

The Rise and Fall of the Confessing Church
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This year 2008 it is now 75 years since the Nazis came to power in Germany, unleashing a terrible 12 years of terror that culminated in a European war that left a profound change not just on European history but on our very understanding of the dimensions of human evil. Big anniversaries of course make us think of smaller ones, and if we were to leaf through a calendar of such anniversaries in 1933 we would find one after another, including February 27 next week will mark the 75th anniversary of the Reichstag fire, as well as the sublevels of history – the debates, the arguments, of people at the time that cannot be marked in dates but which are equally significant because they determined how human beings reacted to the major events. Seventy-five years ago during these winter weeks there was great turbulence and disquiet in the German Protestant church, leading to the story I tell this afternoon, of the rise and fall of the Confessing Church.

As these introductory remarks suggest, that story takes place on a much larger landscape. In both this political historical context – as well as in the context of church history – I would argue that the emergence of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany was a major event, perhaps even the most profound moment in the history of Protestantism since the Reformation itself. The Confessing Church – a minority movement within the German Protestant church that fought against the nazification of the church, divided into factions, never quite sure of its own identity or even its theology – changed the nature of German Protestantism, although certainly not in isolation from the political context of the Nazi dictatorship, the war it unleashed throughout Europe, and the massive human rights

violations throughout the European continent that included the most massive genocide in human history, the murder of 6 million European Jews. What the Confessing Church did by its very existence was challenge the unity of throne and altar, the alliance of church and state power, in a nation in which was an assumed and deeply inculcated tradition. And by challenging this unity in a political dictatorship that had deep popular support, the Confessing Church was forced to articulate some counter-truths that could combat the spirit of the times. Its successes as well as its failures shaped postwar Protestant thought and polity. The Evangelical Church of Germany, and its clergy and leadership, are very different than their counterparts of 75 years ago.

But the story of the Confessing Church has also shaped churches throughout the world. There have been groups throughout the world – in this county, in Africa, in Europe, in Asia, that have called confessional movements. I would contend that all too often the example they follow is a symbolic one that doesn't necessarily correspond to the actual history of the Confessing Church. And yet clearly there is something here that captures our imagination, even if it's only the idea of a church with a clear purpose and the courage to witness to that. And the vision of a confessing church is crucial to understanding the theology and life and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, its most famous member and one of its severest critics.

Chronology (talking points):

- The German Protestant church was almost pre-programmed to succumb to National Socialism in January of 1933.

- Nationalism and praise for new regime
- Anger at the Weimar republic
- Agreement with much of the Nazi rhetoric on the need for a return to traditional values, with its antisemitism and its scapegoating of the Jews as to blame for every humiliation Germany had suffered
- And at the same time there were the seeds of dissent – which led to the struggle within the Protestant church itself: with the Deutsche Christen, the German Christians who embraced the ethno-nationalist ideology of National Socialism
- Describe German Christians: The 1920 Nazi Party Platform included a statement on “positive Christianity”: *“We demand the freedom of all religious confessions in the state, insofar as they do not jeopardize the state’s 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. It combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit at home and abroad and is convinced that a permanent recovery of our people can only be achieved from within on the basis of the common good before individual good.”*
- German Christians embraced all these aspects – wanted an Aryan church. German Christian appeal in its early years – and this began in the 1920s – was widespread and it’s important to see that it was a continuation of the alliance between theology and a certain political agenda, and it drew in even Protestants who would later find their way to the Confessing Church. The brothers Wilhelm & Martin Niemöller, who later became so prominent in the Confessing Church,

were sympathetic to both Nazism and the German Christians. Wilhelm was an early NSDAP member and joined the German Christians in the mid-1920s. Martin Niemoeller voted for the Nazi party in the last free elections.

- Despite the nationalism, despite the relief at the end of the chaos of the Weimar years, despite the anti-Communism and the agreement with much of the Nazi's social and cultural rhetoric and, yes, despite pervasive and deeply rooted antisemitism: the Protestant mainstream couldn't accept the ideological extremes of the German Christians that began to emerge in early 1933: in particular the call for an Aryan church that would essentially adopt Nazi racial laws as the criteria for baptism and church membership, employment, and ordination to the ministry. The attempted nazification of the church (for that's what it was) would eventually lead, in some parts of Germany, to the establishment of separate congregations for so-called "non-Aryan Christians". It would completely pull the rug out from under Christians who were considered non-Aryan under Nazi law – and there 3 times as many of these as there were observant Jews (Germany had one of the most highly assimilated Jewish populations in Europe, and assimilation in that context meant conversion)
- None of these measures, we should remember, were imposed by the state. Almost all of the pressures on the German churches to conform with National Socialism came from within. They were put on the agenda of synods by church members and affirmed by popular votes in those synods, implemented by elected church officials, and given theological legitimacy by some of the most internationally

renowned German theologians, such as Paul Althaus, Emanuel Hirsch and Gerhard Kittel.

