Introduction

Mary M. Solberg

This book lays before the reader a selection of texts published mainly during the 1930s by the German Christians, a minority movement within the Protestant church in Germany that enthusiastically supported Hitler and National Socialism and sought to make the church their instrument.[1] Scholars who write about this period and this movement have of course unearthed and pored over many such documents—flyers, pamphlets, and books. These documents have provided a basis for substantive historical and theological analyses of the Protestant church, the German Christian movement in particular, and their roles in the larger drama of the Third Reich. I am deeply indebted to these scholars, whose work has guided my own understanding of the German Christians and their context.[2] I have relied heavily on their insights.

1. Throughout this book the phrase "German Christian" and its variants refer not to German people who were Christians, but rather to members of the German Christian faith movement. The category "German Christian" included a wide variety of groups, all dedicated to nazifying the Christian church.
2. A bibliography at the end of this volume includes some of the most significant English-language books that deal with the German Christian faith movement.

In contrast to the books written by such scholars, however, the present project is less a book *about* the German Christians than an attempt to provide access *in their own words* to what the German Christians believed and thought. This book contains representative selections from these documents, making them available in English for the first time.

The documents in this volume represent one piece of a very complicated and much larger puzzle. Expressions of the ideological corruption of religion in Nazi Germany, they provide a unique, microcosmic view of a particular collection of groups. Responses to several German Christian documents from those who opposed them are also included in this volume. But many other incisive, critical reactions to German Christian positions and activities, reactions that came both from within Germany and from ecumenical groups outside of Germany, remain to be translated and published.[3] The addition of these materials to the resources available to scholars and students will surely both complicate the picture and help complete it.

In his study of the ideas that animated the German Christians, James A. Zabel articulates a view other scholars share:

> It is difficult to ascertain the precise importance of the German Christians to the rise and furtherance of Nazism, but one can be certain that theirs was no small contribution. . . . German Christians provided ideological briefs for the rise and maintenance of Nazism that encouraged almost total church support for the regime.[4]

3. One of the most important protest documents is the memorandum sent to Hitler in early June 1936 by the Provisional Church Government of the Confessing Church. See Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 83–84, for a brief account of the contents of this memo, the circumstances surrounding its delivery, and the fallout that ensued.
4. James A. Zabel, *Nazism and the Pastors: A Study of the Ideas of Three* Deutsche Christen *Groups* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), xii.

With respect to the German Christians, "What were they *thinking*?" is not simply a rhetorical question, but a serious one, to which the translated texts offered here suggest elements of a response. Documents published by the German Christians, including those found in this volume, reveal that their authors played what they believed to be a consequential role in constructing elements of a powerful myth, both German and Christian, that complemented, strengthened, and served National Socialist goals. As Siegfried Leffler, an influential leader within the German Christian faith movement, wrote, "[S]triving for the kingdom [*Reich*] of God and striving for the German Reich, being a German and being a Christian—these notions are indissolubly linked with one another!"[5]

To Begin With

For many years, I knew next to nothing about the role of the churches in Nazi Germany in facilitating ignorance or tolerance in the face of evil. I knew of course about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young Lutheran pastor executed by the Nazis for his role in a plot to kill Hitler. If he was atypical in his heroic work in the resistance, I supposed, at least he must have had some numerically significant company among his fellow Christians in Germany. Surely others—theologians, pastors, laypeople—had spoken out or actively stood in the way of the Nazi juggernaut.

As it turned out, I had made some assumptions that I had not examined.

This I discovered when one of my students, Aaltje Baumgart, chose to write her thesis on the conduct of the German churches during the Third Reich. I urged her to try to locate whatever primary

5. From *Christ in Germany's Third Reich: The Nature, the Path, and the Goal of the German Christian Church Movement*, excerpted in this volume. See p. 337ff.

materials she could and to integrate them into her work. Instead of immediately recruiting Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a move my assumptions would have led me to make—my student had the pluck to scan a wider horizon. At a nearby college library, she was able to track down the *Handbook of the German Christians* [*Handbuch Der Deutsche Christen*], a 28-page pamphlet published in 1933 by a group associated with the German Christian Faith Movement. Bound together with a few others like it, the pamphlet had evidently been purchased by an American traveler in Germany during the mid-1930s and donated to the college library decades ago.

I was eager to examine the book. "German Christians," I wondered. "Who could they be?" As I pored over the fragile, yellowing pages, covered with old-fashioned Gothic German font, I was by turns fascinated and horrified, a bit as if I were watching an automobile accident. I read this: "The great experience from which radiates everything we think and do today is Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist revolution!"[6] What kind of Christian, I asked myself, had produced these paragraphs in praise of National Socialism? And this: "Just as . . . Martin Luther . . . freed the core of the German soul, just so Adolf Hitler . . . as the instrument of our God, became the framer of German destiny . . . !"[7] What kind of Christian had generated such a full-throated association of Adolf Hitler with the great reformer Martin Luther, the founder of the tradition I claimed as my own? And this: "The Jews are certainly not God's people."[8] What kind of Christian had declared this to an audience of thousands?

6. Constantine Grossmann, *German Christians: A People's Book: A Guide Through Today's Faith Movement* [*Deutsche Christen: Ein Volksbuch: Wegweiser durch die Glaubensbewegung unserer Zeit*] (Dresden: Verlag E. am Ende, 1934). See p. 299 in this volume.
7. Deutsche Christen (Nationalkirchliche Einung). *Handbuch der Deutschen Christen*. 2nd ed. [Berlin-Charlottenburg]: Deutsche Christen, 1933[?]. See p. 197 in this volume.
8. Reinhold Krause, *Speech of Dr. Krause, the regional district leader of the German Christian Faith Movement in Greater Berlin (according to two stenographic reports)* [*Rede des Gauobmannes der*

Had these materials really been written by Christians—for other Christians? If so, what kind of Christian had bought pamphlets like these for a few pennies, stuck them in a coat pocket, and walked off to find a quiet place to eat a sandwich and read all about it? What kind of Christian had absorbed these ideas, this language, and the attitudes they expressed?

The Journey from There to Here

I could read these pages because I knew German, a legacy of three sojourns in Germany: the first two—1949-50 and 1953-56—as a young child, when my parents had worked alongside German churches and social service agencies that were digging their way out of the spiritual and material rubble of the Second World War, and then, right after college (1968-69), as a student on a Fulbright fellowship at the University of Heidelberg. I was raised in the 1950s, mainly in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where my college professor father taught U. S. history. At home, we said table grace in German and sang German rounds in the Advent and Christmas seasons; my parents, writing in English, corresponded regularly with several dozen families they'd befriended in Germany, who wrote back in German. In high school—my graduating class numbered just over 800—I knew only two Jewish students.

In the fall of 1964, I went off to college at Swarthmore. During my first week there, I met more Jews than I had ever known in my life. I recall having heated discussions with several of them about "the Germans" and Germany, which in those days I considered my "second home." The subject of the Holocaust, as nearly as I can recall, never arose, at least not explicitly. And although I majored in history,

Glaubensbewegung "Deutsche Christen" in Gross-Berlin Dr. Krause (nach doppeltem stenographischen Bericht] (n.p., n.d.). See p. 258 in this volume.

the Holocaust was not a subject our professors, or we students, spent much time on.

I came of age politically in the tumult of the 1960s—multiple political assassinations, the war in Vietnam, student protests on college and university campuses, the civil rights movement—and the early 1970s, when I entered wholeheartedly into the women's movement and the gay liberation movement, as well as my first full-time professional work, in book publishing. I returned to school in 1977, starting (but not completing) a Ph.D. program in sociology and, after two years, deciding to earn a masters degree in social work, which I received in 1981. To the best of my recollection, the subject of the Holocaust did not come up in either my first professional setting or even in the two academic settings I traversed.

Beginning in the summer of 1981, I found myself drawn into the struggle of undocumented Salvadoran refugees fleeing to the United States from the early stages of the civil war in their country. In late 1983, I accepted a position representing the Lutheran World Federation in Central America, based in El Salvador. It was a life-changing experience in the midst of the violence of war and of poverty, and my own nation's implication in both. When I returned to the U.S., my goal was to find conversation partners who could help me sort through what I had experienced there. I chose to return to school; theology seemed more likely than other disciplines to offer the intellectual resources I sought to meet this challenge. If it didn't, I sensed rather than knew, it would not be worth its salt—at least not to me.

First I attended Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota. A year and a half later, I transferred to the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. There, having decided to pursue what I imagined would be my last career—as a theologian and perhaps a college professor—I transferred into a doctoral program. None of my teachers at either

seminary turned the theological or ethical spotlight on the challenge I had made the centerpiece of my theological project. Remarkably, or so it seemed to me, few of my professors and fellow students were informed about or interested in what was happening in Central America, or how what was happening there could compel someone like me to want to interrogate theology with such intensity. Neither the Holocaust nor the conduct of the German churches in the years preceding it seemed to be on anyone's radar, either.

