

Emanuel Hirsch and the German Christians

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Introduction

In the study of history, it is important to examine both the things that have gone well, and the things that have been disastrous. If people are to learn from the greatest mistakes of history, it only makes sense to point to the most profound of those failures for the best information. For Christians today, there can be few things higher on the list of ecclesiastical failures than the treatment of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany. The Holocaust is significant because of the near-unanimous failure by all Christian branches to address its atrocities: Catholic and Protestant, clergy and layperson, those within Germany and those without. Certainly, these failures include the treatment of Jews and other minorities, the laissez faire attitude towards German political infringement on other nations, and a host of other wrongdoings. However, for Christians, one attack oft unmentioned is the onslaught against Christianity itself taken up by Nazi Germany.

Why does this matter? While Christianity has been a part of many horrible things that have happened in the world, it has also been a part of many solutions. In the case of Nazi Germany, while the overwhelming response was one of apathy, the strongest anti-Nazi (particularly within Germany) groups were all Christian-based, so it is fair to reason that there may be something within Christianity itself that directs the religion toward resistance. Given the German Christian movement, though, perhaps these things are not as easy to identify as one may think.

Even in their own time, there were many Nazis themselves who saw Nazism as a danger to the church. Given their deep, confessional roots, they saw fit to form a group calling themselves the German Christians. I will go through the history of the movement with an increasingly specific and critical eye, first through the generalities of the

movement, through the historical context of the most crucial year in that movement (1933), to one document written by a brilliant scholar—Emanuel Hirsch. The narrative of Hirsch's life is the story of a brilliant scholar gone wrong—a man who was extraordinarily intelligent, theologically trained, and philosophically gifted. Yet, when it came to Nazism and the German Christians, he too was taken in, along with many other Germans.

This begs the question: if external forces are so powerful that a brilliant mind with Christian roots is unable to discern proper action, what does that mean for Christians? What can someone do at this time in history to assure that such a misuse of Christianity never occurs again? In making clear how their thoughts (particularly the thoughts of philosopher/ theologian Emanuel Hirsch) came about and were refined, the reader should be able to draw conclusions about the historical error that was the German Christian movement. Thus, the story of Emanuel Hirsch presents for Christians, both today and of his own time, the narrative of how Christianity can be misdirected to become something decidedly un-Christian through their bringing in their own pre-conceived notions to the religion, inconsistent theology centering on the Volk, and their desire for the Church to support the state.

I: A Brief History of Nazi Church Policy and the German Christians

Before beginning an in-depth examination of Emanuel Hirsch, one must first understand the environment out of which his thought arises: his German ethnicity and homeland, and his religious affiliation. Germans have always been known as a pious people, so it should come as no surprise that religion and religious life posed a significant problem for Hitler's plans for Germany. In Hitler's eyes, religion had no purpose in the world of National Socialism. In particular, Hitler believed Nazism and Christianity could not coexist.¹ However, some members of this pious German people were unwavering in their Christianity, and utterly convinced by the propaganda put forth by National Socialism. Such people needed somewhere to turn. It is along this line of thinking that many people joined the Glaubensbewegung Deutsche Christen: the Faith Movement of the German Christians.²

Several of the main beliefs of the German Christians surfaced in the late 1920s.³ In the years following World War I, an overwhelming sense of nationalism was sweeping Germany. Around this time, three young pastors who believed in these nationalistic ideals, were spreading their new understanding of scripture throughout Thuringia. They preached a gospel of the power of Hitler and Christ, and that political activism could take the place of more traditional Christian types of worship. These pastors' names were Joachim Hossenfelder, Siegfried Leffler and Julius Leutheuser.⁴ In addition to these three, Wilhelm Kube had a similar movement going in Berlin. Kube was the *Gauleiter* (bishop/regional church leader) for the Brandenburg district, and initially called his

¹ Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1.

² Also known as *Deutsche Christen, D.C.*; henceforth referred to as the German Christians.

³ Bergen, 5.

⁴ John Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945*, (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 11.

movement the Protestant National Socialists. Upon hearing the name, though, Hitler himself suggested the name be changed to the German Christians.⁵

What stake did Hitler have? He was no fool. He knew the religious nature of the German people, and that not all of them would be so quick to give up their Christianity in favor of National Socialism. He was fully aware that people would be skeptical, and in many cases even revolt completely against Nazism if it were to be anti-Christian by official policy. That is why Hitler kept using Christian images and language, as well as openly supporting Christianity, in spite of his personal disdain for the religion.⁶

However, the German Christians presented Hitler with an unique opportunity: here was a group of people for whom Church and State needed not be separate. In fact, the German Christians allowed Hitler the chance at a Church that could unite the Christians (or at least the Protestants) of Germany under the banner of the German Christians. In fact, in the infamous 1933 church elections, two-thirds of Protestant seats were filled by the German Christians, at the urging of Hitler—and all of this came about during an election which saw a larger voter turnout than had ever been seen before.⁷

What was it about the message this group was preaching that so invigorated the German people? Many of the tired, old refrains could be rehashed here, for example the socio-political and economic crisis following the first World War. However, those reasons only explain *why* the message was accepted, not what the message itself was. First of all, one thing sure to excite many of the German people was the infusion and application of nineteenth century racial theory into Christianity.

⁵ Bergen, 5.

⁶ Conway, 5.

⁷ Bergen 5-6.

As genetics was just becoming a more popular study, people began to make wild claims about the reach of its capabilities. Social Darwinism is one offshoot of this phenomenon. More important to Nazi Germany is the ‘racial theory’ developed in the nineteenth century and held over into 1930s and 1940s Germany. Essentially, this theory stated that certain “races” were better suited for certain kinds of work than others. For Europeans of this time, though, ‘race’ was not seen based purely on skin color, but rather was steeped in what today is known as nationality or ethnicity. Poles, Greeks, Germans, Jews, Russians, Spaniards: these were not ‘Europeans’ or ‘Caucasians.’ Rather, each was a distinct race. In the racial analyses of people who professed these beliefs, it was the German race that was grandest of all.

The question then becomes: how does Christianity assimilate these beliefs? It may seem antithetical for Christians to believe these things, but many German Christians saw this as perfectly natural: “The role of race as the fundamental truth of human life played a role for German Christians comparable to that of the Bible in traditional Christian teaching.”⁸ The belief in and devotion the *Volk*⁹ was absolute. One of the favorite refrains of the German Christians is *Rasse, Blut, und Boden*: literally, “race, blood, and foundation.” They saw ethnic identity as more than just coincidental; it is both literally and figuratively the foundation on which everything else in life is built.

The German Christians also had a champion in Martin Luther. This does not mean that all German Christians were Lutherans themselves. Rather, their devotion to the *Volk* is so absolute that, even for Catholic German Christians, Luther is a critical

⁸ Bergen, 23.

⁹ “Volk” is among several words that will be left untranslated. While it literally means “folk” or “people,” it also possesses connotations of race. For the German Christians specifically, this was an issue of major import, further explained on page 22.

figure. Alone, Luther's German-ness made his opinions on matters more valid. Beyond that, Luther's essay, "Against the Jews and Their Lies" was oft-quoted and much esteemed.¹⁰ This document, they believed, proved Luther as an anti-Semite and therefore adherent to the racial laws so dear to the hearts of the German Christians. In fact, a popular German Christian saying goes, "The Swastika on our breasts, and the Cross in our hearts."¹¹

This popular belief of the fusion of Church and State is one of the hallmarks of the German Christians. It has been argued that perhaps one of the reasons for the founding of the German Christians is that there was a fear that, unless Christianity adapted to Nazism, it would disappear altogether.¹² In fact, that is the sentiment of J. Beckmann in *Artgemässes Christentum oder schriftgemässe Christenglaube* (Authentic Christianity or Traditionally Written Christian Beliefs?): "The Church must enter completely into the Third Reich, it must be co-ordinated into the rhythm of the National Revolution, it must be fashioned by the ideas of Nazism, lest it remain a foreign body in the unified German Nazi community."¹³ He is saying that, in order for German Christians to *truly* be a part of the Reich, they must abandon all other concerns (even pre-existent, Christian ones) in favor of Reich matters. Most Germans could be quite comfortable with this idea. A state church was all they knew: "German Christians assumed that any legitimate church had close ties to the state."¹⁴ Thus, in order for a church to be legitimate, as they wished to be, they, too would have to be closely tied to the state.