- Yet the voices that arose to oppose this – the voice that united in the Confessing Church – also came from within the churches. Initially (in this early period) they called themselves the Pastors' Emergency League, established to help pastors and other church staff who were affected by the racial laws. And yet there was not as yet any clear theology – and there was much debate about what a theology in this new situation would look like. Again and again, there was a wish to “let the church be the church” – to return to the confessions, the scriptures, to set clear boundaries against the ideological influences of the German Christians.
- The early period of this struggle with the German Christians culminated in the meeting of Protestant leaders in Barmen in May 1934 and the unanimous approval of the Barmen confession, written largely by Karl Barth. The Barmen Confession repudiated German Christian teachings and the Nazi state's attempts to interfere with the churches. Its six theses proclaimed a church based only upon the traditional confessions and scripture, and declared church independence from "ideological and political convictions." More significantly -- it announced that, from the church's standpoint, there had to be limits on the authority and power of the state, and it explicitly repudiated the Fuhrer principle on which the Nazi dictatorship was based. And with that the Barmen declaration was potentially a statement of political resistance to Nazism: a first step for some Confessing Christians along the path that would culminate in political resistance – the most famous example being Bonhoeffer. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Martin Niemoeller).

- But it was only **potentially** a statement of political resistance. Even today, the Barmen declaration can be read in two directions – 1) as a retreat inward to a pure Christian message that will remain untainted by the politics of the world OR 2) outward, as a challenge to the world and its attempts to stifle the conscience and the spirit (and this is why we see “Confessing church” movements today at all points of the theological and political spectrum – they’re reading the Barmen declaration and this history in one direction or the other). And it was read in both directions at the time, even by the more than 100 Protestant leaders who voted in Barmen to affirm it. As a condemnation of German Christian ideology, of the attempt to create an ideological Christianity that conformed to National Socialism, the Barmen declaration was a clear statement to the world, a real “Here I stand” moment. But the basis of the Christianity it proclaimed – a return to the scriptures, to the claim to follow Christ alone (not any worldly Fuhrer) – could also be read as a move **inward**, a move to “let the church be the church” (as the popular saying at the time went), a retreat from the political sphere toward institutional purity – and fatally, in the context of its time – to caution, to creating a church that could go about its business as usual in Nazi Germany, to a deliberate decision to “render unto Caesar”.
- And this was actually the most widespread interpretation at the time. When we think of the Confessing Church today we often think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and assume that there was a radical clarity about the political and theological challenges that faced Protestants in Germany. Yet for most Protestant theologians, pastors, and church leaders, the opposite was the case. There was

- clarity only in the condemnation of the German Christians. From the very beginning Bonhoeffer was on the margins of his church, and he wasn't even present at the Barmen meeting in May 1934 – having left Germany in September 1933 in disgust with church politics, and describing his move to a pastorate in London as a move “into the desert”, in a letter to Karl Barth. And even in Bonhoeffer the emergence of clarity of purpose and strategy, and of what kind of theology was demanded of him, was a gradual process that lasted, really, until his death in 1945. One sees him through these years wrestling with the big questions as to what “a church in the world” should be about, what his church was being called to do. He was clear from the beginning in his political condemnation of National Socialism (and in this he was years ahead of most in his church). And he was clear from the beginning in his commitment to a different vision of church -- even as he tried to define what that might be -- and Bonhoeffer wanted the Confessing Church to be that church. Between 1933 and 1935 from his post in London he fought successfully to move the congregations there into the Confessing Church, to break with the church leadership in Berlin, which was either openly sympathetic to the German Christians or so cautiously vague with everything it said and did that you couldn't tell the difference.
- And when Bonhoeffer returned to Nazi Germany in the spring of 1935 – to direct a seminary for people studying for the ministry in the Confessing Church -- he found himself in the second phase of the German church struggle.
 - That second phase of the church struggle had really begun in October 1934, with the Dahlem synod, where the ranks that had united in Barmen crumbled.

Mainstream and established church leaders opted there for a model of Confessing church that would avoid a church split between the different factions – German Christians and Confessing Christians – thereby creating an institution marked at best by an uneasy peace. But the radical Confessing Christians (the ones who gave Barmen the outward interpretation) wouldn't buy it, and Dahlem was the synod where they broke away and set up their own governance system, their own theological faculties and examination boards that would train and examine candidates, and the most radical Confessing Christians considered themselves de facto a separate church. When Bonhoeffer returned to Nazi Germany, this was the church, and the ministry, that he returned to.