I transferred once again, in 1989, to Union Theological Seminary in New York City. In this intellectually vibrant community, both the curriculum and the faculty reflected the conviction that the study of theology *had* to have something to do with the seemingly intractable issues of the day, issues still knotted together for me in the civil war that continued to rage in El Salvador. At Union, I also encountered the intellectual, theological, and ethical challenge of the Holocaust. In one seminar I read Lucy S. Dawidowicz's *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945*, and in another I studied the life and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.[9]

But my intellectual passion was still focused on El Salvador. I finished my Ph.D. at Union in 1995. My dissertation, "in partial fulfillment of the requirements" for the degree I sought, was also a way of coming to terms with, though not resolving, the profound existential challenge my experience in El Salvador had raised. I wrote on what I argued was an unlikely but fruitful conversation between secular feminist philosophers focused on epistemology, on the one hand, and Martin Luther's *theologia crucis*, or "theology of the cross," on the other. The point of my project was to figure out *how* we

9. Since then I have become aware of considerable scholarly controversy surrounding Dawidowicz's book. Perhaps the most telling criticisms came from the great Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg, who wrote a scathing critique in his 1996 memoir *The Politics of Memory*.

(Christians) must know, *how we can come to know*, what we must know, to live lives that mean something. When I finished, I knew there was much more to it than what I had done to complete my degree, much more for me to "come to know." It was a start. It was also the beginning of this project, though I certainly did not know it then. . . .[10]

Today, my long period of relative ignorance about the Holocaust, and about the conduct of the churches during the Third Reich, may seem unbelievable. I hope so. If awareness of these matters is now so widespread that we can assume they are "common knowledge," I will happily tolerate the humbling experience of admitting how little I knew for how long.

Or perhaps I *had* learned—perhaps I *did* know—but did not *remember* that I knew. Perhaps I had salted away the information in my intellectual memory, but it had not "struck" me. As an intellectual, a Christian, a theologian, I had not (yet) been "conscience-stricken" by what I knew. Nor did I recall the German Christians having been held up as a crucial challenge to Christian believers or theology. I wish I could claim that I was aware and suggest that others were less or not at all aware. Looking back, though, it seems that we were carrying out our vocations as theologians and, later, as teachers, without giving all of this the attention it warranted.

Today, organizations dedicated to "Holocaust education" urgently continue to produce resources aimed at informing learners of all ages about events that took place many decades ago, as well as more recent genocides. And if it seems a foregone conclusion, at this point in our

10. What role, if any, did the German Christians play in making it easier for their compatriots to avoid coming to know what they had to know to recognize and confront the profound moral challenges Nazism presented to them as followers of Jesus Christ? With chagrin, I have also had to ask what has kept me and so many others from coming to know and confront the moral and theological challenges that period of the church's history clearly presents.

history, that reasonably well-educated individuals will surely have learned about the horrors of the Nazis' "Final Solution," this state of affairs owes much to these Holocaust educators, within and outside of public schools, and the centers from which they draw support. Books and films about the Holocaust are far more plentiful today than they were even a few decades ago.[11]

As far as the conduct of the churches in Hitler's Germany in the years preceding and during the Holocaust is concerned, far too few people in or out of the academy know far too little, despite the slowly growing body of scholarship focused on this subject.

How Could They Not Have Known . . . or *Did* They?

Bending over the German Christian pamphlets my student had found in the nearby college library, I marveled at their simple-minded theological slogans and overheated nationalism, their crass antisemitism and Hitler-worship. I thought about the people who had written these documents—and those for whom they had been written. As they cheered Hitler on, surely these people knew—didn't they?—or at least must have thought about, where they were headed. How could they have avoided hearing Hitler's speeches, in person or on the radio?[12] Had they not read *Mein Kampf,* or talked with someone who had?

11. For decades after the Holocaust, neither schools nor churches, neither scholars nor public intellectuals—with very few and remarkable exceptions—paid attention to the subject, and just a handful of individuals who had survived the horror of the camps wrote about it. Only relatively recently has education about the Holocaust become more widespread. Most Holocaust education materials take the form of resources for teachers at all levels who wish, or are mandated by state or local law, to tackle with their learners what is still an extraordinarily challenging subject. As for the complicity or participation of the churches in Nazi policies and practices leading up to the Holocaust, by and large this matter remains shrouded in ignorance.
12. Most German families had radios, thanks to the mass production of two cheap types of radios known as "People's Receivers." Josef Goebbels was convinced of the effectiveness of radio for disseminating Nazi propaganda.

As the dehumanizing and then murderous Nazi policies toward the Jews were being implemented—the April 1, 1933, boycott of Jewish businesses; shortly thereafter, the Aryan paragraph, expelling Jews from the civil service; the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, stripping Jews of citizenship; the pogrom that came to be known as the Night of Broken Glass [*Kristallnacht*] in November of 1938—how was it that millions of their non-Jewish neighbors looked the other way, literally and figuratively? Surely they saw, and many of them read, *Der Stürmer*, the vulgar antisemitic tabloid newspaper sold at countless kiosks on the street and in the train stations. And what about the road signs outside towns and villages all over Germany, saying, "Jews are not wanted here"? Had not the farmers and shop owners permitted these signs to be planted, one by one, in the soil on the edges of their towns? Or perhaps they themselves had helped plant them, then washed the dirt from their hands and gone on with their day's work.

One imagines that for most ordinary Germans, it would have been hard not to know of the active persecution of the Jews. Many must have looked on but not perceived what was happening as offensive. Much or most of this may even have passed for "normal" for the good Christian people of Germany. Should one not have expected different responses from parish pastors and church leaders? As disturbing as these expressions of antisemitism are in retrospect—speeches, laws, signs, print and broadcast propaganda—they seem not to have insulted the religious faith of most Germans. Historian Ian Kershaw suggests that popular opinion in this overwhelmingly Christian nation was "largely indifferent and infused with a latent anti-Jewish feeling."[13]

13. *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933-1945* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1983), 277.

Pastors, theologians, and ordinary churchgoers alike appear to have understood their faith in terms that permitted or even encouraged attitudes and practices that now seem utterly to contradict the most basic ethical precepts of Christianity. Could faithful Christians have been oblivious to their complicity in the monstrous violence done against their neighbors?

Knowing and Not Knowing

Far more often than we care to acknowledge, knowing or failing to know are choices. Sometimes they are individual choices; sometimes, institutional or even societal. As is often true of choices, a host of factors—overt and covert, conscious and unconscious, implicit and explicit—impinge on the choice to know or not to know. Whatever factors bear on them, however, such choices have ethical implications. The ethical implications of knowing—or failing to know—were as critical during the Third Reich as they are today, as the twenty-first century unfolds. Today, as then, they drive us toward the question of how we are implicated in what we have come to know—what we have to do with it—and to the question of how we are to live with what we come to know.[14]

As a theologian, I continue to wrestle with these challenges, sparked for me in the first place by my Salvadoran experience in the 1980s. The longer I teach, the less surprised I am to discover that such questions provoke and frustrate many of my students too, as their education opens windows and doors, revealing a world in deep distress. It is a world in which most people hold on to life by their fingernails, a world that hungers and thirsts for food and water as much as for justice and peace, a world being transformed and deformed by climate change and global capitalism, religious conflict

14. A more extensive treatment of this subject can be found in my book *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

and acts of terrorism. As they move further and further beyond the boundaries of their "comfort zones," my students ask, how shall they live with what they are coming to know?

A crucial corollary question is this one: what *keeps us from knowing* (or choosing to know) what we must know to live rightly, responsibly, accountably? What keeps us from knowing about the large and small ways in which how we live, as individuals and as a nation, contributes to burgeoning economic inequality? What keeps us from knowing how what we do and fail to do accelerates the rate of climate change, imperiling this planet and everything that inhabits it? What keeps us from knowing the appalling history of Euro-American treatment of Native peoples in North and South America? What keeps us from knowing how profoundly our nation's history has been corrupted by slavery and lynching, Jim Crow and segregation?[15]

Perhaps it makes more sense to reiterate the language used above. What keeps us from *remembering that we know*? What keeps us from being "struck" by what we know?

Returning to the theme of this volume: what has kept so many of us, especially those of us who identify ourselves as Christians, from knowing about the complicity of the churches whose tradition we share in the rise and progress of Nazism and all its horrific sequelae, including the murder of millions of Jews? Why do we lift up the witness of a Dietrich Bonhoeffer and believe, without further examination, that he exemplified rather than defied the behavior of his, and our, co-religionists?

15. Documentaries commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the events of 1964's "Freedom Summer" include newsreels that remind us how violently and unapologetically hatred has been expressed in our own land. News coverage of local responses to the arrival of undocumented immigrants frequently reveals our capacity to demonize and exclude other human beings who (we may say) "have no right to be here."