¹⁰ Bergen, 28.

¹¹ Conway, 45.

¹² Conway, 45.

¹³ Conway, 46.

¹⁴ Bergen, 54

Thus, the search for legitimacy and recognition was not to prevent the collapse of Christianity as they knew it, but rather to make what they believed to be the truest expression of Christianity to be the confessional belief of all Germany. Their own document, the *Richtlinien* (Guidelines), a set of ten points outlining German Christian beliefs and desires, points to their beliefs being universally accepted as the ultimate goal. In their first point, the *Richtlinien* state the hope that the document itself (that is, the *Richtlinien*) would “either be or replace a confessional belief, or at least shake the foundation of the confessions of the Protestant Church.”¹⁵ While this may sound like a political movement, the German Christians go on to frame their argument in a broader way that allows them to see themselves as having gone beyond politics and into the realms of theology. The entirety of the third point of the *Richtlinien* reads:

The members of the “German Christians” do not desire to be a church-political party in the traditional sense. We concern ourselves with all German Protestant Christians. The time of parliamentarism has passed, even in the Church. Church-political parties do not have the religious authority to represent the church-Volk, and stand in the way of the holy goal of being **one** church-Volk. We desire to be one, living Volk-church; the expression of all the beliefs of our Volk.¹⁶

Clearly, the German Christians were interested in more than just the survival of the church—they wanted it to flourish, to accept the principles of Nazism alongside of Christianity, and to have their expression of Christianity be the only one.

One important factor in this movement for the German Christians was the introduction of the Aryan Paragraph. Although the measure was not passed at the height of the power of the German Christians (circa 1933), it was a significant issue, and one which drew much (though not unanimous) German Christian support. Essentially, the

¹⁵ Joachim Hossenfelder, *Unser Kampf* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag München, 1933), 6. All translations henceforth are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

¹⁶ Hossenfelder, 6.

idea behind the Aryan Paragraph was that, in order to be a pastor in a Protestant church in Germany, one would have to be of Aryan ancestry, and one would have to be able to prove that. Many German Christians saw the German clergy as infiltrated by Jews. They valued blood so highly that even the sacrament of baptism was not viewed as powerful enough to change someone from Jew to Christian.¹⁷ There was a cry for German pastors to be truly, racially German. As a 1934 article in the *Deutsches Pfarrerblatt* (German pastors' newsletter) claimed that Germans had a right to German "pastors of their tribe: Chinese for Chinese, Japanese for Japanese, Negroes for Negroes."¹⁸ This obsession meant that non-Aryan pastors were considered unacceptable to many practitioners. However, some, even within the German Christians, found that hard to swallow. It seemed to undermine the power of Christ and of baptism. Additionally, at one debate on the subject, one person did bring up what he assumed would be the ensuing "rejection of the New Testament because Paul, the apostles, and Jesus were Jews"¹⁹ This, it seems, would have been a major theological issue.

A document known as "Jesus und die Juden" (Jesus and the Jews) cites Rosenberg's claim that, "The likelihood that Christ was not a Jew, that he had not a drop of real Jewish blood in his veins, is so great that it is almost a certainty."²⁰ This information is based on the fact that Jesus was known throughout his ministry as a Galilean; the author makes the claim that Galilee was largely a gentile area with only a very small number of Jews, and thus the likelihood of Jesus' Judaism was low.

¹⁷ Bergen, 88.

¹⁸ Bergen, 90.

¹⁹ Bergen, 89.

²⁰ *Jesus und die Juden*, (Weimar: Verlag Deutsche Christen Weimar, 1937), 5-6. Trans. Mary Solberg.

The German Christians, though, were no fools: they also knew their scripture. The same author cites the following three parallel passages, Matthew 22.45; Mark 12.35ff; Luke 20.41ff when they state: “If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”²¹ The author is also quick to note that, while many people in the Bible do make the claim of Jesus’ Jewish ancestry, Jesus never does so himself. Then, even if it were to be discovered as true that Jesus were of Jewish ancestry, the author of “Jesus und die Juden” protects himself by quoting Paul that “‘Christ *according to the flesh*’ descends from David.”²² It is as if the author wants to remind the reader that Christ’s true power lays not in his body, but rather in the power of God, which is *obviously* without Jewish blood (the author laughs that very idea off early in the essay). He also quotes Goebbels, claiming that Christ is the “‘first and most important adversary of the Jews.’”²³ Essentially, he covers his bases theologically.

As has been noted frequently, the German Christians had a general concern for a few things, but among those, theology is not to be found. For German Christians, theology was made up more of practice than of ideas. Unity, ritual, race—these are all things to which a German Christian could point and about which he or she could agree; beyond that, however, it becomes much more difficult to say what German Christians actually believed. For example, within the *Richtlinien*, at least five of the points mention directly; all ten points mention it at least peripherally. However, the closest they come to doing theology is in point 2, which quotes a poem:

Outward one and strong in spirit,
Centered around Christ and his Word,
Inward rich and diverse in form,

²¹ I quote the NRSV, Matthew 22:45

²² *Jesus und die Juden*, 4, emphasis added.

²³ *Jesus und die Juden*, 2.

Everyone a Christ by call and type.²⁴

This point actually says nothing theologically. It does stress the importance of Christ and the Word, but never really goes beyond saying that they are important. Additionally, the entirety of point 4 reads: “We stand at the foundation of Positive Christianity. We profess an affirmative, appropriate belief of Christ for Germans, how he embodies both the German spirit expressed by Luther, and heroic piety.”²⁵ Again, while theological language is used, there is nothing expressed here which actually reveals what German Christians have to say about theology, and particularly about the problem of Jesus’ Jewishness.

This kind of thought is not at all unusual for the German Christians. What is the reasoning? The greatest reason is likely the inconsistent theology of the movement. If there were some definitive source to which one could go and find the beliefs of the group, it would be easy to say more about theological difficulties. This characteristic theology as done above—disjointed, disconnected, and disorganized, is one of many shortcomings of the German Christian movement. While there were many adherents, theology was not particularly important to them. This should lead one to question, as many did, their validity as a group in the first place.

However, it is not these inconsistencies that are most troubling, but rather the one point of theology on which they do hinge their beliefs: the Volk. This emphasis on the Volk could be considered theologically relevant; in fact, the German Christians justified it by saying it is ordained by God. Admittedly, it would be a new piece of theology, but just because something is new does not automatically classify it as wrong. The error in

²⁴ Hossenfelder, 6.

²⁵ Hossenfelder, 6.

the German Christian's ways, from a theological standpoint, though, is that the emphasis on the Volk was more important even than the emphasis on God and Christ. This point practically prevents the movement from even being deemed Christian, by some standards, but certainly reaches a major inconsistency with the remainder of Christianity or Christian beliefs.

But regardless of inconsistencies *within* the movement, there were external forces which met the German Christians even more harshly than any internal problem. Perhaps the first among these that people think of is the Confessing Church and the Pastors' Emergency League. The roster of these groups opposed to the German Christians is littered with the names of famous theologians: Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Martin Niemöller, to name a few. While this church had power and influence, it was not what ultimately led to the decline of popularity of the German Christians. Rather, what hurt them most was the person who initially thought they could be a powerful tool: that is, Hitler himself. Hitler always saw Nazism and Christianity as, ultimately, irreconcilable.²⁶ Eventually, the German Christians fell out of Hitler's favor, and he was ready for people to commit themselves completely to Nazism. However, in spite of the fact that the number of German Christians was ever-shrinking after 1933, many of the politically and religiously powerful people in Nazi Germany continued to be German Christians. 1933 itself, though, had much significance to the movement. Besides being the height of the movement's power and influence, it was also the time at which tensions were highest and religious battle lines were being drawn. For Emanuel Hirsch, that meant the writing of *Das kirchliche Wollen der Deutschen Christen*. Obviously, this

²⁶ Bergen, 1; Conway, 1.

work did not come out of a vacuum, but rather was inspired by the responses of other theologians and authors, at which point Hirsch felt he needed to enter the ring.