- Yet even these radical Confessing Christians never really left the German Protestant Church, and so even after Dahlem the Protestant church continued to encompass all these different factions. And its most prominent leaders opted for a cautious path that 1) would keep their church from splitting into factions and 2) avoid confrontations with the Nazi state.
- That meant silence about the things that mattered. It meant making numerous compromises with the German Christians, who now held leading positions in many church bureaucracies. It meant couching the church's timid criticism of this or that policy in proclamations of political loyalty and support for the state. When the church wanted to fight against something the Nazi state was doing, it meant behind the scenes, quiet diplomacy, working the contacts that bishops and other leaders had with Nazi bureaucrats – rather than speaking out publicly in protest and condemnation.

- And what that looked like in real life is what historians uncovered decades later, when they really began to examine the record of what the Confessing Church actually did and said (not just the glorified picture that emerged right after 1945), is a shameful, tragic, sickening picture of cowardice and complicity in state violence:
- In 1935, two weeks after the passage of the Nuremberg laws, a small group of deaconesses tried to move the Confessing Church synod at Steglitz to speak out against the Nazi measures against the Jews. In the memorandum they submit to the synod they write: *“How should we answer the question, “Where is your brother Abel?” We in the Confessing Church have no better answer than that of Cain. . . . Why must we continually hear from the ranks of the non-Christians that they feel the Church has abandoned them? . . . Why doesn’t the Church pray for those suffering guiltlessly, those being persecuted? Why aren’t there prayer meetings for the Jews, like there were prayer meetings when the pastors were arrested? The Church makes it bitterly difficult for us to defend her.”* And the memorandum and the measure aren’t even put on the agenda, because the presiding bishop at the synod (one of those who had signed the Barmen declaration) warned that the Confessing Church would be committing suicide if it spoke out on such a key aspect of Nazi policy, and another leader threatened to walk out, if the issue of the Jews was discussed.
- And the response of the church was similar, on one key issue after another: the widespread silence about Kristallnacht; the behind the scenes attempts to stop the euthanasia program coupled with a refusal to speak out, to the church’s open

- affirmations of Nazi war policies in the name of patriotism once the war broke out. By 1937 the Confessing Church was backing away even from the so-called non-Aryan Christians, the very people for whose sake the church struggle had begun. For the sake of avoiding a direct confrontation with state laws, the church shamefully abandoned the pastors who were affected by the Nazi racial laws. Some of them emigrated; some were arrested in the wake of Kristallnacht and sent to camps; some of them suffered bitterly under the silence of the church.
- There were some in the CC who left it in fury at its cowardice. In 1938, the young lawyer Gustav Heinemann, who decades later would become president of the Federal Republic of Germany, resigned from the Confessing Council in the Rhineland in disgust, condemning its constant compromises and saying: ***“How much have we declared unbearable, and yet we bear it!”***
 - As this chronology would suggest, perhaps the trajectory of the Confessing Church can be described less as a rise and fall than as a brief energetic moment of vision and hope, followed by a steady and numbing decline. Throughout the 1930s, each year is marked by major political events as well as – on the subterranean level, not frequently traced in general historical works of the period – by an ongoing church conversations and reactions and debates and – people going to church and sending their kids to bible studies and ministers preaching sermons: 1933 – 34- 35- 36 – 37 – 38 – 39. The story of the Confessing Church usually peters out by 1935 or so, and yet it continued. It was part of the reality of thousands of German Protestants.

- Among the many ironies of this complex history is the path of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wasn't at Barmen. He wasn't at Dahlem. His brief appearances at the prominent early events of the church struggle can best be described as rabbleroising. At the so-called "brown synod" in Wittenberg in 1933 he and his friend Franz Hildebrandt drove Bonhoeffer's father's car into town and nailed protest leaflets up on all the trees. At the Steglitz synod in 1935 he appears again with his students, and they sit up in the balcony of the church and stamp their feet in protests and catcalls to the delegates below. In between those two events, as I mentioned, he took off for London – an act that I would submit reflects uncertainty and ambivalence about his relationship to the official church. And when he returned to Germany it was to just about the most remote posting possible, to lead one of those 5 Confessing seminaries (established by the radicals at the Dahlem synod), to educate young theologians who want to become pastors in that worst and most uncertain of times. Because they trained in an illegal seminary, their ordinations weren't recognized by the official church, and they had to find work in a Confessing parish that would support them. They couldn't expect the standard benefits and security of official church pastors (who were civil servants). After August 1939, almost all of them became soldiers. Half of the illegal seminarians in the Confessing Church died in the war, most of them on the eastern front. 113 young men studied under Bonhoeffer for the ministry between 1935 – 1937; 36 of them were killed in action.
- But the Confessing Church continues in the war: (men were gone; women kept it alive).

