political views were very right wing in that he was not willing to disregard his oath of loyalty to the Kaiser.[46] He even joined the German National Student Movement in the hopes of working towards a better future for Germany. After observing the events surrounding the anti-republican Kapp Putsch in 1920, Niemöller was disheartened at watching Germans fight each other in order to determine political control. Niemöller concluded that, "'We [Germans] lacked leaders, we lacked a real goal, and, above all, we lacked the inward and moral urge to national action.'"[47]

Upon finishing his exams in 1924, Niemöller became a program director with the Westphalian Inner Mission. The mission's goals were to maintain church social programs and reforms such as youth and welfare organizations. During his seven years of service at the mission, Niemöller learned invaluable organizational skills that would later be a benefit to him in his work with the Confessing Church.[48] In 1931, Niemöller accepted a position as a pastor in Dahlem, a prestigious area near Berlin. It is from this pulpit that he made his stand against the Nazis.

When Hitler took office in 1933, Niemöller was hopeful that Hitler's leadership would lead to a new era in German government. Initially, Hitler's public policies and strong leadership seemed to be exactly what the country needed. Hitler spoke of his desire to restore the empire and return the German Protestant Church to its former glory. Niemöller had voted for the National Socialists in 1924 and 1928 and he continued to support the new government until it became apparent that Hitler's publicly adopted views were not truly the foundation of his government.[49] Niemöller even sent Hitler a telegram to congratulate him on his decision to withdraw Germany from the League of Nations.[50] His disillusionment upon discovering Hitler's real beliefs became a turning point in his decision to resist the new church control.

Even though the increasingly popular Hitler was just officially coming to power, Bishop Otto Dibelius—in contrast to Niemöller—was already hesitant about his leadership and willing to stand up to his demands. Hitler had decided that the newly elected *Reichstag*, or state parliament, should open at the old *Garnisonkirche* in Potsdam. This church was very important in Prussian history because both Frederick the Great and his father were entombed therein. Potsdam was within Dibelius' diocese and he did not

think it was appropriate for a government function to be held at a church. A struggle ensued between Dibelius and National Socialist leaders. The Nazis could not understand why Dibelius would not consent to Hitler's wishes and Dibelius did not understand why it was so important for the event to be held in the *Garnisonkirche*. A compromise was finally reached in which separate Catholic and Protestant services commemorating the event were to be held elsewhere in the city while a special state ceremony was to take place at the *Garnisonkirche*. The day after the ceremonies, the *Reichstag* would be opened at the Kroll Opera House in Berlin.[51]

The festivities took place on March 21, 1933 and from this event, Dibelius began to fall from favor with the Nazi government. At the Evangelical service held in the *Nikolaikirche* prior to the *Garnisonkirche* state service, many notables—including Göring and President Hindenburg—came to hear Dibelius preach.[52] In his sermon, Dibelius spoke of Martin Luther and the separation of church and state, subjects that opposed Nazi policies:

> . . . we would not be worthy to be called an Evangelical Church did we not add with the same candor as Luther that public office must not be confused with private arbitrary power. . . The kingdom of secular power and the kingdom of divine grace, are one in the person of the Christian. This is our ardent desire, that a new future for Germany will be brought about by men who, in thankfulness for God's grace, sanctify their lives in discipline and love, and that the spirit of such men will permeate the whole people! Lord, let us again become what our fathers were: by God's grace a hallowed people![53]

Dibelius' comments were not well received by the Nazis present because he discussed the need for boundaries between church and state power. His sermon was threatening to the Nazis present because he did not glorify Hitler's rise to power. Dibelius himself described their reactions, "The National Socialists gave me dark looks. They never forgave me those words."[54] While he did not immediately feel the effects of his sermon, Dibelius already had a sense of foreboding at what was to come.[55]