Section II: Circumstances Surrounding Emanuel Hirsch's Document

Part A: Socio-Political Climate

As mentioned, to understand Emanuel Hirsch's *Das kirchliche Wollen der Deutschen Christen*,²⁷ one must understand the specific political, social, and religious climate of Germany in 1933. In 1933, the German Christian movement reached its greatest success. Admittedly, even that was not great: the German Christians could only boast about 600,000 members at their peak strength.²⁸ That may not seem like a lot in a country which was able to systematically murder 13 million people at during the same era; however, the total number of people drastically underestimates the influence of the group. The German Christians held many positions on the State's Church government. Most importantly, Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller was a German Christian. The Reich Bishop is like the president of the national church council for all of Germany. Essentially, he was the head of the Protestant Church during the reign of Hitler. This gave the German Christians a person of tremendous power in their organization. He was by no means the only German Christian in the Church government. In fact, in the 1933 church elections, two-thirds of all open spaces went to German Christians.²⁹ Not only did this occur in during the largest voter turnout in German history, but it also made the Faith Movement of the German Christians look like nothing could stop it.

Another fact, less often referred to even by scholars of the era is that German Christian membership is somewhat cloudy to determine. While there certainly were at least 600,000 members, there may have been many more. Official membership in the

²⁷ trans. *What German Christians Want in the Church*

²⁸ Bergen, 8.

²⁹ Bergen, 5.

group required filling out a form, albeit an uncomplicated one.³⁰ However, it is very often the case that people are unwilling to do such paperwork, particularly when doing so does nothing but give them a membership number and cost them dues. Additionally, there is significant reason to question the availability of such forms. Certainly, they would not have been the kind of thing to merely be sitting around on street corners. In my own research, I ran across the form only once—it was found in a pamphlet published by the German Christians themselves. For people who were not inundated with German Christian literature already, it may have been hard to find an official way to register with the party.

Additionally, it is apparent that an extremely large contingent of the German Christians was pastors. This creates another interesting issue when counting German Christians. How many “non-members” had pastors who were, in fact, German Christians? It is obvious that the number of pastors drastically outweighed the number of laypeople in the movement, so to whom were they preaching? Obviously, there must have been more congregations out there hearing German Christian-based messages than were members of the group, so many of those people may have had German Christian sympathies. Additionally, since the various strands of the German Christian movement were highly localized (in Berlin and Thuringia, for example) it is impossible to tell how many sympathizers there were who were simply too far away from a major German Christian center to actually be able to receive literature and officially become members. These factors all add up to point to one fact: the number of German Christians is indiscernible. While 600,000 may be a fair estimate, it is quite likely that the actual

³⁰ Please see appended form, Appendix A.

number of people who believed in the things the German Christians were teaching was far, far greater.

Part B: Who is Emanuel Hirsch?

Emanuel Hirsch was born June 14, 1888 in Brandenburg, Prussia. Hirsch's later interest in theology was sparked at an early age, as he was the son of a Lutheran pastor. His family moved to Berlin when he was 18, which allowed him to study Lutheran theology under Karl Holl, who stressed the importance of Luther for Germans in their specific chronological idiom. To Hirsch, of course, this meant interpreting Luther through the lens of a German intellectual believing in the ideas of 19th century racial theory. Hirsch began his career in academia following his graduation by working first at Göttingen in 1912, and then Bonn in 1914, following a promotion and remained until 1917. Afterward, he left to become a parish pastor—an endeavor that lasted only four years. In 1921, he returned to Göttingen as the chair of church history. In 1936, he took over the systematic theology teaching at Göttingen, and remained until 1945.³¹

Hirsch was interested in something more specific, though, than just the role of the *Germans* in the *world*; his goal was a prescriptive way of living for the *German* in *Germany*. On this count, Hirsch was able to build much of his political philosophy prior to 1933 and the rise of Hitler. Hirsch saw the primary objective to be that Germans reach their destiny. In fact, this idea was, to Hirsch, very similar to what people in the United States thought of Manifest Destiny: there is a predetermined destiny, ordained by God, that the people must reach. Among Hirsch's happiest moments was the advent of World War I.³² He believed that to be the moment for Germany to shine. However, when the

³¹ Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians Under Hitler*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 122

³² Ericksen, *Theologians*, 124.

Germans were defeated and the Hohenzollern Empire came to an end, Hirsch was crushed: “He had no use for Social Democrats.”³³ For Hirsch, the Weimar Republic was an insult.

But how does this connect to theology? Well, as Hirsch was interested in systematic theology (ironic, given his profession of German Christianity and his close study in Luther³⁴), it stands to reason that the connection between philosophy and theology would be deeply-rooted for him. In fact, the two were nearly inseparable for Hirsch. “Human history and notions about God belong necessarily together.”³⁵ Hirsch sets forth his belief that for true creativity to arise, it must have “a maker, a fashioner” to borrow a phrase from Richard Niebuhr (Niebuhr, of course, picked up on this train of thought leading directly from Nietzsche to Hirsch to Niebuhr).³⁶ The general idea, according to Hirsch, is that truly original thought cannot come from human beings alone: humans, as he sees them, are products of a society and their experiences. Therefore, a thought cannot arise unless it is within that realm of experience. However, Hirsch believes there to have been people who had such thoughts: “Amos, Socrates, Luther, Leibniz, and Kant.”³⁷ Therefore, such thoughts need to come from outside the realm of human experience, i.e., of divine origin. He then goes on to use other philosophical forms of reason to prove his ideas.

³³ Ericksen, *Theologians*, 125.

³⁴ One famous Lutheran doctrine is that of the two kingdoms: that the earthly and heavenly kingdoms are separate from one another and that God will provide earthly leadership and people are to worry about the things of God. This was a major point of interest for German Christians, as they were both obsessed with Luther because he was German, and interested in Hitler. This doctrine allowed them to point to Hitler as a God-given ruler who had been provided for them. As one may expect, there was much contention over this doctrine during the Third Reich.

³⁵ Ericksen, *Theologians*, 129.

³⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 48.

³⁷ Ericksen, *Theologians*, 129.

Politically, Hirsch was very active. He was conservative and nationalistic. He believed in using war when necessary, particularly to defend the state. This is why he saw First (and would later see the Second) World War as not only valid, but the right thing to do.³⁸ In April 1932, just before the election, Hirsch published an article proclaiming Hitler to be the correct choice for the German people, rather than Alfred Hugenberg of the German Nation Peoples Party, a conservative group not quite as eccentric as the Nazis.³⁹ Hirsch's decision to switch allegiances from Hugenberg to Hitler had largely to do with the idea of a national church. Hirsch felt very strongly nationalistic, and believed that National Socialism promised a way to fulfill a true union of Germans under Christ, in spite of his disagreements with some aspects of Nazi paganism and racial theory.⁴⁰ Obviously, all of these factors contributed to Hirsch writing *Das kirchliche Wollen der Deutschen Christen*. It was a perfect storm: the rise of Hitler and National Socialism, the prevalence of the German Christians, and Germany's messy political situation. But, even in the presence of all of these mitigating factors, Hirsch would not have written this document had there not been a different one, written by Karl Barth, to which Hirsch could respond.

Part C: Karl Barth

Perhaps the most important theologian of Germany during the early part of the twentieth century was Karl Barth. Barth came along at a time when Germany was rife with theological minds, but even in his own day, he was perhaps the most famous and respected theologian around. His attitudes carried a lot of weight in Christian circles, particularly in Germany. Therefore, when Barth declared his distaste for the German

³⁸ Ericksen, *Theologians*, 142.

³⁹ Ericksen, *Theologians*, 146.

⁴⁰ Ericksen, *Theologians*, 146-7.

Christians, it was inevitable that he would be met with hostility. Barth wound up spending the Nazi era living abroad, as he was a major target for Hitler.

Karl Barth was opposed to Nazi rule of Germany. Particularly, he was against the religious policies of the Nazis. Barth firmly believed the Nazis to be in danger of bastardizing Christianity. Barth believed he had to write something against these ideas. This is the Genesis of his pamphlet series, *Theologische Existenz Heute!* (*Theological Existence Today!*). The first in this series is what Hirsch writes against.

First, Barth espouses his role. He is a theologian, and believes that it is important to do theology. While this may seem obvious, what Barth is trying to say (obliquely) is that he is not going to be making political statements; rather, he will be making theological ones. This is somewhat true and somewhat untrue. First, it is true that he is using theology; what he is not doing is avoiding politics. He says himself that, “I regard the pursuit of theology as the proper attitude to adopt: at any rate, it is one befitting Church-politics [sic], and, indirectly, even politics.”⁴¹ Clearly, while he *states* that the political slant is incidental, the document is written with that in mind. Additionally, his clever wording as to for whom and as whom he is writing: “In the matter of speaking and having an audience I have ample reason for being content to keep within the limits of my vocation as a theological professor.”⁴² This is a direct shot at people such as Hirsch, who would reach outside their disciplines to make grand statements about politics and/or race. Certainly, this may be one of many things within the document to which Hirsch took offense.