Little in our Christian theology as it is written, taught, or preached seems to require us to choose to know or remember that we know, to acknowledge ourselves as members of the same family with those who have perpetrated such crimes against others, human and nonhuman. Nor are we challenged to recognize that we are kin to those who suffer or live on the margins, and that we ought to live in response to that knowledge, that kinship. Far too much serious Christian theology lets us off the hook, by never raising the questions or explaining why we have little or no choice about our ignorance, both of the marginalization and the suffering of others and of our (possible or even likely) implication in it. Far too much serious Christian theology simply ignores—or chooses not to know about—these persistent realities.[16]

The Documents

Those who wrote and published most of the documents in this volume were true believers, not only in Jesus Christ, but also in Adolf Hitler and his Nazi revolution. These documents and many others like them functioned to help other Hitler-era Germans who read them, and who almost without exception identified themselves as Christian believers, comprehend what was happening around them as fully compatible with their Christian faith. In doing so, these documents helped them evade the troubling moral and ethical implications and imperatives they would otherwise have had to face. Reading the documents gives us access to ideas and language,

16. On reading this paragraph, a trusted colleague pointed out that we should neither overestimate the importance of theology in these respects nor underestimate the significance of the small betrayals of the Gospel both "in church" (preaching and worship and liturgy) and in the daily lives of "ordinary" Christians. Two recently-published books in theological ethics *do* take "these persistent realities" very seriously: Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda's *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013); and Larry L. Rasmussen's *Earth-honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

mixed together from both Christian and Nazi lexicons. This language permitted readers to ignore or dismiss what was happening, or deny its ethical significance and their own ethical agency—and, when necessary, even to justify themselves in the process.[17]

Commitments near and dear to German Christians—including a fierce nationalism, anti-Judaism, and the notion of the "people's church" [*Volkskirche*]—were deeply rooted in Germany's history. What became the German Christian faith movement—most scholars writing about the church struggle [*Kirchenkampf*] use the expression "German Christians" or "German Christian faith movement" to refer to any and all of its various expressions—emerged during the late 1920s and early 1930s out of a number of groups within German Protestantism, groups that were often distinguished by ideological differences and leadership styles.[18]

17. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections "On Stupidity" seem apropos in this connection. They appear in his 1942 letter/essay for his co-conspirators, "After Ten Years," and are worth quoting at some length. ". . . This much is certain, that [stupidity] is in essence not an intellectual defect but a human one. . . . The impression one gains is not so much that stupidity is a congenital defect but that, under certain circumstances, people are *made* stupid or that they allow this to happen to them. . . . [E]very strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity. . . . The process at work here is not that particular human capacities . . . suddenly atrophy or fail. Instead, it seems that under the overwhelming impact of rising power, humans are deprived of their inner independence and, more or less consciously, give up establishing an autonomous position toward the emerging circumstances. . . . Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil." In Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English, Vol. 8, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 43-44. "What keeps us ignorant" may be equivalent to "what makes us stupid" in Bonhoeffer's sense.

18. I am indebted to Hartmut Ludwig of the Theological Faculty at the Humboldt University in Berlin, who underscored for me the importance of appreciating the many distinct German Christian strands within the Protestant churches who organized in support of the Nazi project. In this connection, Prof. Ludwig also directed me to a chart in Gerhard Besier and Eckhard Lessing, *Die Geschichte der Evangelischen Kirche der Union, Vol. 3: Trennung von Staat und Kirche, Kirchlich-politische Krisen, Erneuerung kirchlicher Gemeinschaft (1918-1992)* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1999), 331, which sketches out the evolution of a variety of "German Christian movements" from the early 1920s through the late 1930s. With the gracious permission of Prof. Besier, I have translated and included this chart, which can be found at the end of this introduction.

The movement's earliest incarnation was arguably the League for a German Church [*Bund für Deutsche Kirche*], founded in Berlin in 1921.[19] In its emphasis on the centrality of the "heroic" (and Indo-European, not Jewish) Christ rather than the suffering Christ, its urgent call for the "dejudaizing" of Christianity (including discarding the Old Testament), and its claim on Martin Luther as the "German prophet," the League set the ideological stage. Twelve years later, in 1933, significant public figures in the emerging movement—among them Reinhold Krause, Friedrich Wieneke, and Arnold Dannenmann—all credited the League with having provided important early touchstones.

According to James A. Zabel, "An overview of German Christian development . . . resembles an hourglass figure with a mid-point reached in 1933," moving "from diversity to unity and back again to diversity."[20] Doris L. Bergen describes this development in terms of "five distinct stages . . . between 1932 and 1945: ascendancy, fragmentation, regrouping, ambiguous success, and postwar reintegration."[21] The first period, Bergen argues, dates from the founding of the German Christian Faith Movement [*Glaubensbewegung Deutsche Christen*] in 1932, which Dannenmann describes in his 1933 *History of the German Christian Faith Movement*, excerpted in this volume. It ends with the so-called Sports Palace scandal: Reinhold Krause's speech there on November 13, 1933, also included in this volume. During these months, German Christians

19. Zabel, 9ff. Zabel, who provides a very helpful "overall ideological picture of the German Christian movement in its wide variety" (xiii), references the extensive work of German historian Kurt Meier on the institutional development of the German Christians.
20. Zabel, 21.
21. Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 15. Bergen's is the best English-language book on this subject. The documents excerpted in this volume emerge from the first four of these "stages," with the lion's share clustered around the period of the German Christians' "ascendancy," which was also the period of their greatest influence.

received considerable support from the Nazi Party, both locally and nationally, for their grassroots organizing efforts. Thanks in no small measure to this support, they won an overwhelming victory in the July 1933 church elections, enabling them to bring about the unification of Germany's 29 regional Protestant churches [*Landeskirchen*] into one national church [*Reichskirche*], and to impose on this consolidated church the first and only national bishop [*Reichsbischof*], Ludwig Müller.[22]

Reinhold Krause, a high school teacher and an enthusiastic though undistinguished member of the Nazi Party, was the Berlin district leader of the German Christian Faith Movement. His speech before a fervent crowd of 20,000 German Christian loyalists was also published in newspapers all over Germany. "In crude, abusive language," Bergen writes, "[Krause] attacked the fundaments of Christianity as unacceptable marks of Jewish influence. [He] lambasted the Old Testament, the Apostle Paul, and the symbol of the cross as ridiculous, debilitating remnants of Judaism, unacceptable to National Socialists."[23] The speaker's extreme views, it seems—or perhaps it was his rhetoric and manner of speech—were not mainstream, even among movement members, at least not as early as 1933. During the following weeks and months, German Christian membership rolls declined dramatically. Pressured by more moderate colleagues, Reich Bishop Müller dissociated himself from the organization and publicly repudiated what Krause had said.[24] The

22. Several pieces by Müller are also excerpted in this volume.
23. Bergen, 17.
24. See Müller's "Declaration of the National Bishop Regarding the Events in the Sports Palace," ["Kundgebung des Reichsbischofs zu den Vorgängen im Sportpalast"], in Constantin Grossmann, *German Christians: A People's Book: A Guide Through Today's Faith Movement* [*Deutsche Christen: Ein Volksbuch: Wegweiser durch die Glaubensbewegung unserer Zeit*] (Dresden: Verlag E. am Ende, 1934). In this volume, see p. 263ff. Two months later, however, Müller made clear his ongoing loyalty to Nazi goals and his desire to curry favor with Hitler himself. He concluded an agreement with Baldur von Schirach, the head of the Hitler Youth, to incorporate all Protestant church youth—comprising 700,000 members—into the Hitler Youth

national leader of the organization, Pastor Joachim Hossenfelder, was forced to relinquish his post to a more moderate figure, Dr. Christian Kinder, and Krause lost his position, too.

The fragmentation of the movement after the Sports Palace speech also signaled disagreements among its protagonists about both political and theological matters, as well as sharp personal conflicts and differences in leadership styles. Like almost all of their fellow citizens, they certainly supported Hitler's National Socialist program for the "renewal of Germany," loved the Fatherland and the German people, and shared a centuries-old Christian anti-Judaism that morphed all too easily into the racial antisemitism preached and practiced by the Nazis. But German Christians disagreed, sometimes intensely, regarding their views on whether or how closely to work with the Nazi Party's organization, whether or how loyally to protect Protestant confessional traditions and texts, and not whether, but how passionately to pursue the exclusion of all things Jewish from the churches.

Of the panoply of German Christian groups that emerged (or re-emerged) in 1934 and 1935, perhaps the most notable, and certainly the most radical, was the one that had gathered around the Thuringian pastors Siegfried Leffler and Julius Leutheuser.[25] Founded by Leffler and Leutheuser in 1929 under the name the German Christian Church Movement [*Kirchenbewegung Deutsche Christen*], the Thuringian German Christian movement had maintained its independence throughout the tumultuous events of 1933 and early 1934. From the mid-1930s on, more moderate German Christians gravitated toward the Thuringians' organization, which "emerged . . . as the center of a new national German Christian organization."[26]

organization. For a detailed account, see Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich, Vol. 1: Preliminary History and the Time of Illusions, 1918-1934* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 573ff.