- There are some striking observations that can be made when we juxtapose Bonhoeffer's path during these years with the rise and fall (or as the case may be the numbing decline) of the Confessing Church. 1) One is that as during the same period that the church becomes more paralyzed and in a way irrelevant, Bonhoeffer's engagement on behalf of that church became most intense and decisive. The period of his deepest engagement in the Confessing Church are really those years between 1935-39, when the Dahlem group goes underground and the mainstream church falls silent. Those are the years when Bonhoeffer teaches a generation of students to preach, to minister, where he writes the theological classics *Discipleship* and *Life Together*, where he begins to conceive concretely of a new kind of church and a new kind of ministry and fellowship among believers. 2) And yet another striking thing when we read the documents from those years – the letters, the sermons, the student notes – is that there's very little in them that reveals the political circumstances in which they were written. The documents from the years at the seminary in Finkewalde, as well as the period in which Bonhoeffer was supervising seminarians in secret, underground, do seem to be a move inward. Bonhoeffer's focus is on exegesis, preaching, ministry, and yet when we read these documents closely (with an eye to the larger political context) we can see that he is really trying to give them the spiritual food to nourish them in their position on the margins of their church. They were already positioned in Nazi Germany: as illegal seminarians they had taken a stand that jeopardized their standing in the official church AND drew the attention of the police. The DBWE includes are a series of police reports on Bonhoeffer's

movements and his talks to seminarians and bible groups. In 1937 the Gestapo closes the seminary in Finkenwalde, and in 1938 he's expelled from Berlin, and in 1940 the police put a ban on his public speaking and he's required to check with the local police wherever he goes. 3) And this brings us to the other striking thing, which is where Bonhoeffer goes from there: in 1939 he leaves his students behind, travels to this country, feels guilty, returns and for a brief period continues to supervise his students secretly. But at this point he is already a member of the resistance. For all intents and purposes his official work in the Confessing church had ended. After the fall of Nazism in 1945 mainstream church leaders condemned his resistance activities as politically based, not as something a Christian would do.

- And this leads me to another observation: the most outspoken members of the Confessing Church, the people who did something, the individuals who actually were part of some kind of resistance group, were most often those on the edges. Peel back the layers of the Confessing Church, in fact, and we find a variety of movements and theological developments that bear later fruit:
 - Role of young women theologians, their fight for ordination, their keeping the CC alive during the war
 - Different conception of church that bore fruit especially in the GDR (Schoenherr). This lost out in BRD after 1945 with re-establishment of the church
 - Emergence of political theology: legacy carried out by Niemoeller, Scharf, Gollwitzer, Eberhard Bethge. These were also moral leaders in postwar

Germany who became voices of conscience, memory, reconciliation. Kurt Scharf helped found and led the Aktion Sühnezeichen. It was Bethge (Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer) who spoke out in Germany about the Holocaust and helped bring about the 1981 Rhineland synod statement that redefined the German Protestant church's relationship to Judaism.

- In other words – in its aftermath, in its legacy, the Confessing Church became a symbol of resistance and courage and thus in a sense enabled the postwar German Protestant church to achieve a political and theological clarity that the CC itself had never had. It was my privilege, when I was collecting oral histories for my first book, to interview a number of the CC people. I felt at the time and still feel today that I met the best and the brightest that this church had to offer – and in the process was able to get a sense of what the potential for a church can be.
- Something similar can be said of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. One of the things I learned from the people I interviewed was how unknown he was at the time. Today we describe him as a leader of the Confessing Church, but many of the people I interviewed said they never heard of him until after 1945. He was young (27 in 1933). He wasn't a bishop, or a prominent pastor. He spent considerable time outside of Germany. So he was always at the margins. In many ways he had a remarkable clarity, from the very beginning, about the political challenges faced by his church. Yet this didn't always translate into a clarity as to what he should do, and particularly with regard to where he belonged in his church. His movement in to the resistance itself is an example (coincidental, really – I'm not sure so much it was a decision as a circumstance in which he found himself and then made sense of).