⁴¹ Karl Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!* trans. by R. Birch Hoyle. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933), 9-10.

⁴² Barth, 10.

Additionally, Barth emphasizes the role of the Word of God (both as the Bible and as personified in Jesus Christ) as central to the work of the church.⁴³ Interestingly, this matches up very well with what the German Christians claimed to believe about God; however, while that was their claim, their practice appears to have been quite different. Barth makes a stinging remark to that effect when he states that “in our anxiety in the face of existing dangers we no longer put our whole trust in the authority of God’s Word, but we think we ought to come to its aid with all sorts of contrivances, and thus we throw quite aside our confidence in the Word’s power to triumph.”⁴⁴ Here, Barth takes a shot at those who are espousing beliefs in human authority—his reason, which he does not state explicitly, is Hitler. Many Germans had a faith in Hitler that Barth found offensive, as he believed that faith to belong to God. Again, there is much contention around the idea of God and government.

Barth’s ultimate offense to Hirsch, though, comes much later in the text, after he has made many other claims opposing Hirsch’s point of view:

At this point I can supplement what has preceded by stating how I reckon up the position of things as they are likely to eventuate. After the latest events I am more convinced than before. My view is, that a union with the Evangelical German Church which in any way has surrendered to [Müller] and the “German Christians” will probably not be maintained. Disobedience will have to be rendered to the doctrines, *pronunciamentos*, and measures of the “German Christians” *Reichs*-Bishop and his prebendaries, which measures are to be expected as opposed to the Gospel. If necessary, even against them, the final consequences will have to be paid.⁴⁵

⁴³ Barth, 12.

⁴⁴ Barth, 15.

⁴⁵ Barth, 67.

Barth states clearly that he finds the German Christian view to be a false one. Obviously, this position is in conflict with Hirsch and many other German Christians. It was writings like this that led Barth to self-imposed exile from Germany.

Finally, Barth closes by lamenting the state of Germany, and particularly the German clergy: “If it so be that the German Evangelical theologian should still remain awake, on the watch, or if he have gone to sleep, to-day, to-day [sic] once more, Oh! that once more he were awake!”⁴⁶ He sees Germany as weakened and defenseless, and he sees the German clergy as having stood by while atrocities have occurred. Thus, he allows his message to serve as a call to action for all German clergymen, such that the disease of Germany, as Barth sees it, can be cured.

⁴⁶ Barth, 84-5 Most likely, “Evangelical” in this translation should read “Protestant.”

Section III: *Das kirchliche Wollen der Deutschen Christen* by Emanuel Hirsch

The document put out by Barth showed Hirsch that other scholars were putting out their notions about Christianity, and Hirsch decided it was time to put in his two cents—particularly since he believed Barth to be so wrong. Hirsch felt that Barth’s document inaccurately described what the situation in Germany *actually was*. This is the difference that inspired Hirsch to write his document, famously beginning with the statement: “With Karl Barth, there is nothing which we German Christians can discuss.”⁴⁷ Arguing about what the state of German Christianity actually looked like, though, is one that is always filled with opinions from different sides. What is definitive, though, is what Emanuel Hirsch hoped the Christianity in Germany to be. Thus, the second part of Hirsch’s document comes into play: the idea, not of what Germany *is*, but what it *should become*. Thus, I will focus on three sections of this document: first, the section in which Hirsch explains what Christianity is and what its adherents believe; second, the section about the relationship between National Socialism and Christianity; and finally, the section about freedom of the church and its consequences for the church situation in the state.

Section A: Hirsch’s Definition of Christianity

While the first paragraph or so of Hirsch’s document is simply critical of Barth, Hirsch eventually moves to laying out his picture of what Christianity should look like. In a section titled “A Short Course on the Christian Religion,”⁴⁸ Hirsch explains the rules of Christianity. This article of twelve points at about three pages long (much of which is

⁴⁷ Emanuel Hirsch, *Das kirchliche Wollen der Deutschen Christen* (Berlin-Charlottenberg: Verlag: Max Grevemeyer, 1933), 5.

Mit Karl Barth ist für uns Deutsche Christen kein Reden.

⁴⁸ Hirsch, 17.

laid out in this section) describes Hirsch's theology paying particular attention to the most significant of these (identified as points 1, 2, 6, and 8). Using these points, one can see from where Hirsch is coming, in terms of religious viewpoint.

The first point echoes (and elaborates on) the First Commandment:

The tangible world of things and people is not the final, nor the actual reality. Both incomprehensible to our reason and inconceivable to our minds, the holy and almighty Word of God the Father is brought about. He calls everything that lives and is into that state of being. He creates and keeps and directs all Völker⁴⁹ and people. Nothing can contradict his will; He is Lord of the living and the dead. To serve Him and worship Him with all the strength He has given us is our sole purpose for existence.⁵⁰

Hirsch makes God the focal point, and includes a mention of nationality/Volk in his description of God, and God's importance. It is no accident that Hirsch attempts to sound like the Bible, as it gives more credence to his words. Also, his emphasis on "Volk" in contrast to "people" goes to show how important that separation was for the Nazis in general, and the German Christians in particular. Saying that a Volk is a separate thing means that the customs, traditions, and people are all divinely ordained and determined, and that it is God's will that they are so.

His second point expands on the first:

God the Father shows Himself in our hearts without our search or thought being involved, in spite of all questions and doubts of our brooding reason.

⁴⁹ The word "Volk" (as well as the plural "Völker" and the adjective "volkisch") is German for "folk" or "people." However, for the German Christians, this word meant much more. It signalled not only the designation of a people, but also carried with it the Nazi syntax in which Volk has come to mean "race." Additionally, the connotation of "Volk" implies a certain ordained-ness—that is, "Volk" is not just luck of the draw, but rather, particularly for the German Christians, something chosen by God. This word has far too many meanings to bring them across adequately in translation, and has simply been left in the original German; however, if an English approximation were needed, perhaps "people" serves that function best.

⁵⁰ Hirsch, 17. Pt. 1:

Die sichtbare Welt der Dinge und der Menschen ist nicht die letzte, die wahre Wirklichkeit. Unfaßlich für unsre Sinne, unbegreiflich für unsern Verstand trägt sie der heilige allmächtige Willen Gottes des Herrn. Es ruft alles, was wird und lebt, ins Dasein. Er schafft und hält und lenkt die Völker und die Menschen. Nichts can seinem Willen widerstehen, er ist Herr über Leben und Tod. Ihm zu dienen, ihn anzubeten, mit allen Kräften, die er uns gegeben hat, dazu sind wir da.

He shows Himself in all the limitless depths and rich life around us, in the wonderful history of the Völker and peoples, in the undiscovered secret of our own, living bodies and souls with their sincerity and neediness, and in the particular type and work that he has given to every single Volk and every single people. He shows himself to us in that we find ourselves to be called to absolute obedience and absolute service, to complete sacrifice and total devotion; in that we can only live in truth and spoil at lies; in that we must ask what is good and what is bad. He shows Himself to us in our groping after and searching for the Everlasting, in our contradiction against the mystery of death, in the fear and torment we feel with our hearts torn in two, in the brokenness and necessity that sin brings into our lives. If we keep these manifold proofs of God quiet within us, then we feel that surrounds us everywhere and mobs us as an inescapable goal, to which we must either swear, or deny. In this way, we come to know that He is truly God.⁵¹

In this point, he states that God is a motivator, and that He⁵² shows Himself to us all the time. It is our job, however, to recognize Him and seek after Him ourselves. This idea bolsters Hirsch's own point—he is serving God, and God causes one to be God, so Hirsch is good.