Dibelius personally experienced the growth of the *Deutsche Christen* movement in the number of church leaders who "discovered their National Socialist hearts" and joined the *Deutsche Christen* church following Hitler's rise to power.[56] The debate surrounding the election of a Reich Bishop was the catalyst for the downfall of Dibelius and many other church leaders. As previously noted, many supported the nomination of Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, but the *Deutsche Christen* wanted Ludwig Müller, Hitler's chosen pastor, to be elected to the position of Reich Bishop. Müller himself spoke before the council to encourage them to elect him for the position—an action that was unheard of in the church. Dibelius was the first to respond to Müller's statement by challenging everyone present to support the nomination of Bodelschwingh. Bodelschwingh was eventually elected, but the large minority supporting Müller revealed that the church was indeed divided on many issues.[57] Soon after this election, August Jäger, the newly promoted state commissioner for the Evangelical Church in Prussia, dismissed Dibelius and many other Superintendent-Generals who were not in line with the *Deutsche Christen* doctrine. These church leaders were powerless to stop the changes. Dibelius soon discovered that there were no pastorates open to him within Germany and he left to work in Italy for a short time.[58]

Martin Niemöller was also very alarmed by the events surrounding Ludwig Müller's election as Reich Bishop. The church's perilous position within Germany was becoming more and more obvious to many church leaders. Following Müller's adoption of the Aryan Paragraph as church doctrine, Niemöller formed the Pastors' Emergency League, or *Pfarrer Notbund*, in August 1933. This group adamantly rejected the role of the Aryan Paragraph in the church and stood for a church based on the tenets of the Bible

and the Protestant Reformation.[59] While over 2,000 pastors initially joined the League, many church leaders believed that Niemöller was too alarmist in his warnings about their nationalistic forms of worship. In the fall of 1933, Niemöller began holding evening meetings at his home in order to analyze the differences between Hitler's ideology and biblical teachings. These meetings quickly outgrew his home as hundreds came to learn more about the religious conflict between their church and Hitler. According to an American pastor, Rev. Ewart Edmund Turner, who lived in Berlin at the time and attended many of the gatherings, these meetings were "the first analysis of Hitlerism" and "the first coals that started the fire of opposition."[60]

The continued resistance of many pastors to the doctrine of the *Deutsche Christen* led Reich Bishop Müller to issue an edict forbidding political discussions in the church. Any pastor caught criticizing the church establishment would be dismissed from their position and denied a pension. On January 7, 1934, ninety-eight Berlin pastors protested this edict from their pulpits. The following Sunday pastors throughout the country read a statement issued by this resisting body regarding the edict. These pastors made it clear that they rejected Müller's attempts to subdue them.

Niemöller suffered some personal setbacks early in 1934 because of his involvement in the growing church resistance. In January, Müller suspended him from preaching. Shortly thereafter, the Niemöller home was searched and all of the documents regarding the Pastors' Emergency League were seized. Someone also attempted to bomb the Niemöller's home, but fortunately the bomb was unsuccessful. Even through all of this personal tragedy, Martin Niemöller remained true to his cause.[61]

In May 1934, the Confessing Church held its first synod at Wupperthal-Barmen. Niemöller and many other church leaders declared that the *Deutsche Christen* church government was invalid and violated scripture. This synod was important because it brought together people from a variety of Protestant traditions in order to establish one solid doctrine on Protestant beliefs. This conference allowed people from a variety of church backgrounds to work together towards a common cause. It became the precursor to the establishment of the Confessing Church.

By the time Otto Dibelius returned from Italy in July 1934, the Confessing Church had already established itself through the Barmen Declaration. Dibelius attended the Dahlem Conference as an observer and was pleasantly surprised at the strong stance that the Confessing Christians took against the *Deutsche Christen.* From then on, Dibelius knew that his place was within the ranks of the Confessing Church. He soon accepted an assignment to work with the Brandenburg Council of Brethren.[62]

Dibelius' work in the Confessing Church was not without hardship. Early in his career, the Confessing Christians in Neuruppen asked the pastor to come and speak about the church struggle. During Dibelius' sermon, the National Socialists started an uproar that ended the meeting. Dibelius was subsequently arrested, the first time he was arrested for his faith. As the alleged "instigator" in the uprising, he was imprisoned until the following evening.[63] This event was significant because the true instigator of the riot was none other than Pastor Falkenberg, the local *Deutsche Christen* leader. During the meeting, Falkenberg had shouted that Dibelius was a traitor to the country. Soon after the event, Confessing Christians in Neuruppen asked Dibelius to file a legal suit against Falkenberg for his slanderous statements. Although reluctant, Dibelius went to court in

the hopes of easing the persecution experienced by local Confessing Christians because of Falkenberg's victory. Dibelius' case against Falkenberg was tried twice and in both instances Falkenberg was found guilty. Dibelius' minor victory eased the tension for the Neuruppen Christians, toppled Falkenberg from power, and discredited Falkenberg's claim that Confessing Christians were traitors to their country.[64]

