

THE POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

When the Church Must Resist

INTRODUCTION

1. Hitler appointed Chancellor, head of German government, Jan. 30, 1933
2. *Gleichgestaltung*: 'switching into the same gear' of German society¹
 - a. Hitler's goal: unite all Germans under Nazi worldview and eliminate all hindrances
 - b. Encompass every level of society
 - i. Mandatory party membership for many professions
 - ii. Civil servants: *Heil Hitler* instead of *Guten Tag*
 - iii. Oaths of personal loyalty to the *Führer*
 - iv. Other political parties banned
 - v. Non-governmental organizations under Nazi party leadership
 - c. Ideological supremacy as well as absolute political sovereignty
 - d. Ideological conflict: German Evangelical Church vs. Nazi state
3. Bonhoeffer's warning on February 1, 1933
 - a. Radio broadcast of critique of the "leadership" (*Führer*) principle
 - b. Danger of making an idol out of the leader
 - c. Broadcast cutoff

CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO STATE INJUSTICE

1. Law for Reconstitution of the Civil Service, April 17, 1933
 - a. Aryan clause: those of Jewish origin not allowed to hold office
 - b. Implications of Aryan clause for German Evangelical Church
 - i. Racial test: German church should be German
 - ii. No pastor of Jewish origin
2. "The Church and the Jewish Question"²
 - a. Jew subjected to special laws by state solely on basis of race (362)
 - b. Church cannot presume to know how things should go historically, but it does not stand aside (363).
 - c. 3 possible actions of church in response to state injustice (365–66)
 - i. Question whether state fulfilling its legitimate responsibilities
 1. Too little law and order: group deprived of rights
 2. Too much law and order: overuse of force robbing church of right to proclaim its message
 - ii. Aiding victims of state action, whether Christian or not
 - iii. "Seizing the wheel" of the state
 1. Engage in direct political action
 2. Must be decided by "Evangelical council"
 - d. *Statu confessionis* (366)

¹ Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler*, 30–33.

² *Berlin: 1932–1933*, volume 12 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 361–70.

- i. Something unessential made essential to membership and/or leadership in the church
 - 1. Example: excluding “racial” Jews from German church
 - 2. Judaism not a racial but a religious concept (368)
 - ii. Articles of faith by which the church stands or falls
- 3. Barmen Declaration (May 1934) affirmed
 - a. Jesus Christ the Lord of all areas of life (Article 2)
 - b. Church’s message and ordinances not subordinated to dominant ideology or set of political convictions (Art. 3)
 - c. State not to become the single and total order of life; church not to become an organ of the state (Art. 5)
- 4. Assessment of Barmen Declaration
 - a. Strong statement resisting Nazi inroads into life of church
 - b. Not a word about unjust treatment of the Jews
- 5. Involvement in conspiracy to assassinate head of state
 - a. Extraordinary—beyond three possible actions
 - b. Cannot be a “public” action
 - c. Must be engaged in without support of the church

THE IMPACT OF CONTEXT ON THE CHURCH’S RESPONSE

- 1. Ordinary situation: discern relationship of proclamation to state, economy, and so on
 - a. Name sin as sin: ministry of correction and improvement
 - b. Christians in public office special responsibility to discern God’s intentions in their particular institutions³
 - c. Goal: not to establish Christian state, Christian economy, but to participate in forming responsible state and responsible economy⁴
- 2. Extraordinary situations
 - a. Minority situations (early church)
 - i. Christians not directly responsible for wrongdoings of world
 - ii. Responsibility: obedience under suffering and strict congregational discipline
 - iii. Even congregation in catacombs has universal task⁵
 - b. Church coopted by state (Nazi Germany)
 - i. Confessing Church issued Barmen Declaration
 - ii. Extraordinary venture of responsibility may be necessary
 - iii. Difficult to discern task and fulfill it
 - c. Similarity of “minority church” and “coopted church”: state hinders primary mandate of proclaiming the gospel
 - d. Key criterion for extraordinary situation: Does the government permit the church to carry out its primary task without hindrance?
 - e. Can “up the ante” too quickly and conclude in an extraordinary situation when more ordinary daily responsible action needed

³ *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*, volume 16 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, 525.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 543.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 545.