25. Excerpts of documents by both these men appear in this volume.

26. Zabel, 39.

Its name changed several times as its leadership made attempts to establish ideological as well as organizational unity with other German Christian groups. In 1937, Leffler and Leutheuser founded the German Christian Movement for a National Church [*Nationalkirchliche Bewegung Deutsche Christen*], which then became the National Church Union [*Nationalkirchliche Einung*].

Six years into the Third Reich, in April 1939, representatives of various German Christian groups, as well as some non-German Christian pastors and laypeople, came together to sign the so-called "Godesberg Declaration." Drafted largely by Siegfried Leffler, the document's contents manifested the radical pass to which the Thuringians had brought the broader movement.[27] The signatories pledged themselves to serve Adolf Hitler, "the man who has led our people out of servitude and misery to freedom and true greatness." National Socialism, they averred, had opened to the German people a "true understanding of Christian faith." Judaism and Christianity were characterized as "unbridgeable religious opposite[s]," and all forms of "international" and ecumenical Christianity were utterly rejected. The Declaration also provided the basis for the establishment of the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence in German Church Life in May 1939. The effort was spearheaded by Walter Grundmann of the University of Jena, by then a bastion of German Christianity.[28]

Those outside the German Christian movement, Ian Kershaw observes, may have worried about the Nazi Party's increasingly anti-church and anti-Christian character. Such reservations, however, did not dampen their "fervent support for the conservative-national goals

27. The text of the Godesberg Declaration and the response of the Confessing Church are included in this volume. See pp. 443.

28. Excerpts from Grundmann's *Who Is Jesus of Nazareth?* [*Wer ist Jesus von Nazareth?*] (Weimar: Verlag Deutsche Christen, 1940; published in connection with the Institute for the Study of Jewish Influence on German Religious Life), appear in this volume. See pp. 453.

and values which after the commencement of the war could only with . . . [great] difficulty be separated from the 'specifically Nazi' components of Nazism."[29] As for the German Christians themselves, their commitment to the realization of Hitler's vision of a vast, racially pure, thousand-year Reich only intensified. They were helping to refashion key elements of public moral discourse and spiritual and religious self-understanding at all levels of Germany society. Through various media, including the published materials from which the excerpts included here are taken, German Christians did work neither the Nazi Party nor Hitler's government *could* have done.

The Historical Context

The historical context for the documents in this volume was the rise of National Socialism and its *Machtergreifung*, or "seizure of power," in early 1933. (In January, the power of government was handed over to Hitler quite legally; within weeks, he had managed to consolidate virtually absolute power in himself.) Pastors within the German Protestant Church [*Deutsche Evangelische Kirche*, or *DEK*[30]] had already established several different groups that, with some others that emerged later, came to comprise the German Christian movement. They were already organizing energetically on both local and national levels, often in cooperation with and taking much the same structure as the National Socialist party.

29. Kershaw, 184.
30. The German word *evangelisch* can be translated "evangelical." While in the American context this word has come to connote a particular kind of Protestant, in the German context it usually means "Protestant" in contrast to "Catholic." In this volume, in all but a few cases, the German designation *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (literally, the German Evangelical Church) is translated "German Protestant Church," comprising regional Lutheran, Reformed, and United (Reformed and Lutheran) churches.

More specifically, the historical context for these documents was what came to be known, even as early as 1933, as the "church struggle" [*Kirchenkampf*]. The church struggle was not a battle between the German Protestant church and the Nazi state. Rather, it played out within and was a contest for administrative and theological control of the German Protestant Church and the hearts and minds of its members. The church struggle's two chief antagonists were the German Christians and what came to be known as the Confessing Church [*Bekennende Kirche*].[31] Most of the documents excerpted here—and others, including those listed in the bibliography at the end of this volume—would likely have been published even in the absence of the struggle. But the struggle surely generated some of them, as well as much of the intensity with which authors addressed a number of themes, particularly those having to do with the relationship of the church to the Nazi state.

The church struggle had very, very little to do with the Jews. It began early in 1933 in response to the efforts of those (chiefly, the German Christian faith movement) who sought to bring the Protestant church fully into Hitler's project of *Gleichschaltung* (literally, "shifting into the same gear")—legally, structurally, culturally, and theologically. The Nazis understood this coordination of all German institutions—all German life, really—to be essential to the "revolution" they envisioned. It was a revolution whose goals were *race* and *space*: Hitler's determination to "purify" what he believed to be the ancient, noble German "master race" and to ensure that this "race" would have the *Lebensraum*, or living space, to prosper and grow throughout Europe and beyond. The ideological, philosophical, and religious productions that accompanied the Nazi revolution wittingly or unwittingly served these goals. Much of the

31. For a compelling account of the story of the Confessing Church, and the church struggle, see Victoria Barnett's *For the Soul of the People*.

rhetoric they employed drew on, reflected, and intensified deeply-rooted prejudices, especially Christian antisemitism.

Players on both sides of the church struggle were passionately committed to what they and the Nazis called the "renewal of Germany." Whether they were members of the Party or not (and many were), most German Protestants—most Germans, in fact—were captivated by the promise of Hitler's revolution. Several well-known church leaders stated publicly that the date of Hitler's ascent to power was for Germany "an Easter moment." Even those who may have had reservations about one government measure or action or another were at pains to reiterate publicly their love for and loyalty to the German people, the Führer, and the Fatherland. Criticism of the Nazi state or party, or of positions taken in support of them, was exceptional; at least during the early years, the dearth of critical voices seems to have reflected both assent and nationalist fervor, rather than reservations or fear of reprisal. It is also clear that many highly intelligent and thoughtful people, including university professors with international reputations, believed in Hitler and his vision for Germany. And almost to a person, they identified themselves as Christians.[32] As Christians, they perceived no contradictions between their profession of faith and their commitment to Hitler's vision of a "new Germany."

The German Christian faith movement, whose earliest strands had been woven in the early 1920s, was perhaps the most articulate expression of this commitment.[33] Even before Hitler's ascent to

32. In 1933, the population of Germany was about 67,000,000. About sixty percent of the population was Protestant, mainly Lutheran; about forty percent was Roman Catholic. Less than one half of one percent was Jewish.

33. The German Christian faith movement, almost entirely Protestant Christian, is to be distinguished sharply from the German Faith Movement, a neo-pagan organization associated with Professor Jakob Wilhelm Hauer of the University of Tübingen. The similarity of the names—*Glaubensbewegung Deutsche Christen*, or German Christian Faith Movement, and *Deutsche Glaubensbewegung*, or German Faith Movement—led many to confuse them with each

power in January 1933, the movement's pastor-founders sought to wed Christianity to National Socialism. Once the "German Revolution" was underway, members of the movement saw themselves as essential to its accomplishment; they were spiritual and theological co-workers who apprehended the deep, even mystical affinities between what Hitler wanted and what they believed God wanted for their Germany.

The German Christians were convinced that Christians had critical roles to play in Germany. They were to play these roles, not simply as Germans who happened also to be Christians, but also as Christians who by God's grace, they would have said, were irreducibly *German* Christians. Germany was once the heart of Christendom, the land of the Reformation, and the home of some of the most influential theologians of the previous five centuries. And Hitler exploited the German Christians' passionate commitment to bring the Protestant churches into his grand *Gleichschaltung*.[34]

Within the context of the church struggle and the larger story of the Third Reich, what members of German Christian groups and their sympathizers had in common was much more important than what divided them.[35] And in the context of the church struggle, both sides claimed to represent the true church of Christ; neither the German Christians nor the Confessing Church formally broke with the established German Protestant Church. Members of both groups—and the vast majority of "neutral" Protestant Christians, who were members of neither—looked to make sense of the relationship

other. The former identified itself as Christian, while the latter was both neo-pagan and anti-Christian.

34. It was actually Hitler who suggested that the name "German Christians," with all its evocative ambiguity, would be more effective than "Protestant National Socialists," the name the movement's leaders originally proposed.

35. Despite the "bewildering array of splinter groups that divided and coalesced in countless constellations," Bergen writes, "various authorities [during and after the Third Reich] treated German Christianity as a recognizable whole" (7).

between their faith and their new political reality, the National Socialist revolution. Among German Christians the conviction ran deep that, as a German Christian chronicler wrote in 1933, "in their origins, Christianity and National Socialism both go back to God," and consequently, "Some kind of living relationship between the two must therefore also be possible in the present."[36]

The German Christians were numerically never more than a minority within the Protestant church in Germany. Doris Bergen cites the "generally accepted figure of six hundred thousand [members] as a reasonable estimate . . . in the mid-1930s."[37] Nonetheless, a complex set of forces, some profound and some pathetic, allowed them to wield considerable influence within both the church and the broader German society. Political hubris, personal ambition, fear of being left out or of suffering political reprisals, a desire for position in German society and access to political power, old personal feuds, and a variety of other factors, all worked in favor of, and sometimes also against, the German Christians' plans for Germany and especially for the churches.