Throughout the pre-war Nazi period, Dibelius spent most of his time in the administration of the Brandenburg province due to his extensive church background. He also wrote memoranda and leaflets that were distributed anonymously throughout the country. These leaflets appealed to German Protestants about the dangers of government involvement in the church. While on many occasions the Gestapo searched Dibelius' home, they were never able to find any evidence to link him to the leaflets. The pastor was also arrested numerous times, but he was always released. The worst punishment that Dibelius received was an official order prohibiting him from preaching.[65]

While Dibelius passively worked towards his ideals, Dietrich Bonhoeffer actively voiced his opposition and concern with Nazi policies. Bonhoeffer came from a liberal, academic upbringing, which affected his thought and actions. He was born in Breslau on February 4, 1906. His family moved to Berlin when he was a small child and he spent his formative years in close contact with his neighbor, Adolf von Harnack, a leading liberal scholar at the time. Bonhoeffer came from a long line of scholars and it was always assumed that he too would be a scholar. At the age of seventeen, Bonhoeffer enrolled in theological studies at Tübingen. After taking a break to travel to Rome and North Africa, Bonhoeffer began to seriously study theology in Berlin under Harnack.[66] He presented his doctoral thesis, *Sanctorum Communio*, at the age of twenty-one. This

thesis established his lifelong interest in studying the structure of the church. Upon completing his theological examination, Bonhoeffer went to Spain to become an assistant pastor to a German speaking church in Barcelona. While in Spain, Bonhoeffer developed an interest in Christian ethics, which was to remain an important theme for his studies. He later wrote a book on the subject. In September 1930, Bonhoeffer went to the Union Theological Seminary in New York as a Sloane Fellow. While in America, he was introduced to the American practice of the social gospel. Although he was not impressed with American theology, Bonhoeffer admired the involvement of American Christians in the social issues of the time.[67] Bonhoeffer's experiences living abroad gave him a different perspective on theological issues in Germany.

In August 1931, Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin as a theological professor. Germany had drastically changed in his absence. When he had left for America the year before, the National Socialist Party was only a minor party. Upon his return, Bonhoeffer discovered that the Nazis had become the largest party in the German Parliament. When Hitler became chancellor in 1933, Bonhoeffer was one of the first to criticize Hitler's leadership principle. Unlike most of the opposition within the church, Bonhoeffer emphasized that the struggle with the Nazi government was not a political one, but rather a theological one.[68]

Bonhoeffer took a strong stance on anti-Semitism within the church. When Bishop Müller adopted the Aryan Paragraph, Bonhoeffer vocally opposed the discrimination of church pastors. He believed that "a church which discriminated against its members and ministers on the ground of race was no longer the church of Jesus Christ."[69] In a speech regarding the adoption of the Aryan clauses, Bonhoeffer made the

following statement: "The church cannot allow its actions towards its members to be prescribed by the state. The baptized Jew is a member of our church. Thus the Jewish problem is not the same for the church as it is for the state."[70] Although he disagreed with the Aryan Paragraph's effects on the church, Bonhoeffer did not stand up against Jewish discrimination in German society. He was careful to limit his criticism to the implementation of government goals in the Protestant church. Bonhoeffer did not believe that it was his place to criticize government decisions unless they affected the morality of the nation. At the time, the government's anti-Semitic policies were not seen as harmful to the nation as a whole.

Soon after he stood out against the Aryan Paragraph, Bonhoeffer accepted a position as the pastor of a German Lutheran Church in London, where he stayed until 1935. While he was criticized for his decision to leave Germany at such a pivotal time, Bonhoeffer was better able to serve the Confessing Church movement in London. He was free to speak to people about Germany's problems without fear of repercussion. Bonhoeffer convinced the church establishment in England that the developing Confessing Church was the true German church.[71] His work in London set the stage for the international support of the Confessing Church and its leaders during the war.