In the next three points, he explains the significance of Christ, but in a way that is (perhaps) surprisingly similar to mainstream Christian beliefs about Christ: that Jesus died for sins; lived and died as an actual human being, and as God's great gift to us; that

⁵¹ Hirsch, 1. Pt. 2:

Gott der Herr bezeugt sich in unsern Herzen ohne Zutun unsers Forschens und Denken, wider alle Fragen und Zweifel unsers grübelnden Sinns. Er bezeugt sich uns in all dem unerschöpflich tiefen und reichen Leben um uns, in der wunderbaren Geschichte der Völker und des Menschen, in dem unergründlichen Geheimnis unsers eignen lebendigen Leibes und Geistes mit ihrer Herzlichkeit und Bedürftigkeit, in der besonderen Art und Aufgabe, die er jedem einzelnen Volke und jedem einzelnen Menschen gegeben hat. Er bezeugt sich uns darin, daß wir uns finden als gerufen zu unbedingtem Gehorsam und unbedingtem Dienst, zu ganzem Opfer und ganzer Hingabe; darin daß wir nur in der Wahrheit leben können und an der Lüge verderben; darin daß wir fragen müssen nach Gut und nach Böse. Er bezeugt sich uns in unserm Tasten und Suchen nach dem Ewigen, in unserm Widersprechen wider das Rätsel des Sterbens, in der Angst und Pein unsers mit ihm entzweiten Herzens, in der Zerrissenheit und Not, die die Schuld in unser Leben bringt. Halten wir diesem mannigfaltigen Zeugnis Gottes in uns Stille, dann spüren wir, das er uns allenthalben umgibt und umdrängt als unser unertrinnliches Schicksal, das uns entweder zu Fluch oder zu Gegen werden muß. Daran erkennen wir, daß er in Wahrheit der Herr ist.

⁵² In the German language, "God" is a masculine noun and would thus take masculine pronouns. I have followed this example so as to be nearer to Hirsch's own perspective. Additionally, the German Christians emphasized a specifically masculine God; however, that perspective is beyond the bounds of this paper, which focuses more specifically on Hirsch.

he saves us from “sin, death, and the Devil.”⁵³ What happens next, though, is that Hirsch relates Christ’s saving power to the world at large, in terms of how the world should interact:

All of us, who through the Spirit and belief become little Christs, are bound in our hearts into a community of brothers and sisters of all times and nations. In this community, we thank and pray to God with one heart and mouth, in spite of all the earthly quarrels that divide us. In this community, we are called to help one another in joy and love on our way through the darkness of life and to our Heavenly Father.⁵⁴

What is so fascinating about this point? Hirsch makes a very strong claim about the need for Christian responsibility to one another, in spite of race. This seems counter-intuitive to Nazi thought on this issue. However, when one thinks about it more closely, Hirsch is very careful with his language. For example, he states that it is important to help one another to reach the Heavenly Father: he says nothing about helping one another in struggles in life. While he talks of unity in Christ, he says nothing of earthly equality. It is these differences that must be kept in mind while comparing Hirsch to more modern interpretations of Christ.

Hirsch includes a point about biblical inerrancy (a major issue for the German Christians):

God has given us the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as testimony of Jesus Christ, through which he awakens, holds, and nourishes our belief. It serves as our guiding principle and help in our evangelizing and our service. To read Scripture correctly and, through its power, overcome the fallacies and delusions within our community is the most

⁵³ Hirsch, 18. Pt. 5:

Sünde, Tod und Teufel

⁵⁴ Hirsch, 18-19. Pt. 6:

Wir alle, die wir in Geist und Glaube Jünger Jesu werden, sind in unserm Herrn verbunden zu einer Gemeinde von Brüdern und Schwestern, die durch alle Zeiten und alle Lande geht. In dieser Gemeinde bitten und danken wir Gott mit Einem Herzen und Munde, trotz allem uns trennenden und irdischen Streit. In dieser Gemeinde sind wir gerufen, einander in Freiheit und Liebe zu helfen auf unserm Wege durch das Dunkel des Lebens zu unserm himmlischen Vater.

beautiful task of our theology. To read Scripture daily and have the pleasure of learning from it is the right of every Christian.⁵⁵

This indicates to the reader that there is a strong belief in Scripture, but the German Christians cannot bring themselves all the way to believe in Biblical inerrancy, because of the effect that would have on policies regarding the Jews. The esteem for the New Testament and for Christ, however, is great. Therefore, Hirsch indicates that a correct reading of the Bible makes Christ what both testaments proclaim. Likewise, he claims that, “To read Scripture correctly . . . is the most beautiful task of our theology.” Therefore, he places his specific value of Christ-centeredness and somewhat disregard of the Old Testament as a necessary function of Christianity, as will be shown on page 32.

Hirsch then says more about how people are to be organized on earth: “God has bound us in a natural community and order, as spouses, parents and children . . . bound in blood to our Volkstum, to the fate of our state.”⁵⁶ He goes on to talk about acceptance of this role. Here, finally, one sees the foundational German Christian belief about Volk come to life in Hirsch’s theological writings. Obviously, his beliefs are commensurate with the German Christian ideas about Volk being determined by God. Equally important to note is the idea of “order,” as he expresses it. He speaks, of course, about marriage and the parent-child relationship, knowing that his readers would have an idea of order or a sense of hierarchy in those relationships; he continues, though, to include

⁵⁵ Hirsch, 19. Pt. 8

Gott hat uns die heilige Schrift alten und neuen Testaments gegeben als das Zeugnis Jesus Christus, dadurch er unsern Glauben weckt und hält und nährt. Sie ist uns Richtschnur und Hilfe in unsrer Verkündigung und unserm Dienst. Die Schrift recht auszulesen und aus ihr alle Macht menschlichen Irrtums und Wahnes in unsrer Gemeinschaft überwinden zu helfen, ist die größte und schönste Aufgabe unsrer Theologie. Die Schrift täglich andächtig lesen und aus ihr lernen dürfen, ist das Vorrecht jeder Christen

⁵⁶ Hirsch, 19. Pt. 9:

Gott hat uns verbunden in natürlicher Gemeinschaft und Ordnung, als Ehegotten, Eltern und Kinder, . . . im Blutbunde unsers Volkstums, in der Schicksalsgemeinschaft unsers Staats.

Volk in the same sentence, leading the reader to the natural and intended conclusion that Völker are arranged in a hierarchy, as well—and it goes *without* saying that “German” is at the top of the hierarchy.

After this point, an interesting rhetorical shift happens: Hirsch begins talking less about God, and more about people. In what is supposed to be a history of or guide to Christianity, Hirsch begins doling out duties. He weaves it in so adeptly, though, that it is somewhat difficult to detect. After beginning all but one of the first nine points with “God,” “Jesus,” or “belief,” Hirsch’s last three points begin with “our,” “our,” and “we.” Now that a better explanation Christianity according to Hirsch has been portrayed, it is easier to see how Hirsch draws some of his conclusions.

Section B: Hirsch’s Political Beliefs in Regard to Christianity and Nazism

“What becomes of the Protestant Church is not trivial for the rebuilding of our Volk and state.”⁵⁷ So opens Emanuel Hirsch’s section called “National Socialism and the Church.”⁵⁸ He begins by stressing National Socialism’s concern for the people. At first, it actually reads much more like political propaganda than religious writing, even though it does serve both functions. Hirsch understood the difficulty of the rebuilding effort in Germany after the disaster of the Weimar Republic.⁵⁹ He was also keenly aware of the struggle for the German church to find an identity. He then formed a link between the two, and made the leap to German Christianity. He then made it his mission to evangelize this message to Germany, and did so with great logic and precision. He notes

⁵⁷ Hirsch, 23.

⁵⁸ Hirsch, 23.

⁵⁹ Ericksen, 126-127.

the importance of the German church struggle, and explains that “[National Socialism] has something to offer [the church].”⁶⁰

One incredibly significant issue to keep in mind throughout the reading of Hirsch is that Hirsch is not talking about the concept of “church and state” as it is viewed in America today; Hirsch does not see this as a good general rule. Rather, he sees his particular state and the Church as being at an historical moment. He and German Christians see this as the time when Church and state can finally be in harmony and attempt to accomplish the same goals. In fact, the German Christians (Hirsch included) see National Socialism as a time for the *Church* to help accomplish the goals of the *Volk* through the *State*. This, therefore, is very opposite reasoning to that which one often hears in modern America in regard to the Church-state debate. Usually, people today fear that the state will be overtaken by the Church; here, there was the opposite problem, although it was advocated by many within the Church, such as Hirsch himself.