Beginning in 1933, the German Christians sparked the church struggle over control of the Protestant church. During that same year, they forced what had been decentralized, individual regional churches to reorganize as a national church. Embracing the Nazis' Führer principle, they elected a national bishop to preside over this centralized national church. And throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, they played key roles in most university faculties of theology, training grounds for both academic theologians and pastors. Beyond its institutional influence, Bergen notes, "the movement was most significant in the intangible sphere of ideas."[38] In the words of

36. Arnold Dannenmann, *The History of the "German Christian" Faith Movement* [*Die Geschichte der Glaubensbewegung "Deutsche Christen"*] (Dresden: Oskar Günther Verlag, 1933). See pp. 121ff in this volume.
37. Bergen, 7.

German Christians themselves, the documents excerpted and translated in this volume provide illustrations and explications of some of these ideas.

The Documents' Audiences

To whom are German Christians' documents addressed? Some, like the 1932 "Original Guidelines of the German Christians," function to declare—unapologetically, one assumes—the foundational commitments of the leaders of the movement. This document, and a 1933 revision, seem to be addressed both to other Christians whom German Christians hoped to recruit into the movement and to members of the Nazi Party apparatus who might be surprised by, or even skeptical about, the depth and intensity of their commitment to National Socialist principles and goals. Others, like Arnold Dannenmann's 1933 *History of the "German Christian" Faith Movement*, seem to have several audiences in mind, among them Christians enthusiastic about Hitler and the National Socialist revolution in Germany but still unfamiliar with the historic, crucial role German Christians understand themselves and the church to be playing in that revolution, precisely *as* Christians.

The Jewish Question is a speech Gerhard Kittel gave in June of 1933 and then published very successfully. This internationally-respected scholar's intention, according to Robert P. Ericksen, is "to raise the discussion of the Jewish question above the level of slogans and vulgar racism and give it a moral, Christian basis."[39] Perhaps he believes there are fellow Christians who are seeking such a basis amidst the "slogans and vulgar racism" of radical Nazi propaganda. Kittel himself was not a member of the German Christian movement, though

38. Bergen, 8.
39. *Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 32.

he certainly resonated with its agenda and provided professional underpinnings for some of its dearest priorities. Emanuel Hirsch—like Kittel, a theologian of considerable reputation—was a committed German Christian; his *What the German Christians Want for the Church,* excerpted here, is a direct response to Karl Barth's critique of the movement's claim that Germany's experience of the National Socialist revolution is an integral part of "salvation history," written by God and engaging the German people.[40] His audience would very likely be other convinced and theologically-literate German Christians, including those within the universities' theological faculties who surely would find exchanges like this intellectually exhilarating.

Some of the writings sampled here, including those by Kittel and Hirsch, qualify as theologically sophisticated; others, however, are aimed at "the choir," that is, those already on the German Christian bandwagon. The published version of Reinhold Krause's November 1933 speech at the Berlin Sports Palace, complete with the recording stenographers' notations of the applause and appreciative shouts from the audience, reached hundreds of thousands of readers through the newspapers. Outside the hall and after the event, the reaction was decidedly mixed. The enthusiasm Krause's speech inspired can be attributed to the extremity of Krause's attack, both on the church as a business-as-usual bystander in what was perceived as a seminal historical moment, and on the Old Testament as a "Jewish book" with no place in the Christian church. The chagrin—and among some, the revulsion—his speech inspired likely resulted from that same extremism, perceived with clarity perhaps for the first time by those who did perceive it.[41] That the same speech could inspire such

40. See Barth's *Theological Existence Today!*, excerpted in this volume on pp. 81ff.

41. Hundreds of pastors left the rolls of the German Christian movement, which began to splinter. The ranks of the Pastor's Emergency League, founded some months earlier by Pastor

diverse responses may itself be a sign of the ambivalence present within the churches, or at least among pastors, in this first year of Nazi ascendancy. One wonders if the same speech delivered four or five years later would have elicited the same expressions of excitement and of rejection.[42]

Reinhold Krause's published 1933 speech certainly represents German Christian propaganda in its most vulgar form; so does a 1936 pamphlet titled *Jesus and the Jews*, published by the radical German Christian group, the Organization for German Christianity [*Bund für deutsches Christentum*]. "Is Christianity, out of an inner bondage, forcing us to submit to Judaism?" the pamphlet's author asks—not entirely rhetorically, one assumes. "Listening carefully to what the people are saying, one perceives clashing viewpoints. . . . And because the Jewish question is so fundamental to the National Socialist worldview, we can neither skip over it nor resolve it in a cavalier manner."[43] The pamphlet proceeds to "prove" that Jesus was not Jewish.

The format of the pamphlet *What Do the German Christians Want?: 118 Questions and Answers,* compiled by Otto Brökelschen in 1937, suggests it is directed to a popular audience. The pamphlet's introduction explains the need to which it responds: "Despite five years of struggle and work, the question [What do the German Christians want?] continues to meet with astonishing ignorance, and responses to it are often mean-spirited misrepresentations." The pamphlet was published "to clear the air" and to give German

Martin Niemöller, swelled; within several months, the League gave rise to what became the Confessing Church.

42. Ian Kershaw writes, "The . . . attitude of the . . . leaders of both [Protestant and Catholic] denominations to racism was highly ambivalent. . . . Steeped in [the tradition of anti-Judaism], and also in the contemporary commonplaces of racial prejudice, many Church leaders were unable or unwilling to speak out forcefully and unambiguously against anti-Semitism" (247).
43. Bund für deutsches Christentum, *Jesus and the Jews!* [*Jesus und die Juden!*] (Weimar: Verlag Deutsche Christen, 1937). See p. 437 in this volume.

Christians "who are on the front lines the practical handle they need to provide urgently needed explanations . . . with respect to the matter of German Christianity, or who reject or oppose it."[44] Clearly, even well into the Third Reich, members of the German Christian faith movement felt they were still not getting through to, or were being misrepresented in, some quarters of German society.

German Christian publications had a variety of audiences and purposes. It is my hope that the documents excerpted in this volume represent some of the most significant among them.

Criteria for the Selection of Documents

A number of criteria guided the selection of documents excerpted and translated for this volume.[45]

1. *Chronology*. The German Christian movement is often thought to have been active and influential only in the early to mid-1930s. In fact, the movement persisted throughout the lifespan of the Third Reich—and beyond. As mentioned earlier, Doris Bergen frames its activity in terms of five periods: ascendancy, fragmentation, regrouping, ambiguous success, and postwar reintegration. About half the documents excerpted here were published during the movement's ascendancy; these were also the years during which German Christians published most widely.

The movement's period of most visible and consistent influence occurred during 1933–34, when it enjoyed Hitler's favor; he saw it as an instrument for accomplishing the *Gleichschaltung* of the Protestant church. Organized resistance to the German Christian agenda

44. Otto Brökelschen, *What Do the German Christians Want?: 118 Questions and Answers* [*Was wollen die Deutschen Christen: 118 Fragen und Antworten*] (Weimar: Verlag Deutsche Christen, 1937). See p. 397 in this volume.

45. In this regard I am especially grateful to Doris L. Bergen for her counsel at an early stage of this project.

emerged in the church, chiefly in the form of the Pastors' Emergency League and then the Confessing Church. At that point Hitler seems to have dropped his initial plan, and any pretense of favor toward the German Christians who favored his plan, as far more trouble than it was worth.

Remarkably, however, the German Christians' passion for the Führer's program did not abate. Unrequited, they continued to act to sustain and further it. As they did, the German Christians proclaimed and explained the irreplaceable spiritual, moral, and social contribution only (German) Christianity could make to the destiny of the Fatherland. The publications excerpted here, spanning the years between 1932 and 1940, reflect their persistent efforts to bend the church toward the trajectory dictated by National Socialism.

2. Key *issues*. From the beginning, antisemitism was as central to the German Christians' contribution as it was to their self-understanding. In pursuing their chief goal—to erase all signs of Judaism from Christianity—they both fomented and relied on anti-Jewish sentiments and scholarship that had circulated throughout Europe for centuries, sometimes dormant, sometimes virulent. The so-called Jewish question was also unavoidable because of the troubling but obvious matter of Christianity's origins in Judaism.