Bonhoeffer was influential in the Barmen Conference of 1934 and he helped write the Barmen Declaration. His increased notoriety led to the Confessing Church calling him to run a separate seminary for Confessing Christians in 1935. This seminary was set up in Finkenwalde on the Baltic Sea. Finkenwalde was the center of the Confessing Christian movement until the Nazis shut it down in 1937.

The Confessing Church movement suffered some difficulties in the mid-1930s. On February 22, 1936, the Confessing Church suffered its greatest internal setback following the fourth Confessional Synod at Bad Oeynhausen. The Confessing Church was made up of a large moderate faction led by three Lutheran bishops: August Marahrens of Hanover, Theophil Wurm of Württemberg, and Hans Meiser of Bavaria. This moderate faction believed that the movement as a whole would be jeopardized by a direct attack on the ideological problems with National Socialism. This group was countered by a small radical faction of the Confessing Church that interpreted scripture as commanding them to protest against the immoral actions of the government. Martin Niemöller, Hans Asmussen, and Otto Dibelius shared this more radical viewpoint.[72] At the fourth synod, these two groups irrevocably split. The Lutheran group formed its own council and the rest of the Confessing Churches were forced to rebuild their church administrative structure.[73] Suddenly, the resistance to the *Deutsche Christen* was divided and powerless to stop the growth of the Nazi church movement. The remainder of the Confessing Church lost much of its authority with the people and, consequently, the Confessing Church was unable to gather strong support for its goals. When problems such as the persecution of the Jews came to a forefront during the war, the church was not able to muster open opposition to these Nazi policies.

In 1937, Otto Dibelius reentered the public sphere with his open letter of condemnation against Hans Kerrl. In the spring of 1937, Hitler had appointed Kerrl, a *Deutsche Christen* pastor, to the position of Reich Minister for Church Affairs. Kerrl decided that his first course of action would be to unite the moderate elements of both the *Deutsche Christen* church and the Confessing Church.[74] In a speech to the leaders of the

various church committees, Kerrl instructed these pastors that from then on they would have to teach, in Dibelius' own words, Kerrl's own "National Socialist brand of Christianity—a frightful mixture of race, blood, soil and New Testament."[75] Kerrl's order was a direct assault on the very foundations of Christian belief. Dibelius was compelled to respond by writing an open letter to the Reich Minister.[76] The letter was copied and widely circulated throughout Europe and America. Kerrl was so upset at this development that he ordered legal proceedings against Dibelius.[77]

On August 6, 1937, the trial of Otto Dibelius began. The courtroom was packed with many high-ranking Nazi officials and members of the domestic and foreign press. The numerous church leaders who had heard Kerrl's speech testified as witnesses and all but one agreed that Kerrl's order was "an attack on the foundations of the Christian faith."[78] Kerrl flatly denied that he had said anything that was inflammatory against Christianity. Dibelius spoke in his own defense, explaining that it was his duty as a pastor to publicly object to Kerrl's statements. While Dibelius and his lawyers expected his sentence to be as little as a 300-mark fine or as great as three months imprisonment, to everyone's surprise, the court decided to acquit Otto Dibelius. This decision was not only an embarrassment to Hans Kerrl, but also to the Nazi State. While Kerrl fumed and plotted Dibelius' destruction, the Nazis worked to cover up the fiasco. Kerrl's desires were thwarted and the Nazis were determined to be better prepared before attempting to bring to trial another public figure. Martin Niemöller's trial, which was scheduled to begin ten days later, was postponed for many months in order for the government to assess their mistakes and be better prepared to make their case.[79]

Unlike Dibelius, both Niemöller and Bonhoeffer faced imprisonment because of their faith. Martin Niemöller was arrested in 1937 and imprisoned in Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps until his release in 1945. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was held in the Flossenburg concentration camp until his execution on April 9, 1945. These two men risked everything for their beliefs.

