

EPISODE THREE:

The Confessing Church, 1933-45

In the previous two episodes, we have encountered instances of Christians responding with unrestrained willingness to a call for courageous service and sacrifice. This week, we encounter a more ambiguous, even disappointing, response: the relationship of the church in Germany to the Nazis in the 1930s and '40s, which stretched across the spectrum from full collaboration, to partial resistance, to willing martyrdom.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), of course, is well known as a religious leader of the resistance movement. As a Lutheran pastor and theologian, he helped to create a network of Christians to oppose the Third Reich, and formed numerous young pastors as resistance leaders in the underground seminary he led at Finkenwalde.

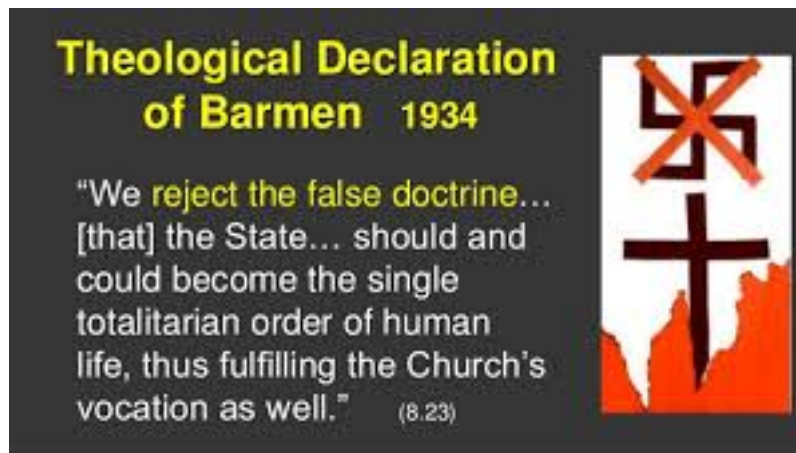
Bonhoeffer's witness, however, was very much a minority voice even among Christians. In fact, the established church of Germany willingly allowed itself to be co-opted by the Nazis as the Protestant Reich Church, and of the 18,000 Protestant clergy in Germany in the 1930s, only about 3,000 actively joined the resistance. For many protestants (Lutheran, Reformed, and United) as well as Roman Catholics, there was a strong cultural allegiance to central authority, and to a close tie between church and state—an allegiance which Hitler cleverly manipulated in gradually taking control of the compliant churches.

The focus of the opposition to this co-opting of the Christian faith was through what came to be known as the Confessing Church, so called because of its confession of the Lordship of Christ over against the authority of the state. Its formation was sparked in part by the promulgation of the "Aryan Paragraph" in

1933, which required that any clergy of Jewish descent should be removed from their pastoral cures and defrocked.

In November of that year, a large rally of pro-Nazi Christians in the Berlin Sportpalast called for a series of changes in the German church, such as:

- the removal of all pastors unsympathetic with National Socialism
- the removal of the Old Testament from the Bible as being too Semitic
- the removal of all "non-German" elements from religious services
- the adoption of a more "heroic" and "positive" interpretation of Jesus, who in pro-Aryan fashion should be portrayed to be battling mightily against corrupt Jewish influences.



In response, a group of opposition leaders met the following spring in Barmen and adopted the "Barmen Declaration," which was largely authored by the famous Reformed theologian, Karl Barth. (Bonhoeffer was one of those attending.)

Rejecting the "false

doctrine" that apart from the one Word of Jesus Christ, there is any other revelation of any lord, it forcibly asserted the independence of the church from state authority.

Remarkably, however, neither the Declaration nor the Confessing Church went so far as to condemn the moral and social objectives of National Socialism, including its campaign against the Jews. In fact, Bonhoeffer devoted much of the rest of his life to trying to inspire a more forceful denunciation of Nazism from the Confessing Church, but to no avail. This struggle is reflected in his classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937), in which he writes: "Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a person must *knock*. Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life."

In this time of social upheaval in our own country, the question has to be asked of the Christians in our own day: To what resistance does the Lordship of Christ over all things call you? How is the integrity of the human person compromised by the corruption and greed of our time, in ways that call us to a life of costly grace?

Bonhoeffer was eventually arrested by the Gestapo, imprisoned, and then executed on April 9, 1945.



Reichsbischof Müller of the Protestant Reich Church giving the Nazi salute.