Following the culmination of World War I, the atmosphere was tense; the unreserved emotions—confusion, sadness, hatred—resounded through the nations. In a very real sense, by 1919 the dust was still only just settling, the wounds healing, and lives were getting back to normal. This perceived normalcy, however, was especially difficult to achieve in Germany, since the restoration process was prolonged and exacerbated—and, in a way, never fully achieved—by the motions set forth in the Treaty of Versailles. Officially signed on 28 June 1919, the Treaty required major concessions to be made on the part of the German government and, by extension, the German people. It meant that Germany was to accept and declare full responsibility for the war. Furthermore, as a result of what have come to be known as the “War Guilt Clauses,” Germany was forced to disarm, make significant territorial secessions, and provide reparation to many of the allied countries.  

1 Although the twenty-year inter-war period brought relative peace and prosperity to many of the allied countries involved in World War I, it only nominally improved the living conditions for most of the German people; the years of the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933, only worked to foster in them a deep desire for political and social revolution, while the Great Depression of 1929 reaffirmed the need for an economic and spiritual revival.  

2 It is in this initial setting that one may begin to properly understand the Nazi uprising and the many theopolitical responses it spawn.

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2 Paxton, pp. 309-311.
With a social, political, and theological background so conservatively oriented toward nation and authority, it is no wonder that many German Protestants were predisposed to welcome Hitler’s rise to power in 1933—even if they had misgivings about the National Socialist Party’s obsession with race, its violent tendencies, or its unclear position on the independence of the land churches.3

For over seventy years, historians and theologians alike have examined the responses of religious institutions and religious people to the advancement of the National Socialist order, the propagation of World War II, and the atrocities of the Holocaust. Though the focus has largely been on the Roman Catholic decision of neutrality, many scholars have instead turned their attention to the center of World War II: the German Protestant people. When looking at German Protestantism’s individual and group responses, it is important to note “the distinction between Protestantism and the Protestant church… the Protestant church avoided an official position in regards to National Socialism, thereby continuing its course of neutrality.”4 On the level of groups and collective, however, three categories can be discerned: cooperation, ambiguity, and resistance. Each of these categories is representative of individual German Protestant movements, dispersed throughout the country, and propelled by a mixture of social, political, and religious responsibility. The intricate blending of these three factors, as well as the responses of the churches during this time expose how the role of the religious person was inexorably and permanently changed: no longer were religious people strictly confined to the moral decisions of the church, nor was scripture restricted to purely theological analysis and understanding. Instead, these stances of cooperation, ambiguity,


and resistance reveal that no matter the circumstances one’s religious convictions will call one to action.

**German Christians and Cooperation**

During the years of the Weimar Republic, a great majority of Protestant priests and clerics affiliated themselves with the German Nationals. Nearing the end of this period, however, there emerged localized collections of Germans who were no longer satisfied with the conservative *Deutschnationale Volkspartei* (DNVP), and by the early 1930s these splinter-groups had begun to organize on a national scale. By 1932 the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP) had claimed the title of largest party. On 30 January 1933 Hitler became chancellor, setting in motion a domino effect that would dismantle the existing German government and pave the way for a one-party, socialist state.

It would appear, with Hitler’s takeover of the German political sphere, that the time was ripe for the emergence of a unified Protestant collective who shared Hitler’s desire for the re-formation of Germany—though with the prestige and power also being bestowed upon the Church. On a national level, the German Christians of the *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (DEK) may have represented a unified front of right-wing National Socialists. DEK supporters beckoned the amalgamation of the 28 Protestant churches into one body, asserted the need for a state-run institution, and “sought to unite Protestant Christianity with National Socialist ideology and virtues.” Moreover, in these early

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5 Feige, p. 153.
6 Feige, p. 121.
7 Jantzen, “National Socialism as a Force for German Protestant Renewal?”, p. 54.
stages, neither Hitler’s words nor his writing—including *Mein Kampf*—unequivocally suggested that he was anything other than open to the Christian church in Germany. However, it would later become clear that “Hitler did not share the German Christian’s religious convictions” and that the “Nazis used the German Christians as long as the latter appeared to be a viable political tool.”

