The Church Struggle in Germany:
“The Hope That We Have”

“Faith and Fatherland: Parish Politics in Hitler’s Germany” by Kyle Jantzen (Fortress, 2008)

“Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy A Righteous Gentile vs. The Third Reich” by Eric Metaxas (Thomas Nelson, 2010)


Those who personally remember the Second World War are nearly gone. At this writing, at the beginning of 2011, no one with any memories of that period of world history is under the age of seventy-five. War veterans that survive today are more than eighty years old. Memories fade. People carry their own stories into the grave. It is now up to the historians and philosophers to help us explore and struggle with that terrible time in human history.

As Lutherans, we need to continue to probe our own theology and culture in light of the German Nazi experience. How do we make sense of a time where in the most Lutheran country in the world, a philosophy arose that was responsible for the global disaster of World War II? We ask ourselves the tough questions. How could all of this have happened? Did Lutheranism shape the Nazi movement? Was the Lutheran community a willing accomplice to the Nazis in Germany, or were Lutherans (as was Dietrich Bonhoeffer) valiant resisters? Is Bonhoeffer popular in the post-war German church because he was typical of Lutheran anti-Nazi heroism, or did he prove the rule, by his life exception, that the Lutheran church in Germany was totally corrupt and compromised? Indeed, is Bonhoeffer’s memory being abused by those who would look to the church as somehow an island of resistance in the sea of Gospel betrayal? Was the Lutheran Church in Germany as fascist as the Nazi regime? These questions, and many more, have been the subject of an entire field of historical studies for the past sixty years. In this essay I will bring some modest reflections on these questions.

In my last conversation with Pastor Al Goodrich, the book “The Holy Reich” was recommended to me. Pastor Goodrich served at Bethany Lutheran Church in Mohawk, Michigan. As an arm chair historian fascinated by these questions, I promised Pastor Goodrich that I would read the
Steigmann-Gall work and we would soon discuss it together. His untimely death prevented that from happening.

Historians in this 21st century are probing questions about the role of religion in culture and politics. As Christians, we are a part of the heritage of the Inquisition, the Crusades, Apartheid and slavery. Many of those who committed crimes against humanity during these periods were Christians. As Lutheran-Christians we need to be interested, and should also be uncomfortable about the Lutheran Church’s role in Germany during the Nazi period.

Richard Steigmann-Gall’s book, “The Holy Reich”, began as his doctoral dissertation. In its published book form it explores the faith life of German elites from 1920 to 1936. The work has over 1,200 footnotes and a wonderful sixteen-page list of primary and secondary sources in both German and English. His focus is on the formative years of German National Socialism. Steigmann-Gall contends that the Nazis were, for the most part, Christians (Lutheran and Roman Catholic) and that their faith practices shaped them as leaders of The Third Reich. For example, Nazi Herman Goering would remain a faithful Lutheran until the end of his life. While they would manipulate and misuse their Church, the teachings of German Christian churches were helpful to their super-nationalistic end. Steigmann-Gall points out the scandal of the theological elites at the Universities who were Nazis themselves, or who were willing accomplices to Nazism. Some German protestant theologians favored Nazi ideology and culture. Many theological luminaries from that period such as Paul Althaus, Walter Kunneth, and Gerhard Kittel were themselves pro-Nazi. Even the anti-semitism of the 19th century theologian Albrecht Ritschel is shocking to our modern sensibilities. In my time in seminary, these theologians’ books were used without comment on either their Nazi past or their anti-semitism.

Steigmann-Gall points out that many Lutheran state bishops saw in Nazism a fulfillment of Protestant social vision. To understand that period in Germany, one must remember the absolute terror that the German churches believed that a communist takeover in Germany would bring to them. Seen by many as a bulwark against the Bolsheviks that had nearly destroyed the Church in Russia and murdered thousands of clerics there, the Roman Catholics and Lutheran communities in Germany viewed the Nazis as a positive force which would prevent in Germany a similar communist victory. However, not all Christians in Germany were pleased with the Nazi ascendency. As early as 1931, Roman Catholic bishops argued against the Nazi movement, even as they saw its value as being anti-Marxist.

In the Lutheran galaxy of heroes, no one shines brighter or has more public recognition beyond the church than German theologian and Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In the World War II era, other Lutheran luminaries like Raoul Wallenberg, Martin Niemoller, Kaj Munk and the Norwegian Bishops, especially Eivind Berggrav, are famously heroic. However, the life and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer stands out. Bonhoeffer’s life and his theological works are studied by seminarians, pastors and theologians to this day.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer is an example of the idealistic noble resister to the forces of evil. Eric Metaxas has written a new fascinating account of Bonhoeffer’s life wherein he weaves a complex tapestry of the man who would die at the hands of the Nazis at the young age of thirty-nine. In his 591-page biography, “Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy” Metaxas portrays Bonhoeffer as a man of privilege, intellect, discipline and absolute courage fueled by his evangelical idea that Christians must be loyal, above all, to Jesus Christ.

Raised in an elite intellectual family, Bonhoeffer’s early life was nearly ideal. His father Karl was the most famous psychiatrist in Germany. His mother’s family was full of university professors and theologians. Bonhoeffer’s brother, Karl-Friedrich, was a physicist working with Albert Einstein and another brother, Klaus, was a corporate lawyer working for Lufthansa, and later Germany Army Intelligence. Klaus Bonhoeffer was a bitter enemy of the Nazis, and close to the end of the war, would suffer the same fate as his brother Dietrich.