Closely-related issues included the authority of the Old Testament: Was it ineradicably and irredeemably Jewish, or was it actually anti-Jewish and prophetic of Jesus' coming and the supersession of Judaism by Christianity? The character and "race" of Jesus was under scrutiny: Was he really a Jew—or, as the German Christians set out to prove, "Aryan"? Martin Luther's vicious later writings on the Jews gave this sixteenth-century figure a supportive role in many German Christian discussions of the Jewish question. Luther was "the German prophet," the man who had called the German people [*Volk*] into

being; they claimed he was also the forerunner and noble forbear of an all-but-messianic Adolf Hitler. According to the German Christians, Hitler and National Socialism were in fact completing the task Luther had begun some four centuries earlier.

The nature and function of the church within German society were also critical matters for the German Christians. The fact that the German government and the Nazi Party were for all practical purposes indistinguishable was for some a stumbling block. For others, it was entirely appropriate and even desirable. In the church struggle, the Confessing Church brought the issue of the relationship between the state and the church to center stage. The organizational independence of the church, rather than the question of what was happening to the Jews, was perhaps the issue most bitterly contested between the German Christians and the Confessing Church. Even the question of whether the church would adopt a version of the Aryan paragraph was principally an issue of the church's independence from state interference, rather than an issue of either its implications for the Jews more generally or of the efficacy of the sacrament of baptism. For the German Christians, all three matters were involved, in different ways and to different degrees.

3. *Authorship*. In print as well as on the speaking platform, German Christian groups had prolific and articulate leaders and spokesmen, including Friedrich Wieneke, Siegfried Leffler, Julius Leutheuser, Joachim Hossenfelder, Wolf Meyer-Erlach, and Walter Grundmann. Chroniclers and pamphleteers, among them Arnold Dannenmann and Friedrich Brökelschen, put pen to paper. The national bishop Ludwig Müller not only made pronouncements but also tried his hand at reworking some passages of Martin Luther's translation of the New Testament. Finally, Protestant theologians and university professors of international stature, including Paul Althaus,

Emanuel Hirsch, and Gerhard Kittel, contributed intellectual sheen to the movement's efforts.

4. *Contemporary critics*. Before the window of opportunity closed, several theologians, including Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, produced sharply-written and spoken public critiques of the German Christians. Their arguments, suggested in the excerpts included here, illustrate the struggle to shape, or reshape, the myth that undergirded the self-understanding of millions of German Protestants. Interestingly, Paul Althaus, an early sympathizer with the German Christians, found some of their claims went too far; perhaps he can be categorized as an "internal critic."
5. *Types of documents*. Pamphlets and tracts were, of course, easily produced, cheap, written in popular language, and portable: ideally suited to spread German Christian ideology.[46] Reaching into every corner of German life, the movement published posters, broadsides, and scholarly books, calendars and almanacs, "dejudaized" liturgies, hymns, and Bibles, and reprints of speeches and radio sermons. I have suggested that these publications became resources for the German public's moral frame of reference. In a place and at a historical moment where propaganda played a key role, German Christian publications offered language and logic that both permitted and taught Germans—university-educated and working-class, nominal or

46. The invention of the printing press and moveable type in the late fifteenth century made it possible to reproduce many copies of written materials. During the centuries since then, pamphlets and tracts—sometimes a few pages, sometimes many bound together and folded over—played a crucial role in communicating information, political and religious opinion, new and even revolutionary ideas. It is difficult to imagine that Martin Luther's theological protest in 1517 would have had the tumultuous impact it did have, absent the dissemination of his 95 Theses and subsequent writings throughout Germany and the rest of Europe. It is also difficult to imagine the American Revolution without the pamphlets and tracts written by men like Thomas Paine. Perhaps the best contemporary analogies to this medium of communication would be the "tweet" and the blog.

committed religionists—how to fuse their (German) Christian faith with faith in the Führer and the Fatherland.

Determining the influence on people's thinking or behavior of particular documents is, of course, impossible in almost all cases. However, several documents excerpted here record events that seem to have had considerable impact: among them are those that have to do with the introduction of the Aryan paragraph into the church; Barth's June 1933 "manifesto" *Theological Existence Today!*, and the transcript of the speech delivered by Dr. Reinhold Krause in November 1933 to a packed Sports Palace in Berlin. Other documents, judging from the multiple editions registered on the title pages of the original German publications, seem to have been widely distributed and probably widely-read. In any case, as Doris Bergen observes, while

> [t]he movement had a national profile and spread its views via widely circulated newspapers and well-known theologians . . . its persistence depended on local bases of support. Protestant church members in a Westphalian village may never have attended one of the movement's mass rallies or read its publications, but they may have listened to German Christian ideas from the mouth of their pastor every Sunday.[47]

Documents like those excerpted and translated in this volume were "carriers" of those ideas.

47. Bergen, 15. Several pages later, describing the "frenetic production of spin-off [German Christian] organizations throughout 1934 and 1935," after the Sports Palace scandal and the onset of the church struggle, Bergen writes, "Yet the movement persisted. German Christian pastors went on preaching in pulpits across the country; parish representatives, synodal officers, and regional bishops, elected or appointed in 1933, remained in office and continued to propagate the cause." The proliferation of German Christian groups that, according to Bergen, led to renewed efforts to "regroup," is evidence of "the intense energies generated" by the people and ideas associated with this movement (18).

What Can We Learn from Reading These Documents?

About the momentum of antisemitism. It is impossible to read these documents without awareness of their historical context; they are written, published, and read at a time and in a place heading toward the Holocaust. In his June 1933 lecture, world-renowned New Testament scholar Gerhard Kittel underscores the seriousness of "the Jewish question" and argues that "the fight against the Jews . . . must be carried out on the basis of conscious and clear Christian convictions," which he proposes to explore in the talk that follows.[48] There are four possible responses to the question, "What must happen to the Jews?" The first one is extermination.[49] Kittel makes short work of this possibility, devoting to it only a few sentences:

> The violent extermination of the Jews is not a serious option: if the systems of the Spanish Inquisition or the Russian pogroms did not succeed, it seems highly unlikely this will happen in the 20th century. Nor does the idea make any moral sense. A historical reality like this one may be resolved through the extermination of this people at most in demagogic slogans, but never in actual historical circumstances. The point of a particular historical situation is always that it presents us with a task that we must master. Killing all Jews is not mastering the task at hand.[50]

What is chilling about this 1933 statement is first that it was made at all—in a public lecture by a highly-regarded teacher-scholar on the theological faculty at Tübingen, then (and still) one of the most renowned universities in Germany. Furthermore, Kittel seems to dismiss the "option" of extermination chiefly on the grounds of expedience: if it has been tried before and has failed, it is unlikely to

48. Gerhard Kittel, *The Jewish Question* [*Die Judenfrage*] (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1933). See the excerpt from this document included in this volume, p. 201ff.
49. The other three are Zionism, assimilation, and "guest status," the last of which he favors as the only possible solution to the problem of what to do with the Jews in Germany.
50. Kittel, p. 207 in this volume.

work if it is tried again. With historical hindsight, Kittel's statement and the complete absence of any expressed moral compunction take our breath away. In the broader context of his lecture, and despite his dismissal of its likelihood, what he says seems to override any serious intellectual, moral, or theological objection to its implementation. How many Germans could or might have anticipated that this "option" would eventually be implemented is impossible to know.

Kittel's published lecture is exceptional in that it mentions Jews and extermination in the same breath. But many of the German Christian documents in this volume, however refined or vulgar their language, reflect, justify, and even nurture attitudes and actions, public and private, that denigrate, devalue, exclude, and attack Jews and Judaism. Some German Christian writers perpetuate the centuries-old Christian lie that the Jews crucified Jesus and that they continue to live under that curse. Others identify Judaism with "godless" Bolshevism, a threat the National Socialists successfully exploited with the German public before, during, and after their ascent to power.

About the power of public discourse. *Das Volk*, or "the people," is a perfectly ordinary German term. Like most Germans living in the Third Reich, however, those who generated these documents embraced this word (and its panoply of variants) in its nazified meaning, which excluded everyone and everything the Nazis considered "un-German," especially the Jews. In Nazi-German, *Volk* could mean "race" or "nation." One of the documents in this volume defines *Volk* as "the divinely willed community of German people based on the created orders of race, blood, and soil."[51] As this German

51. Otto Brökelschen, *What Do the German Christians Want?: 118 Questions and Answers* [*Was wollen die Deutschen Christen? 118 Fragen und Antworten*] (Weimar [Thüringen]: Verlag Deutsche Christen, 1937), p. 395ff in this volume.

Christian definition suggests, the word *Volk* and words compounded with it—there were scores of them—carried a meaning by turns mystical, ideological, and even theological. *Volksgemeinschaft,* for example—literally, "the people's community," or "the community of the people"—referred to "the mystical unity of the blood-race of the national-German-Aryan community," and, in Nazi thought, bound the Third Reich together.[52] *Völkisch*, an adjective made from *Volk*, may be best translated "ethno-national," or "ethnic," but it also carried race-related, exclusionary freight. *Volksgenossen* [literally, "comrades from among the people"] were all those within this community, and no one outside it. Widely-respected university theologians like Paul Althaus sanctified *Volkstum*, perhaps best translated as "ethnic culture," and often employed as the Nazi-German racial-ethnic replacement for "nationality." Like *Volk*, *Volkstum* was one of God's "orders of creation"[53]—part of the structure of all that God had made—that faithful Christians dare not undermine or disrespect, but rather should protect and seek to purify.