Even though Martin Niemöller knew of the inherent dangers of actively speaking out against anti-Semitism, he continued to stand up against the Nazi regime. Friends worried about his safety and that of his wife and seven children, but Niemöller rejected their ideas for his escape from Germany. Throughout the mid-1930s, he was arrested five times, but each time he was only held for a day or two.[80] In 1937, the government increased its efforts against the Protestant Church with waves of arrests of pastors and laypeople who were a part of the Confessing Church. The Nazis were attempting to weaken the movement through continued persecution. On June 27, Niemöller spoke out against these arrests in a sermon at his church in Dahlem:

> We have as little thought and as little hope as the Apostles had of escaping from the clutches of the powers-that-be by our own efforts; and we have certainly as little intention as they had of obeying the human command to keep silent regarding what the Lord our God orders us to say; for, as long as the world shall last, one must obey God rather than men![81]

Although Niemöller assumed that his days of freedom were numbered, he had no idea that this would be his last sermon until after Hitler's death. On July 1, Niemöller was arrested at his home and taken to the Moabit prison.

The Nazis arrested Niemöller on relatively minor charges. Due to the increased legitimacy that it gave the Confessing Church cause, the government made it illegal for a pastor to read the names of people who had withdrawn their membership to the *Deutsche*

Christen. Martin Niemöller was charged with breaking this law and "causing unrest among the people."[82] On February 7, 1938, Niemöller's court trial began in secret. The defense called numerous well-known Germans to testify to the pastor's sincere patriotism and past dedication to Germany. The prosecution countered with allegations that Niemöller was in league with foreigners. On March 2, the presiding judges acquitted him of most of his charges with the belief that Niemöller had acted honorably, but they did convict him of breaking the law regarding the reading of names. Niemöller was sentenced to time already served and was to be released shortly. Unfortunately for Niemöller, Hitler was upset at the ruling and wanted Niemöller sent to a concentration camp. When none of his cabinet members would support him, Hitler declared that Niemöller was to be his personal prisoner and had him immediately sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin where he was to stay until the end of the war.[83] Niemöller was fortunate because although he suffered eight years of imprisonment, he survived the Nazi regime to serve the German Protestant Church in the post-war years. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not so lucky; he became one of the most well known martyrs for his faith.

Due to his connections in the government, Bonhoeffer was not imprisoned until late in the war. During the pre-war and early war years, Bonhoeffer was active in the underground Nazi resistance. Following the government closure of the Finkenwalde seminary in September 1937, Bonhoeffer and some of his students began a hidden ministry in Köslin, Gross-Schlönwitz, and Sigurdshof.[84] Shortly thereafter, he began making contact with those in the German resistance, many of whom were planning ways to overthrow Hitler. In June 1939, Bonhoeffer accepted a teaching assignment in New

York. Although he originally planned on staying in the United States, Bonhoeffer soon felt called to return to Germany in July 1939 to face the struggles that were to come.[85]

Bonhoeffer was employed by the German intelligence, the *Abwehr*, during the early part of the war. His employers justified his job in intelligence by saying that his ecumenical contacts would be helpful for gathering information for the war effort, but the *Abwehr* was in actuality the center of the resistance against Hitler. Bonhoeffer was able to travel throughout Europe because of his job and connections. He helped Jews escape Germany and he tried to get Allied support for the German resistance. Many in Germany were suspicious of his government position and consequently, his role in the church changed because of these advantages. When he was eventually arrested in 1943, the church did not place him on the intercession list in large part because of his "double life."[86] In April 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested and spent eighteen months in a Berlin prison. Following the attempted assassination of Hitler in July 1944, Bonhoeffer's prison privileges were further restricted because of his early involvement in the resistance. His friends and family lost contact with him and he disappeared within the prison system. Later it was determined that he had been moved to Buchenwald, then Schönberg, and finally to Flossenburg, where he was executed on April 8, 1945.[87]