From the outset, then, it may be that the German Christians are the easiest of the Protestant responses to categorize, given that their ideologies, goals, and driving forces appear clear and unified among the group. As Kyle Jantzen illustrates, however, the hodgepodge of moderate to radical views on the local level presented a much larger push towards the dissolution of the German Christians than what appeared at first. Hitler’s eventual shift to Christian neutrality—indeed, an outright indifference—seriously undermined the propulsion and authority of the German Christian Faith Movement. On a micro scale, the reactions in towns such as Nauen, Pirna, and Ravensburg represented a covert threat to the stability and continued existence of the DEK. Jantzen’s research in the field reveals how small towns, whether loosely or intricately connected to the main arteries of the National Socialist state and Reich Church, each produced their own unique responses and reactions. As he points out:

> The extensive conflict surrounding pastoral appointments [in these districts] illustrates the critical importance of parish clergy in the local Church struggle. At the center of a web of relationships between parishioners, church patrons, local political leaders, clerical colleagues, and the higher church officials, parish clergy

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8 Feige, p. 126.
10 Feige, 187-189.
had the power to shape the fundamental course of parish life during the Nazi era.\textsuperscript{12}

This illustrates that appearances can be deceiving. Although on the surface the German Christians were a unified front, when examined more closely it becomes clear that the individual’s political stance was heavily influenced by his or her religious beliefs and vice versa, and this entanglement of social, political and religious thought caused doubt and confusion. As Nazi dictates became increasingly forceful upon the churches in these districts, many pastors’ allegiances became blurry; some would abandon the Reich church in exchange for the Confessing Church, and those who remained part of the German Christian Faith Movement often found themselves consciously subverting and compromising the efforts of the Reich church.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{The History of the Confessing Church}

The opposition to the German Christians began for the most part as a protest to the growing demands of the National Socialist Party on the Protestant churches, namely their clergy and members. It should be noted, however, that here, as with the German Christians, much of the opposition played out “mainly on the level of groups, movements, and church parties within the body of Protestantism.”\textsuperscript{14} During the latter half of 1933, the Nazi Party—and by extension the German Christians—passed the \textit{Aryan Paragraph}. Cooperation with this new law required that any clergy whose lineage or relations included Jewish people were to be dismissed, and parish members with Jewish ties, including newly converted Jewish Christians, were to be denied access. In response

\textsuperscript{12} Jantzen, \textit{Faith and Fatherland}, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{13} Jantzen, \textit{Faith and Fatherland}, p. 113-114.
\textsuperscript{14} Feige, p. 135.
to the *Aryan Paragraph*, Martin Niemöller and others led several Protestant pastors to form the *Pfarremotbund* (Pastors Emergency League, PEL) on 11 September 1933. Their initial opposition rested in large part on the basis of concern for church independence and boundaries from state interference, and not with the issues of anti-Semitism or human rights.\(^{15}\)

The Sportspalast Rally and the *Aryan Paragraph* opened the eyes of a number of pastors who had initially been sympathetic to the German Christians. After the Wittenburg Synod the PEL was founded to help those who had been fired or arrested in the Prussian churches. The PEL was the precursor of the Confessing Church and the founding statement of the PEL pledged to protest all infringement on confessional freedom by the state and explicitly opposed the *Aryan Paragraph*.\(^{16}\)

By 25 January 1934, Martin Niemöller, Karl Barth and other heads of the PEL met with Reich bishops, German Christian theologians, and Adolf Hitler to *discuss* the mounting issues of church-state and church-clergy relations. However, the continuation of the Pastors Emergency League became exacerbated, if not outright futile, and “the only man to emerge triumphant from the meeting was Hitler.”\(^{17}\) Both Lutheran pastors and moderate PEL members tended to blame the lack of any real progress from the January 25\(^{th}\) meeting on the more radical members of the PEL such as Niemöller.\(^{18}\)

**The Confessing Church of Karl Barth and Ambiguity**

Slowly, it became increasingly clear to more radical League members and disillusioned parishioners alike, that “their ability to survive as a Christian church would

\(^{15}\) Barnett, p. 35.
\(^{16}\) Ibid.
\(^{17}\) Barnett, p. 52.
\(^{18}\) Ibid.
rest not just on what arrangements they worked out with the state but on the integrity and steadfastness of their beliefs.”

By May 1934, these collectives had established a common ground in the form of the Barmen Declaration, a document penned in large part by the Swiss-born theologian Karl Barth. The first Confessing Church Synod, held in the Barmen suburb of Wuppertal, professed Barth’s ideology:

That the Bible had to remain their guide and Jesus Christ their model. Individual Christians had the freedom, on the basis of scripture, to oppose the state when its dictataes came in conflict with scriptural mandates. Jesus Christ—not Adolf Hitler—remained the spiritual head of the German Evangelical Church.

Barth’s words, echoed in the Barmen Declaration, provided a unifying point for members and supporters of the Confessing Church. That is, each Christian could be reassured in the belief that Jesus Christ was the only voice of revelation. As Stefanie von Mackensen, the only female delegate at the Barmen Synod remembers: “it was overwhelming how we were given the words decided upon in Barmen. All at once, we were freed from our isolation, and experienced a community that, until then, hadn’t existed in the Evangelical Church.” This united community of believers, however, would be short-lived. It would be quickly divided yet again into more radical opponents of Nazism, and the more moderate voices that echoed the theology of Karl Barth.