One of the significant factors for Hirsch in his endorsement of Nazism as the solution to the problem of Christianity is Hirsch’s belief about Hitler:

No Volk in the world has a leading statesman so earnestly Christian as ours; as Adolf Hitler closed his critical May 1st speech with a prayer, the whole world felt the amazing sincerity therein. Therefore, the Church has much for which it should thank National Socialism. Likewise, though, it has much to demand of the Church. The Church should, not try to direct politics around God’s will, and should not begin to direct the command of the state around God’s will. The Church must freely agree to the communal work of becoming a National Socialist state.⁶¹

The crux of Hirsch’s argument is that, while it is important to follow the tenets of Christianity, it is equally important to follow the Volk, which in this case leads to National Socialism. Essentially, he says that it is okay for the state to direct the life of the

⁶⁰ Hirsch, 23.

⁶¹ Hirsch, 24.

Church, but not okay for the Church to interfere in the state: “The soul cannot be pulled in this way, that the state is here and the church is there. Thus falls man to pieces.”⁶² In fact, he takes Hitler’s purported Christianity as proof of the necessity of this non-interference; in fact, it is likely that, were Hitler to be unmasked as the non-Christian he actually was, Hirsch would have been unable to support him, at least with the vehemence with which this document is written—but given what Hirsch has seen of Hitler, he appears to be the consummate German and Christian, concerned with God and the Volk.

Hirsch’s real concern, though, is the position of Ludwig Müller. Hirsch yearns for Müller’s installment as Reich Bishop.⁶³ He praises Müller’s longstanding allegiance to the “National Socialist movement” and how Müller has “know the Führer personally for about six years.”⁶⁴ Again, his belief in Hitler comes to the forefront. Overall, though, his argument centers on the qualities possessed by Müller, and the direction in which Hirsch sees Müller leading the church. Hirsch believes that the appointment of Müller will be called for by the people, by the Church, by the Gospel, and by God’s will.”⁶⁵ Clearly, Hirsch sees more at stake than just a leader of a political movement, or even a local pastor: Hirsch sees this as the actual destiny of the German people, through Hitler and Müller.

Section C: Hirsch’s “The Freedom of the Church, the Purity of the Gospel”

Hirsch focused intently on the direction of the church in Germany. In regard to evangelizing, Hirsch states: “I must see eye-to-eye with him, I must hear his voice, and we must come to know one another as brothers, who have undoubtedly come from the

⁶² Hirsch, 24.

⁶³ Hirsch, 24.

⁶⁴ Hirsch, 24.

⁶⁵ Hirsch, 25.

Lord of nature and history, to come to human communion.”⁶⁶ While this may make one believe that Hirsch wants a fully evangelical Christianity in which people are all equals and share in Christ, that is not the case. Again, while it seems like Hirsch is crossing the boundaries of nationality, he is very careful to point out that the best, strongest, and most natural bond comes when “two people are bound in a common, earthly ring of blood and fate.”⁶⁷ Therefore, again, he sees Volk as an undeniably ordained by God and as the most significant link between people.

He expounds more on this rhetoric of Volk and religion in his next paragraph: [The Church] must be the Church of its own Volk, which serves God and the Gospel.”⁶⁸ Obviously, given Hirsch’s extreme nationalism, while this is not surprising, it is also rhetorically interesting because of its placement in the document. This section of the document appears, naturally, near the end: thus, Hirsch has given his audience time to warm up to his ideas before he starts advocating them so blatantly. Even though he makes similar statements much earlier in the document, it is only here, near the end, where his fervor reaches this level and he becomes a zealot for his cause.

Hirsch, in the third paragraph of the section, eerily prophesies what future generations of readers will come to think of the German Christian movement: “We are all familiar with the resulting ‘danger.’ The Church will always be, in reality, a human Church, will always carry with it the limits and errors of the Volk and era. There is, in protestant Christianity, no holy *Ordo* to save us from this fate. It is through authentic

⁶⁶ Hirsch, 27.

⁶⁷ Hirsch, 27. The word for blood (“Blut”) is of great significance to the German Christians. One of their rallying cries was “Rasse, Blut, und Boden” (race, blood, and foundation). This word serves a similar function to the word “Volk” in that a literal translation alone is inadequate to describe the full meaning of the word. “Blut” has implications of race, superiority, heredity, Volk, and many other things beyond the mere biological blood. In fact, it means even more than the heredity with which it is often also associated.

⁶⁸ Hirsch, 27.

people that God allows his Gospel to be carried, through the history of our generations.”⁶⁹ Undoubtedly, Hirsch saw his time as a transcendent moment, in which God, who “never leaves his Church,”⁷⁰ would not allow a grievous error to take place. Particularly given that Hirsch believed the Germans to be among a special rank of people: surely, God would not allow his elect to suffer through a major error in judgment.

Hirsch absolutely believes in the rightness of his argument. Logically, given what Hirsch knows to be true, it follows. That is how such a brilliant man is able to make such a blatant error in judgment. However, one must also take into account the fact that Hirsch is not trying just to win a political battle or an argument—he sincerely believes that this is the correct direction for the church, and that it is how Germans should live as Christians.

⁶⁹ Hirsch, 28.

⁷⁰ Hirsch, 28.

Section IV: Christianity Today

For Christians today, what is to be taken away from this study? Emanuel Hirsch's *Das kirchliche Wollen der Deutschen Christen* is very informative if one has specific questions about the German Christian movement and what some of its adherents believed. The document also shows how even brilliant people like Hirsch were *led* to believe the things and act the way that they did. However, what is left for one who has studied this period of history are a few, fundamental questions. First, what are the specific things that caused the German Christians to believe falsely? Second, is there anything that *can* be done in such circumstances? Finally, what (if anything) is an appropriate strategy for avoiding such situations in the future?

Part A: Logical Missteps of German Christianity and Emanuel Hirsch

To address the first question in regard to today's Christians is that of circumstance. The most obvious, blatant, and easiest explanation for what went wrong is that of the specific, historical location of the movement. Obviously, Nazi Germany presents as unique and complex a social situation as has ever existed, so pointing to that as a culprit is easy. First, to make the case for this argument, one needs to simply look at the facts of German Christianity—it came about in a time in which the political and social situation of the nation was very fragile; racial theory, which is one of the driving forces behind the German Christian movement, was readily accepted; there was a Church government that was essentially appointed by a corrupt leader—simply a perfect storm for disaster.

While there is certainly some validity to this argument, it has weaknesses. First, the argument implies that nothing else similar has ever happened within Christianity,

which is definitely false (the Crusades, medieval and later church-endorsed persecution of the Jews, support of the slave trade, etc.). Second, there is the problem of the non-“German Christians.” One cannot make the argument that they were less German (Tillich, Barth, etc.) or that they were unaware of the movement. As Barth states at the beginning of the first pamphlet of *Theological Existence To-Day!*: “For a good while back I have been frequently asked if I had nothing to say about the concerns and problems affecting the German Church nowadays.”⁷¹ Clearly, Barth is aware. Hirsch saw Barth’s document as specifically damning to the German Christians. Therefore, there was something that prevented even many Germans from becoming a part of the movement. What specifically are these things?

It would be wonderful if something as simple as being a Bible believer would be enough. However, according to Hirsch’s own definition of Christianity, the Bible is critical to Christianity—even for German Christians.⁷² In fact, Hirsch is not alone in this. A much later document (in 1937) by the German Christians indicates that this belief was nearly universal in the movement. This question-and-answer pamphlet asks, “Is the Bible God’s Word?” Then question is answered with “The Bible is not as a whole God’s Word, but we have in the Bible God’s Word.”⁷³ While this particular group favored the New Testament and did not see the whole thing as divine, they certainly did believe in the importance of Scripture.⁷⁴ However, even this disregard for certain parts of the Bible has a history: Luther himself advocated the non-use of some biblical texts. Obviously, while devotion to Scripture is the kind of answer Christians would want to have, it is

⁷¹ Barth, 9.

⁷² Hirsch, 19. Pt. 8.

⁷³ Otto Brökelschen, *Was Wollen Deutsche Christen?* (Oberhausen, Rheinland: 1937), question 54.

⁷⁴ Brökelschen, questions 54 & 59.

inconsistent with the data, since the German Christians were quite fond of the Bible. Additionally, there is no sort of sentiment among the German Christians that God is not present in the world. In fact, they were obsessed with God's actions within the world, particularly in relation to racial theory, as has been shown throughout this exploration.