What we think, learn, know, and say, as well as what we "leave out," ignore, forget, or dismiss as irrelevant: all of it takes shape through the power of language. Language and thought are woven together, not least of all as children and young people grow into adults. In the Third Reich, fluency in this vocabulary of "race," "community," and "blood" developed quickly and organically. The nazified terms above were seen, read, and heard continuously all over the Third Reich. They became the building blocks of public

52. Robert Michael and Karin Doerr, *Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi German: An English Lexicon of the Language of the Third Reich* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 423.

53. "Orders of creation" is a theological construct referring to certain structures or institutions God is said to have established in the earthly realm to order human life; marriage, family, the economy, the state, and the church might all be counted among them. For the German Christians, race—as they understood it—and *Volk* or *Volkstum* were "orders of creation," too, and, because they were established by God, were utterly sanctified.

discourse and were more and more easily applied to identify those who did and did not fit in. Philologist and linguist Victor Klemperer, who lived through the horrors of Nazism as a German Jew, "paid close attention to the language as it evolved . . . noting that words have the potential to be a small can of arsenic—they can be swallowed without being noticed, they seem not to have any effect, and yet after a period of time, the effect of the poison becomes apparent."[54]

It must have been exceptionally difficult—and dangerous—to think, let alone to converse with others, in any language that might have been considered "counter-cultural," not only by the Nazi state, but also by the neighbors. The published language out of which the documents in this book are crafted reflects German Christians' particular appropriation of the nazified German almost everyone in Germany heard, and likely spoke, every day. Those who want to explain, persuade, and announce what they believe to be good news must make themselves intelligible by speaking the language of those they want to reach; it will be no surprise, then, if they find themselves, intentionally or unintentionally, more and more fluent in that same language.

About being a "real" Christian. Those who are tempted to say that the people who wrote these documents or spoke the lectures and speeches that then appeared in print were not *real* Christians face several challenges. The first and vociferous objection would come from the German Christians themselves. One cannot spend very much time with these documents without recognizing how passionately their authors embrace their faith and their church, or how urgently they identify themselves as Christians. For them there

54. Leslie Morris, in the Foreword to Michael and Doerr, xiii. Klemperer's powerful linguistic and anthropological study of "Nazi-German," originally published in German in 1957, is *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist's Notebook* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

is no contradiction between their commitment to Jesus Christ and their commitment to Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist program for Germany's renewal. They are far more concerned, on the one hand, about the Protestant "establishment," which they view as fearful, dogma-bound, and backward-looking, and, on the other hand, about the emerging neo-pagan, anti-Christian German Faith Movement. They are deeply concerned, too, about those surrounding Hitler who reject Christianity completely and would like to see it wither and die. The language and themes of the German Christian documents address and can be better grasped in light of these multiple concerns.

The German Christians' 1932 Guidelines call for "a vigorous people's church [*Volkskirche*] . . . that expresses the power of our faith." The movement has arisen because its members believe that "the church may not stand on the sidelines" in the fight for freedom.[55] Emanuel Hirsch, one of the theologians most closely allied to the movement, writes that the church must develop "a new and concrete teaching about a Christian way of life in the present situation . . . of the German people."[56] A renewal of the church must accompany the renewal of the nation: this theme crops up repeatedly. So does the urgency of combatting "godlessness," chiefly in the form of Bolshevism—what we would call Marxism or Communism. German Christians argued about the relative value of the Old Testament. While some from more radical circles sought to excise it from the Christian canon, they were in a minority. Admittedly, the Old Testament was of lesser value than the New Testament. However, the Old Testament did after all comprise the scripture that Jesus studied. Considered as a whole, it was also part of

55. Found in *Deutsche Christen (Nationalkirchliche Einung)*, *Handbook of the German Christians* [*Handbuch der Deutschen Christen*], 2nd ed. (Berlin-Charlottenburg, 1933), pp. 163ff in this volume.
56. From Emanuel Hirsch, *What the German Christians Want for the Church*, p. 101ff in this volume.

"God's great story," leading to the fulfillment represented in Christ and Christianity. "[T]he Bible," writes Friedrich Wieneke, in his *Outline of German Theology*, "is the book of destiny for German Christians."[57]

About being "the church" here and now. For Germany, the years following World War I were characterized by upheaval, uncertainty, and a good deal of suffering. Trying, as we humans do, to make sense of it all, many German Christians—many Germans, period—interpreted these years as a kind of "Golgotha" experience. Hitler's ascent to power in early 1933 was the clearest possible evidence of God's blessing, long in coming and hence all the more welcome. "[T]he last 14 years," writes Joachim Hossenfelder, referring to the years leading up to 1933, "have been . . . about the faith and the soul of our nation."[58] The *Handbook of the German Christians* puts it this way: "On January 30, 1933, a new stage in the history of our people . . . [began] . . . Adolf Hitler believed in Germany, when there was nothing left to believe in." Comparing Hitler to Martin Luther, it continues, "with his faith in Germany, as the instrument of our God, [he] became the framer of German destiny."[59] Some even believed Hitler, "the most German man, is also the most faithful, a believing Christian. We know he begins and ends the course of his day with prayer, that he has found in the gospel the deepest source of his strength."[60] Perhaps it goes without saying that we humans are often tempted to project onto those who govern the qualities, character, and commitments we have and would like them to share.

57. Wieneke, *Outline of German Theology*, p. 283 in this volume.
58. From Hossenfelder, *Our Struggle*, p. 234 in this volume.
59. p. 197 in this volume.
60. From Constantin Grossmann, *German Christians: A People's Book: A Guide Through Today's Faith Movement*, p. 302 in this volume.

Several scholars with whom I have discussed this project at length have stressed how important religion was in Germany between 1933 and 1945, and not only in terms of faith movements like the German Christians, or denominations like Protestants and Catholics. One has only to view National Socialist rallies to get a sense of their quasi-religious fervor. The German Christian chronicler Arnold Dannenmann writes that adherents of the National Socialist movement, as they organized for change throughout Germany, "were carrying out a religious task." He goes on, "The Führer Adolf Hitler . . . was utterly aware of his divine mission," and "the thousands of gatherings that took place during the National Socialist movement's struggle to take power in Germany actually fulfilled a religious purpose."[61] From the German Christian viewpoint, the "experience of these times"—binding together the whole German people—was "God-given."[62]

Clearly, while people both within and outside the various German Christian groups all used terms like "religious," "church," and a host of others as if their meanings were plain, they often meant very different things. The renewal or revitalization of the church, including its responsiveness to the urgent needs of the world around it, is certainly something most Christians favor. Many German Christians would probably have agreed with Siegfried Leffler's analysis:

> Most Germans do not attend church these days. For this the churches, not the people, are to blame. The church must be renewed. But it doesn't allow itself to experiment, to risk anything. Hence it needs a free movement that is willing to risk starting something new . . . without being dogmatically harnessed.[63]

61. From Arnold Dannenmann, *History of the German Christian Faith Movement.* See p. 127 in this volume.
62. From Joachim Hossenfelder, *Our Struggle.* See p. 149 in this volume.
63. From Siegfried Leffler, *Christ in Germany's Third Reich*, p. 361 in this volume.

In their time and place, German Christians understood their mission *as* Christians to involve the cooperation of "the new church" (reformed from within by German Christians) with the National Socialist government, whose declared mission was the renewal of the whole German society. The German Christians' efforts to actualize this cooperation included, among other things, their proposal to implement within the church the Aryan paragraph, the law that excluded Jews from the German civil service. Those opposed to the German Christians argued that "the mission of the church is not political," and the German Christians' position on the Aryan paragraph "puts [pastors] in danger of subordinating their personal responsibility to the pressures of the subjective and time-bound political or church-political views of those in superior offices, church groups, or entities outside the church." Making "church members of non-Aryan descent into church members with fewer rights and less worth" was not acceptable, and even if the state limited the civil rights of Jews, the church would not accept such limitations—at least, not those the state imposed on baptized Jews.[64]

In this and almost every other case, the totalitarian claims of Nazism made neutrality impossible. For the German Christians, this was not a problem, since their dedication to the Nazi program, on the one hand, and their commitment to Christ, on the other, were both heartfelt and fully compatible. Their opponents were, for the most part, most deeply exercised by what they saw as the German Christians' eagerness to politicize the church, aligning the church's priorities with those of the government. In the process, few identified or condemned the ways in which a nazified Christianity—a Christianity that understood itself in terms of Germany's national

64. From the opinion of the University of Marburg theological faculty regarding the Aryan paragraph. See pp. 58ff in this volume.

priorities, defined by race and blood and soil—threatened the theological and spiritual foundations of the church itself.