Indeed, it was Barth’s steadfastness to theology—one that generally opposed the Liberal Protestant theology to which many of the German Christians clung so tightly—that would provide the dividing factor between the Confessing Church members. For Barth, and those who were also part of the Barthian wing of the Confessing Church, the

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19 Barnett, p. 53.
21 Barnett, pp. 54-55.
22 Feige, p. 217.
fifth point of the six-point Barmen Declaration summed up their response to the Nazi state: “We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State”.23 For them, the focus would always be on the survival of the church outside the realm of any government, totalitarian or otherwise. Barthians believed that a parishioner’s political identity should not confuse or interfere with their Christian identity. Barth’s ambiguous stance towards the Nazi regime has remained a challenging one to consider, perhaps not least of all because it reflects the common responses received from the heads of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches during that time, and indeed their responses to political issues over the decades. Examining the Barthian response exposes the fact that ambiguity was not enough, even during the war. Religious people, including Christians, realized it was not simply their religious freedoms that were being challenged, but also the basic human rights of all people, and that action based on religious convictions was necessary. These people composed another splinter of the Confessing Church and were led largely by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his ideas of resistance.

The Confessing Church of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Resistance

As the National Socialist party continued to grow and reveal its true aims behind an Aryan race throughout the mid-1930’s, Confessing Church members who refuted and opposed the authority of the Nazi regime, but sought to keep the church and scripture politically neutral, continued their membership within the Confessing Church. However,

members neglected to face what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the “Jewish Question”. Although by 1938 “the Confessing Church’s quest for ‘legalization’ led over 85 percent of its members to sign an oath of personal loyalty to the führer,” there remained many supporters and other members of the Confessing Church whose visions did not simply end with consolidation from the Nazis. This community of resistance was confident that its actions could, in fact, speak louder than its words ever had. Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed direct action against the Nazis was the only solution. Even as far back as the publishing of his essay, “Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage” (“The Church and the Jewish Question”) in 1933, Bonhoffer’s views on action were made apparent:

He concluded that there were three options: The first was to remind the state of its legitimate responsibilities; the second was to help the state’s victims. The third course, which Bonhoeffer chose, was “to fall in the spokes of the wheel itself” in order to stop the wheel: to resist.

Unlike Barth, whose theology stood in the way of any direct retaliation against Hitler or the Nazis, it is precisely Bonhoeffer’s theology that compels him to act out against the National Socialist state. “Bonhoeffer eventually concluded that resistance was not merely a legitimate option for the church but a status confessionis: a situation in which the precepts of the Christian faith demanded that Christians resist if they were to retain their confessional integrity.”

Although Bonhoeffer only accepted this understanding of resistance gradually, his response to the Nazi regime, as well as those of his supporters, illustrates the only

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26 Barnett, p. 199.
position—out of cooperation, ambiguity, and resistance—where Christianity and politics were used together positively. The German Christians scripture, on the other hand, was used to the disadvantage of others. For Barth it was used to justify political pacifism, while Bonhoeffer scripture reinforced the human dignity and political liberties of all humankind. His view reflects one that has persisted over the decades since the war ended, and has significantly influenced Christians so that they continue to examine and understand their roles as individual Christians within a larger society.

It is still difficult to discuss the events surrounding World War II, on the one hand because so many intimate details continue to remain shrouded in mystery and on the other because those details that are known often offer little consolation. In many ways, the discussion of the various churches’ responses to these events is perhaps more relevant to understanding church responses today than it has been for some time. As new social and political unrests continue to proliferate the media—and by extension the collective Christian conscience—there grows an expectation that the religious institutions to which one subscribes will respond vocally against evil-doers. Unrest in North Africa, the Middle East, and throughout parts of Europe reminds Christians today that religious pacifism is no longer an option when the human rights of both Christians and non-Christians alike are in jeopardy. It is conceivable that one of the results of the World Wars was that both Catholics and Protestants retained both a political and religious identity, which they hoped to see reflected in the Church and the Church’s actions; it is believed that where it is possible to bring about positive change, the Church must always strive to do so. Furthermore, it will be interesting to continue to examine this call to action as the Church and its followers navigate through the 21st century. With the
increased secularization of many societies throughout the world (predominantly the West), and the often strenuous Church-State relations, will the call to action still remain an important part of the Christian identity? Will consolidated Church efforts to help avert these conflicts even remain influential or effective? These questions, like the ones we ask of the wars, can only be answered over time.
Works Cited