Again, what is it that Barth caught on to that the German Christians missed? Well, there are a few answers. First, one good source to consult is one of those who has a specific, outlined belief on the subject of how one goes about dealing with faith: Paul Tillich. Tillich spent much of his post-Germany career in the United States. However, his theology often addressed the Nazi era. Tillich stresses "ultimacy" as a test for whether something is truly worth worshipping, particularly in his short volume *Dynamics of Faith*. While Tillich can certainly be accused of using hindsight to his benefit, he was in Germany during the Nazi regime, and never became a Nazi himself. In his estimation, nationalism falls short in the test of ultimacy, as would racial theory. Thus, Tillich perhaps has a good defense, as the German Christians could be accused of putting at least as much stress on their race as they do on God. Therefore, one important lesson to take away from Tillich in this example is that it is important to examine closely a groups claims, especially in regard to what the group *says* it believes, and what it *actually* practices.

Another undeniable fact of the German Christians that led to their radicalism is the lack of a systematic theology. This point will undoubtedly be met with contention. Many people may feel that theology is a human invention that people occasionally put above or equal to the God's Word. While that danger is certainly one that is taken whenever a systematic theology is put in place, it must be placed against the other

extreme. For example, the reason that Martin Luther was so poorly received is that he called into question theologies that had been in place for a very long time. Thus, his questioning came under intense scrutiny. When one wipes the slate completely clean, it is possible to say just about anything and make *anything* true. In “What do we German Christians Demand?” the question is posed: “What risks does theology run?” To which the reply is given, “It is in danger of presenting teachings about life and concepts about the reality of faith that become abstract, that is, alienating with respect to both life and Volk.”⁷⁵ The German Christian idea that theology can so distract a people as to warp beliefs about life and Volk is itself so twisted that it is actually difficult to explain what this belief means. Essentially, they are saying that people will become so overwrought with theology that they will lose sight of what is really important; however, the one thing that is actually names (Volk) could be considered just about the *only* point of German Christian theology! At any rate, it is apparent that German Christians had no real, uniting theology. While there were some ideas that Christians, even today, would find admirable (such as the stress on unity in belief in Christ) those ideas are far overshadowed by the lack of theology, leading to disjointedness and overemphasis of dangerous topics.

How does a systematic theology solve this problem? It does not do so completely, but it is able to contribute a few things. First, a systematic theology makes a status quo from which people can raise questions. With the German Christians, there was no such thing in place. It was hard to argue whether anyone was ever right or wrong about anything, because there was no standardized system of belief. If there had been, perhaps any little move in one direction or another would have been brought under

⁷⁵ Brökelschen, question 43.

intense scrutiny, and thus would have led to more questions being asked, and perhaps could have saved the German Christians from making many of their mistakes.

Perhaps more important than lack of a systematic theology, though, is a Christianity not centered on Christ. For German Christians, the Volk becomes so important as an expression of God/Christ, that Christ is lost in the fray. While it is true that there are things that need to be taken seriously beyond simply Christ, for Christians, it must always be considered dangerous when a movement within the Church tries to supplant Christ's significance with anything else.

A next point is also a difficult one for Christians today, since it walks a narrow line. First, the distinction between "church and state" and political involvement must be defined. The combination of Church and state, for the German Christians, meant that there would be a presence of the state within the Church. The counter-reaction, though, calls for action in the state on the part of the Church—not as a political entity in and of itself, but as a reasonably concerned party, as any special interest could be. Another important distinction is that, while the German Christian model is content with a state presence within the Church, the counter-example would have no part in such a system.

The idea of political involvement cannot be considered altogether bad. Certainly, it is the political involvement of Tillich, Barth, Niemöller and other which in part led to the dissipation of support for the German Christians in particular and the Nazi Party in general. However, what is important to differentiate is *what* role the church tries to play in politics. For the German Christians, one of their own *Guidelines* is very clear on this point: "The members of the "German Christians" do not desire to be a church-political party in the traditional sense. . . . Church-political parties do not have the religious

authority to represent the church-Volk, and stand in the way of the holy goal of being **one** church-Volk.”⁷⁶ While this is the stated belief, here again there is the case of statement versus practice. While the German Christians did not form a political party (which is the idea of this point), they had *enormous* political influence, particularly for a group their size. Their powers stretched into the government in ministerial positions, and they had major influence in German Christian-led congregations. So really, their influence was quite corrupting. In fact, their stated goal of unified Christianity was, in practice, the goal into which they placed the most time and effort. They tried to use their influence to achieve this goal. So, again, the test mentioned in Tillich comes into play: the idea of what is *said* versus what is *done*.

Part B: Can anything be done? What are we to do?

In regard to this question, there are things that could have been done in this specific historical instance. More questioning should have been done, particularly in relation to theology and political ambition. However, as is often the case, it is much easier to look back and ask how anyone missed the signs than it is to actually witness injustice, particularly to take a stand on an issue.

So, if something can, in fact, be done, there are elements that first need addressing. For one, is it possible to see a problem? In the case of the German Christians, there was definitely a case to be made for their existence; however, that case was never adequately balanced against the case for the danger of the group. Therefore, with any such new movement (or even general religious idea—perhaps even old ones as much as new), one must consider both sides—why should this be believed? Some people in Germany were able to see the problems, because they asked the right questions, and

⁷⁶ Hossenfelder, 6.

because they were not looking for the answers they desired. Martin Niemöller is a perfect example of this philosophy. Niemöller was a known anti-Semite, yet opposed the Nazi eradication of the Jews. Why? Because he saw it as antithetical to the spirit of Christianity that was beyond his own personal beliefs, beyond politics, and beyond anything else earthly. While this appeal alone is not enough (as has been demonstrated earlier in this paper), it remains a jumping-off point.

Additionally, the test of what a group says and what it does is always an applicable one. If a group claims to be doing one thing, but actually does something else, it is important to see what the motivation is. If a group is merely seeking membership or attempting to please everyone, it is probably not a valid group. Also, since this argument deals specifically with Christianity, theology is a crucial thing to examine. First, does the group have a theology? If not, that should always serve as a warning sign of potential danger. In the German Christian example, one can see that a platform of, essentially, “Christ, Germanness, unity” is not enough to make a valid theology. In fact, it leads to disjointedness and disorganization, as well as the potential danger of one person or faction taking control and leading the group down a dangerous path—certainly an argument that could be made about the German Christians (although those people would have been the founders). Essentially, the backbone of “Christ, Germanness, unity” is not a bad thing—what is bad is what was done with it.

How does one, though, go about identifying these dangers in Christianity today? First of all, though it sounds like a conspiracy theory, healthy skepticism is always a good thing. While Christianity has had its bumps on the road, it has been, for the most part, a peaceful (or at least non-combative) force in the world—or at least most Christians have

been this way. What does that mean? That means that anything that veers from that norm is to immediately be questioned. In fact, the norm itself is to be questioned, but that goes a bit beyond the scope of this exploration. German Christianity certainly falls under this umbrella, since its ideas were new. Now, healthy skepticism does not mean that all ideas are to be thrown out—it means they are to be examined such that they can be determined to be helpful or harmful—to assure that a new idea that may seem as unifying and harmless as the German Christian movement is not, upon further inspection, a movement with just as much potential for danger and disaster.

Given all of this information, it is good to be informed about some of the dangers of Christianity. Clearly, there is a potential for danger within the religion; however, there are strategies which have been tested and proven to work for seeking out some of these dangers and eliminating them. It is critical that Christians are made aware of these strategies. As Christians, it is important not to be caught up in differences that there is unnecessary and unproductive infighting. By the same token, though, while it is true that all Christians are united by Christ, it is important not to fall in to the trap of the German Christians and become so obsessed with unity as to forego the fundamental principles of the religion itself.

Conclusion

In witnessing the story of Emanuel Hirsch, it is plain to see that he is a brilliant figure caught up in a movement that caused his genius to be used in harmful ways. It is important, though, not to allow ourselves to give him a free pass as an innocent victim—Hirsch continued his Nazi sentiments long after the fall of the Nazi regime.⁷⁷ When one reads the story of Hirsch, it is apparent that the ventures of his mind, while logical and thorough, were not Christianity as it was intended. While the applications of what can be learned from the story of Hirsch and the German Christians are many, even a short examination such as this one can be fruitful. Certainly, there is a lot more to be gleaned than can be presented in this short format; however, even this small amount of information can be very edifying. Overall, the failures of Hirsch stem from a failure of Hirsch and the Church to properly go about practicing Christianity, and that failure leads to a misuse of the power and influence of the religion.