What did Bonhoeffer think of the Confessing Church? His years in the resistance and (after 1943) in prison were in many ways the most theologically rich years, even if many of his writings from this period are unfinished and exist only as drafts. Much of his theological conversation was in the form of his letters to Eberhard Bethge. At this point it was not so much a life at the margins as really removed from the daily reality of the Confessing Church in wartime – his primary communications were with his students who were soldiers, and their families. His disappointment with the Confessing Church shapes this theology. In May 1944 he writes: “Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and the doing of justice.”—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, May 1944ⁱ

Bonhoeffer’s theology during these years in resistance and prison are certainly shaped by the political realities and his reflections on them – but also very much by his vision of church. It is ironic that Bonhoeffer, even though he was a figure on the margins, is one of the very few people in the German Protestant church who between 1939-1945 reflects and writes on what the church struggle has meant, and then goes on to reflect about what that means for the future of Christian faith and its church.

Because of these writings, it is Bonhoeffer’s voice that tends to define the legacy of the Confessing Church – even though he was one of the people most disappointed in it. The

young pastors who sought a continuation of the Confessing Church after 1945 were mostly former students of Bonhoeffer.

But just as we can't understand the history of the Confessing Church without always keeping its historical context in mind – we can't understand Bonhoeffer's reflections on the church unless we also explore what he at that point had learned from the church struggle, and the rise and fall of the Confessing church movement. "Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and the world," he writes. Bonhoeffer saw clearly what the cost of compromise is, what the cost of complicity is. He understood something about failure, about what happens to the human soul when backbone dissolves, about what happens to the Christian church when it makes one compromise after the other. He understood that when the church does that – when it continually redefines its message, its interpretations of scripture, its very theology, so that it stays out of trouble – that these are sins not of omission but of commission, of complicity. And that is why he was such an uncomfortable figure for Protestant leaders in the early postwar period. The Stuttgart declaration of guilt, issued in the fall of 1945 by the leaders of the German Protestant Church (some of whom had been at Barmen, many of whom had made compromises) repented of the sins of omission. They portrayed their failures as the failure to live up to their Christian principles, accusing themselves, in the words of the Protestant church's Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, "for not having confessed more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently."ⁱⁱ

And yet the Stuttgart declaration also stated: “Indeed we have fought for long years in the name of Jesus Christ against the spirit that found horrible expression in the violence National Socialist regime...”

Bonhoeffer was no longer around to alive to speak out, but Martin Niemoeller was, and he called it a lie, and Niemoeller joined Bonhoeffer as one of the most controversial and decisive figures of the postwar period. Only weeks before the Stuttgart meeting Niemoeller gave a scathing critique of the church, saying that the “essential blame rests upon the church...it didn’t warn our people, it didn’t unveil the injustice that had occurred...And here the Confessing Church bears a particularly large measure of the blame, for it saw most clearly what was developing, it even spoke out about it, but then became tired and stood more in fear of human beings than of the living God...”

And in the spirit of Martin Niemoeller, those who sought to create a Confessing Church in the aftermath of National Socialism very consciously tried to do so in a way that recognized its weaknesses and failures. The idealization of the Confessing Church at the time came largely from the leaders who had sought hardest to tame it. And today the idealization I sometimes encounter disturbs me because I think it misses the point of the history – but so, I would add, do the attempts to dismiss it entirely. The Confessing Church was a poignant and valiant attempt to create a Christian witness that could stand up to the challenges of its times. What this history teaches us is that this isn’t an easy thing to do – that the traps and temptations are manifold. Nonetheless the alternatives –

to retreat from those challenges, or to embrace evil instead of fighting it – have their costs as well.

1944: “Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and the doing of justice.” Bonhoeffer knew his church had failed and he knew that unless it changed – it wouldn’t be able to address the next challenge: the task of reconciliation. And so he leaves Christians with two tasks (prayer and the doing of justice) that you don’t need a church to do. But then he continues with his vision of the church:

“By the time you grow up, the church’s form will have changed greatly. We are not yet out of the melting pot...and it is not for us to prophesy the day when human beings will once more be called to preach the word of God in such a way that the world will be changed and renewed by it. It will be a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redemptive, as Jesus’ own language was ... it will be the language of a new righteousness and truth, proclaiming God’s peace with humankind and the coming of the kingdom. ..Till then the Christian cause will be a silent and hidden affair, but there will be those who pray and do right, and wait for God’s own time. May you be one of them, and may it one day be said of you: The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter till full day.”

ⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. ~~New greatly enlarged~~
~~edition.~~ (New York: Macmillan Collier Books, 1971), 300-.

ⁱⁱ Matthew Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants ~~e~~Confront the Nazi*
Past (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 187.