Some Concluding Reflections

It is surely tempting to believe that if *we* had been there, things would have been different—that in 1933, *we* would have seen what Germans (almost all of them Christians) did not see, and that *we* would have made other choices, and things would not have turned out as terribly as they actually did. Or even to believe that if *they*—those Germans, who were after all Christians—had only seen through Hitler's demented plans for Germany's future, they would have stopped cheering and started resisting. But in the interest of humility and truthfulness, we must resist these temptations. And for the sake of the church—more than that, for the sake of the world—we must take quite seriously the likelihood that, Christians or no, we would have thought and spoken and acted in similar ways.

When I asked several of my German interlocutors what they thought we could learn from studying the conduct of the church during the 1930s, they responded, "*das Versagen der Kirche*": the failure of the church. Responding in 1933 to the German Christians, Karl Barth wrote that his deepest concern was the Protestant churches' failure to resist them. The church community is determined by the Holy Spirit and baptism, he wrote, not by blood and race, as the German Christians seemed to think; what was at stake was the crucial question of Christian truth. In 1935 the Nazis ran Barth out of Germany, forcing him to resign from his position as professor at the University of Bonn. Even theologian Paul Althaus, who in 1933 welcomed Hitler's accession to power and argued that the *Volk* was a divinely-given "order of creation," wrote in 1935 that the German Christians' identification of German history with salvation history

was "an embarrassing piece of religious presumption," and "[t]he attempt to appoint the German people as the people of God of the new covenant is a bald-faced theological heresy."[65] These were surely not the only public expressions of distress coming from Christian churchmen, but such statements were very few and far-between, and increasingly rare as the decade advanced.

Most egregious of all, of course, was the church's failure to act on behalf of the Jews. Ideologically, the German Christians outdid the Nazis. They married the racial antisemitism of the Nazis to the religious and theological anti-Judaism that had threaded its way through the Christian tradition for centuries. In this overwhelmingly Lutheran land, recruiting "the German prophet" Martin Luther for their purposes was not difficult; his 1543 tract *On the Jews and Their Lies*, with its hateful and violent suggestions for how to treat the Jews in sixteenth-century Germany, seemed tailor-made for Nazi purposes in twentieth-century Germany.[66] Perusing the documents in this volume, it appears that German Christians found it both convenient and compelling to embrace Luther, even to bracket him with Hitler as the two greatest Germans who ever lived.

German church historian Kurt Scholder argues that the church, in claiming the "divine order of *Volkstum"*—which excluded and devalued the Jews—made antisemitism a respectable topic. In doing so, he observes, "the church lost its claim to speak for the simple truth of the Christian command to love."[67] After chiding the German Christians because they conflated the eternal kingdom [*Reich*] of God with the German *Reich*, Paul Althaus could write that "the kingdom

65. From Paul Althaus, *Political Christianity: On the Thuringian "German Christians."* See p. 378 in this volume.
66. See *Luther's Works, Volume 47: The Christian in Society IV* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971). In 1994 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America repudiated Luther's anti-Jewish writings in a "Declaration to the Jewish Community."
67. Scholder, 115.

[of God] that is already here is present in our national, political history *to the extent that people serve their brothers, their people*, in the peace of Jesus Christ. . . ."[68] One could hardly imagine, however, that he would have included the Jews among "their brothers" or "their people," or that he would even have given the matter a second thought. German Christian leader Julius Leutheuser could write in 1935, "Our love for our fellow Germans is the confirmation of our faith in the fact that we are all children of God."[69] No self-respecting Christian would object. To declare that Jews are no longer "fellow Germans"—after the Nuremberg Laws were promulgated (in 1935), they were no longer German citizens—is only a short step away from excluding them in thought, word, and deed, from the larger circle formed by all of us "children of God." Once that happens, all moral and ethical bets are off.

Several of the questions suggested here continue to challenge us, both as we look back to the German churches in the 1930s and as we consider our commitments as Christians in our own time. Among them, I would underscore these:

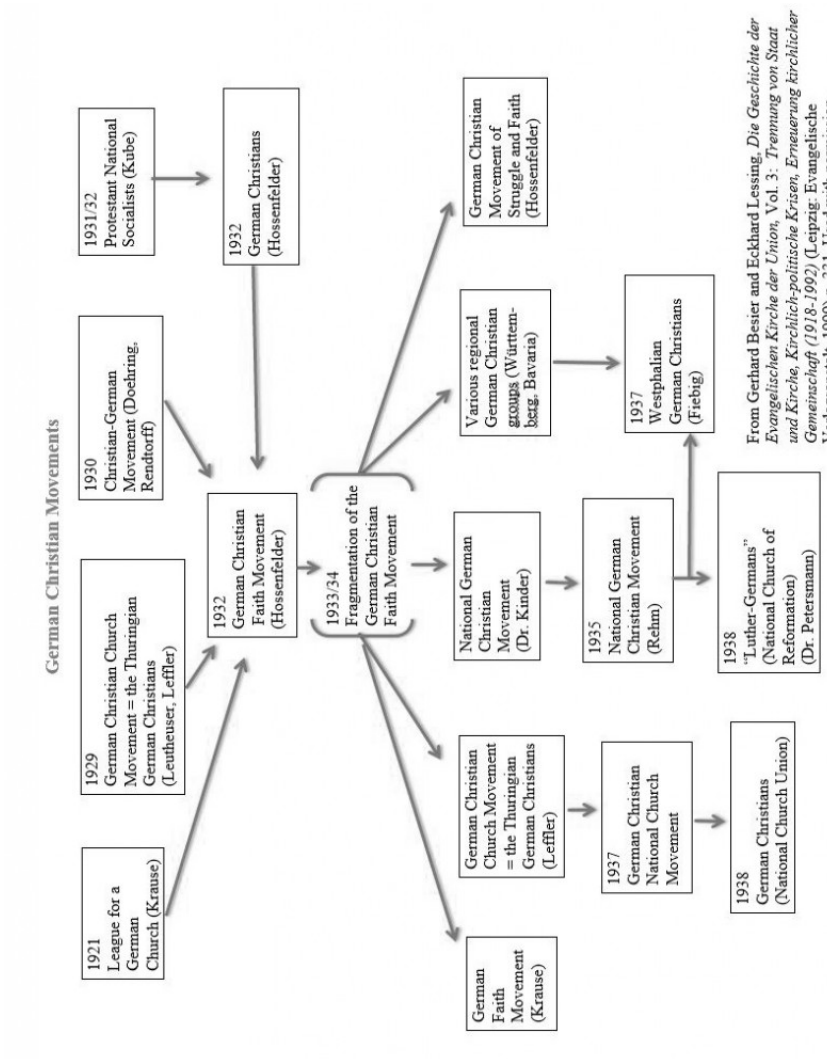
- What *is* the church, and what should be its role within society?
- What should the relationship be between Christian people and their governing authorities?
- How should one weigh one's commitments as a Christian in relation to one's commitments as a citizen and a member of civil society?
- How should one engage with, even embrace, the present reality, even as one nurtures the capacity to consider that reality critically?
- Perhaps most poignantly, who is the neighbor—and what does it mean to love that neighbor as myself?

68. See Althaus, p. 380 in this volume. Emphasis added.
69. In Julius Leutheuser, *The German Community of Christ*. See p. 335 in this volume.

Other important issues have to do with the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which an institution's or a government's public discourse functions to obfuscate rather than clarify. Nationalism, for example, generates a great deal of such discourse. The obfuscation it creates is not always intentional. But it is pernicious when a people must navigate through circumstances that require moral discernment and informed engagement. For example, to conflate love of country, a perfectly noble sentiment, with a religious commitment is to undermine the capacity, and sometimes even the will, to think critically about either one. The German Christians were quite sincere in identifying the Nazi cause with the cause of Jesus Christ. The language they used to propagate their sincerely-held conviction may or may not have convinced ordinary Germans who were Christians that the two causes were identical. But it surely made it easier to imagine that they were and did nothing to alert anyone to the possibility that they were not.

Implicitly, questions about knowing and not knowing—about what allows us to remain ignorant in the face of evil and what might help us avoid being "made stupid" (to use Bonhoeffer's words, quoted earlier in this introduction)—thread their way through all of this. These matters resonate deeply in today's world. Resolving them today is no simpler than it was in Hitler's Germany. For all people of good will—among whom I believe many Christians can be counted—engaging them is an urgent task. My hope is that the documents assembled here will bring them into high relief for students of history and for those who care about what the church may have to say today.

German Christian Movements



From Gerhard Besier and Eckhard Lessing, *Die Geschichte der Evangelischen Kirche der Union*, Vol. 3: *Trennung von Staat und Kirche, Kirchlich-politische Krisen, Erneuerung kirchlicher Gemeinschaft (1918-1992)* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1999) p. 331. Used with permission.