⁷⁷ Ericksen, 193.

Annotated Bibliography

Barth, Karl. *Theological Existence To-day!* Translated by R. Birch Hoyle. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933.

Karl Barth stands as one of the church's most vehement opponents to the Nazi regime in Germany—in particular, Barth was critical of its stances in regard to how it treated German religious life. Barth, an ardent Christian theologian, argued for the primacy of Christ, while the Nazis argued for primacy of state. This argument led Barth to write his pamphlet series *Theologische Existenz Heute!* in response. The first of these documents was read and opposed by Emanuel Hirsch.

Bergen, Doris L. *Twisted Cross*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Bergen's work has been one of the most popular and influential to the academic conversation about the German Christians. Her probe of their methods and strategies has been unparalleled, and the depth to which she explored German Christian theology is entirely new. Bergen splits the essential types of German Christian thought into three tracks: the Anti-Jewish Church, the Antidocrinal Church, and the Manly Church (contents). She identifies these features as the central ideas which guided the German Christian movement. Each of these ideas is given a chapter and then Bergen goes on to elaborate on some of the other ideas which were stressed by the German Christians, such as the role of women, lack of theology, etc. *Twisted Cross* is largely devoted to discerning the German Christian frame of mind, and Bergen is able to do so through extensive quotation of letters, sermons, pamphlets, and other primary sources from the major figures of the movement.

Brökelschen, Otto. *Was Wollen Deutsche Christen?* Oberhausen, Rheinland: 1937.

Conway, John. *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-45*. New York: Basic Books, 1968.

Conway's study of the church in Germany during the Third Reich is a look into Hitler's policies and attitudes towards religion. While highlighting Hitler's general religiosity in speeches and pro-active approach to Nazi-oriented church youth groups (in the beginning of his regime), Conway shows Hitler's general ambivalence towards all things religious in his own personal life, and his propensity to do only that which is necessary to engage people in his way of thinking. One major theme in the work is the different ways in which Hitler handles Catholicism and Protestantism. While people may perhaps be generally familiar with Hitler's disdain for religion, it is difficult to conceptualize how one deals with these two groups: one of which is firmly rooted in a Germanic tradition, the other which is part of an international organization pledging allegiance to another leader.

Ericksen, Robert P. *Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

Ericksen's work is a foray into the inner-workings of the minds of some of Germany's leading theologians of the Nazi era, a section each on Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch. The monograph focuses on how they were able to do what seems inexplicable to modern interpretation: find congruity with National Socialism and Christianity. Kittel was the son of an Old Testament theologian and a New Testament theologian himself. His *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*) is still a highly-regarded and widely-used reference text. Similarly, Althaus' Luther scholarship is also still used today. Hirsch, a noted and prolific philosopher and Kierkegaard scholar, was a vocal and public supporter of the German Christian movement. What becomes clear in reading this book is that the 19th century racial theory, in which race is both a determinate of qualities and an indicator of human worth, which guided Hitler's genocide was ground into these men. They came to see it as as much a part of who one is as religion: summarizing a work of Kittel's, Ericksen states, "a genuine Jewish Christian should be accepted as a Christian brother; but that does not make him a German brother" (33). This basic principle is shared by these three theologians.

Ericksen, Robert P. and Susannah Heschel. *Storm Troopers of Christ*. DVD. Directed by Steven D. Miller.

This film, in five short vignettes with some graphic images, illustrates people on various sides of "the Jewish Question" during the Third Reich—from Reichsbischoff Ludwig Müller (the Christian leader of all of Germany during Hitler's reign), to Martin Niemoeller of the resistance. While cataloging their actions, the video discusses deeper themes response and how different people took the actions of the Reich to mean different things. For example, Niemoeller, in spite of his anti-Jewish tendencies, believed that the actions of the Nazis were against the spirit of Scripture and were therefore wrong, while Walter Grundmann founded the "Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life" in order to seek out and identify people of Jewish ancestry.

Hirsch, Emanuel. *Das Kirchliche Wollen der Deutschen Christen*. Berlin-Charlottenburg: Verlag: Max Grevemeyer., 1933.

This document is Hirsch's philosophy in 1933 in regard to the duty of people within the Third Reich with respect to religion, state, and nationality. Drawing on the favorite German Christian cry for *Rasse, Blut, und Boden* (race, blood, and foundation), Hirsch outlines a political philosophy that he sees as married to his religious and philosophical beliefs about life. For Hirsch, as for all German Christians, these three realms of religion, politics, and identity are one and the same, and need not be reconciled as they may be for the person of today because they are all inherently in agreement; however, Hirsch outlines the process by which he believes these things, and does so in direct opposition to Karl Barth's philosophies as outlined in the first pamphlet in the series, *Theologische*

Existenz Heute! (Theological Existence Today!), thus using this platform to both boost his own perspective and tear Barth's down.

Hossenfelder, Joachim. *Unser Kampf*. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag München, 1933.

This work is a primary document from the German Christians (specifically Pastor Joachim Hossenfelder) identifying some of their thoughts on some major issues. Specifically, the booklet begins with the Richtlinien, or Guidelines, for membership in the Belief Movement of the German Christians. Later, there are articles written by Hossenfelder and his associates regarding many other things, such as reasons to join the movement, and what some of the desires of the German Christians are. Beyond the actual content of the document, it gives insight into how the German Christian movement worked: highly organized (they enjoy lists), rhetorically sophisticated, and highly argumentative.

Jesus und die Juden! Weimar: Verlag Deutsche Christen Weimar, 1937.

This short but impactful pamphlet gives great insight into the mind of the German Christian in some major theological topics. First of all, how is the Bible to be treated? Particularly with Jesus, there is a major problem with him being both savior and enemy (as a Jew). How is this issue resolved? Well, within the pamphlet, there is an answer to that question (more than one, actually), as well as to the question of Biblical authority. What this pamphlet does magnificently is show the many different perspectives of the German Christians, as well as outline the sort of thinking they were doing regarding theology (which is to say, very little).

Niebuhr, H. Richard. *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999.

Reimer, A. James. *The Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Tillich Debate*. Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1989.

This work marvelously outlines the sides taken by each of these two major intellectual figures during the Nazi era. What is perhaps most fascinating is that the two men knew one another first as friends, and respected one another as intellectuals. However, as time wore on, theological, political, social, and eventually personal differences caused impossible rifts between the two men. This particular work outlines these differences in three ways: through correspondences between the two, through their writings independent of one another, and through later, scholarly-critical analysis.

Young, John Wesley. *Totalitarian Language: Orwell's Newspeak and its Nazi and Communist Antecedents*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991.

Young probes use of language in Nazi Germany, and discusses its similarities to Newspeak in George Orwell's *1984*. The basic principle behind Nazi language, as per Young, is the knowledge of manipulating thought through language, as in Orwell's novel.

The concept of language guiding and controlling thought is the backbone of Young's study; he points out Nazis' ability to do several things to language that are important in its control: eliminate words (logocide), invent new words (neologism), and redefine old words (semanticide). For example, *Meyers' Lexikon* explains that "*Arbeiter* (worker) was no longer a name for a proletarian—only an 'honorary title for all creative *Volksgenossen*'" (107). The Nazis also took to using foreign words (xenologophilia) to convince the people of the intelligence of the Party members and the importance of their message.

Appendix A:
German Christian Membership Form

German Christians
Berlin Charlottenburg, Joachimsthalerstr. 35

Membership Declaration

I declare with this document my entry into the Faith Movement of "German Christians," whose guidelines I know, and under whose leadership I place myself.

I am of German-Aryan descent, do not belong to a freemason lodge or any other secret organization, and will join no such organization for the duration of my membership in the "German Christians." I belong to no other church groups.

I pledge a monthly contribution of Mark.

Nazi-participant Num. enrolled on:.....

First and Last Name:.....

Profession or Occupation:.....

Address:
..... Street Num.:

Date of birth:..... of baptism:.....

Of confirmation:..... Date:.....

.....
(Signature)

Membership Contribution:..... Mk. Advertising Contribution:.....Mk.