While Niemöller and Bonhoeffer remained outspoken even with the threat of death, Dibelius chose to take a less active role in the resistance during the war. Otto Dibelius was understandably intimidated by the Nazis and he retreated from the public limelight following his trial. For the most part, he remained in the background until after the war. The war years were personally challenging for Dibelius, as he had to send three sons off to battle; two of them died in action. While he did not overtly resist the

government, Dibelius, like many other sympathetic Germans, played a small part in helping the persecuted Jews by employing two Jewish brothers for the entire duration of the war. He helped them maintain their jobs while hiding from the Gestapo. Upon learning in 1942 of Auschwitz and the horrors of the death camps, Dibelius passed on this shocking information to members of the Swedish embassy. He chose not to get personally involved with the Jewish plight in large part because of Gestapo intimidation. While there were many occasions in which the pastor's associates were imprisoned, he was left untouched.[88]

Lack of Action by the Confessing Church During the War

Dibelius' actions during the war resemble those of the movement as a whole. Most Confessing Christians did little to stand up to the government. Those who did act against the government did so in a way that they hoped would not attract government attention. The totalitarian regime under which they lived made it hard for anyone to publicly denounce the government or take large risks to help others. Many people decided that self-preservation was more important than their beliefs.

While Confessing Church leaders strongly opposed state interference in church doctrine, most did not publicly denounce Nazi anti-Semitism or the government's encroachment on civil liberties. Even with all that was going on in Nazi Germany, "Confessing Christians continually preached obedience to the state in all earthly matters, limiting obedience only when the state interfered with the practice of religion."[89] The Confessing Church leaders were not even willing to agree to criticize the *Deutsche Christen* movement for its anti-Semitic stance. While theologians within the Confessing Church objected to the *Deutsche Christen* doctrine of "elevating *Volkstum*—race—to the

level of God's revelation," no one ever acknowledged this heresy as an anti-Jewish belief.[90] This lack of strong resistance to the *Deutsche Christen* racial ideology is a testament to the inability of the Confessing Church to doggedly stand up to its opponents. The undercurrent of anti-Semitism that remained in the Confessing Church made it hard for the church to oppose Jewish persecution.[91] While a few individuals, for instance Niemöller and Bonhoeffer, chose to speak out on these matters, the Confessing Church as a whole refrained from involving itself in what it deemed unnecessary disputes with the government.

As Germany headed off to war, the Confessing Church leaders came to realize that while they might have a considerable number of members in their churches, these people were not active members. While 6,000 of the 16,000 Evangelical ministers in Germany had declared themselves to be a part of the Confessing Church as of 1934, only a small number of pastors are considered to have actively opposed the government.[92] "To the extent that people were politically opposed to Hitler, they were happy if the pastors were courageous; but that was all, as far as they were concerned." Therefore, "the struggle of the Confessing Church was a struggle of theologians, backed by a very small group of courageous laymen."[93] The Confessing Church continued its struggle for survival under the strong hand of the Nazi government. While individuals involved in the Confessing Church had to decide for themselves whether or not to publicly proclaim their private objections, men such as Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer made the decision to risk their lives in order to stand up for what they thought was right.

After World War II, the totality of the German atrocities came to light and many Christians the world over questioned why the church had not done more to stop the Nazi

government. While Germany's Christians could cite individuals who had stood up to the Nazi regime, the church in its entirety only opposed Hitler on matters of self-interest. The Confessing Church in Germany developed as a response to government ideological interference in church doctrine, not because of objections to Nazi policies on civil liberties. Even the Barmen Declaration of 1934 was established solely because of the church's objections to state interference in church doctrine and not due to the broader actions of the state itself. The fundamental dilemma facing the Christians during the Nazi era was whether they should obey Biblical principles or the state. It is apparent that even the Confessing Christians were not able to discover a clear solution to this problem.

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[10] Stackelberg, p. 105.
[11] Hermann Göring, Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945 – 1 October 1946. 42 vols. (Nuremberg, Germany: International Military Tribunal, 1947), 2: p. 117.
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[24] Baynes, p. 377.
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[26] Thomas, p. 9.
[27] Ibid, p. 10.
[28] Ibid, p. 11.
[29] William McGuire King, "Prelude to the German Church Struggle: Otto Dibelius and The Century of the Church," Journal of Church and State 24 (1982): p. 53.
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[56] Ibid, p. 140.
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