In “Faith and Fatherland”, Kyle Jantzen studies the Lutheran Church in Germany with a focus on three geographic areas. Jantzen looks at Brandenburg, a Berlin suburban area, Pirna next to Dresden in Saxony, and the Lake Constance area of Ravensburg in Wurttemberg. Both suburban Berlin and Dresden are in heavily Lutheran areas in Eastern Germany. The Lake Constance area in the German south is dominated by Roman Catholics. Jantzen studies congregation and synod documents, archives and governmental records to probe the relationship and tension that existed with the Nazi Regime and the Lutheran churches, its synods and pastors.

Within months of the seizure of power by Hitler and the Nazis, steps were taken by the new regime to “reform” the church. Attempts were made by the Nazis to merge the twenty-eight regional protestant churches into a Reich Church. The plan of the government was to eventually blend the Roman Catholics into a pan-Christian “Reich Church” under a Nazi friendly bishop. This effort would be abandoned because of the fierce resistance by the Catholic bishops, the Vatican, and hundreds of Lutheran pastors and some Evangelical Bishops who would soon form the Confessing Church.

The Roman Catholic Church made a political settlement with Hitler early, as the Reich Concordat was signed between the Vatican and the Nazis in 1933. This agreement allowed freedom for the Roman Catholics, especially in the appointment of priests, bishops and the maintenance of Catholic educational institutions while requiring the allegiance of German churchmen and their official silence on all matters political.

During the years after World War I, there had been a serious decline in the influence of the Lutheran Church in Germany. In 1933 and 1934, there was the hope expressed by many that the Nazi movement would renew the church and nation by restoring the influence of the church as the center of German social and cultural life. Jantzen points out that the theological centers of Lutheranism in this time (Law Gospel, Order of Creation and Two Kingdoms Theory) were used
by the hundreds of Lutheran pastors who were sympathetic to the Nazis to justify the authoritarian nature of the German state.

Lutheran clergy were often avid supporters of the Nazis. As early as 1930, three years before the government takeover, at least 120 German pastors were party members. Hundreds more would join the party before 1933. Church worship attendance in the three geographic areas that Jantzen studied increased in 1933 and 1934, directly attributable to the “Nazi Renaissance.” Attendance and church participation would decrease in Lutheran Germany after 1935, as the state began to discourage church participation. Subtle and overt discrimination would increase. By 1937-38, all church meetings, no matter where they were held, were required to be reported to police. During the war years restrictions increased.

Resistance to the Nazi attempted church takeover was growing. Hitler was unable to force the Protestant and Catholics to organize into a Reich Church. That plan was given up by the government in 1937. Hitler’s appointment of Reich bishop Ludvig Muller was disastrously unpopular with those who worried about government encroachment in the life of the church. Nazi racialism became increasing controversial among Christian intellectuals. In 1933, pastors who were at least one-fourth ethnic Jews, were being forced to resign from their pastorates. Seminarians were required to document their Aryan “purity.”

A law forbidding the baptism of ethnic Jews and their employment in any area of the church was seen by many as interference with church life. German Christians (Nazi Christians) talked openly of removing the Old Testament and editing the portions of the Pauline epistles that referred to Judaism.

Into that atmosphere, the Confessing Church was born. This movement was a diverse group of pastors and laity opposed to Nazi control of the Church. Some like Bonhoeffer opposed the Nazi Church very early. In the spring of 1933, just days after the Nazis became the government of Germany, Bonhoeffer made a national radio address delivering a paper entitled, “The Church and the Jewish Question.” By September of 1933, Bonhoeffer called for schism with the state church because of discrimination against baptized ethnic Jews. (Metaxas, p. 187) Some organizers of the Confessing Church (the idea was that a free church built upon the Lutheran Confessions and the Scriptures would be the true church in Germany apart from a folk or national church) were not nearly as radically anti-Nazi as Bonhoeffer. Many Confessing Church members saw the Nazis as a positive force for German economic and political stability. Many approved of the Nazis authoritarian and anti-communist positions. Metaxas reports that the Confessing Church’s willingness to negotiate with the Nazis, and even Hitler himself, alarmed Bonhoeffer, since he recognized the evil of the regime earlier than most.

Hitler and his Nazi party were convinced that the Lutherans and he (a fallen away Austrian Catholic) had a great deal in common. Both were anti-communist, anti-Romanist, anti-Semitic and pro-nationalist. Hitler saw Martin Luther as a national hero only equaled by Richard Wagner.
and Frederick the Great. Hitler saw the Germanic race taking ontological precedence over the sacrament of baptism. Thus, the Confessing Church identified Hitler with heresy!

Anti-Semitism was no stranger to the Christian community in Germany. European culture has had notorious periods of Jewish persecution throughout its history. Indeed, there were many in the Confessing Church who were anti-Semitic. Typical was Confessing Church Pastor Martin Niemoller, who would spend 1937 to 1945 in a Nazi jail. He “Displayed no real opposition to Nazi anti-Semitism. In 1935, the year of the Nuremberg laws, Niemoller told his congregation that “the Jews have caused the crucifixion of God’s Christ…They bear the curse, and because they rejected the forgiveness, they drag with them as a fearsome burden the unforgiven blood-guilt of their fathers.”” (Steigmann-Gall, p. 185)

The eugenics campaign of the Nazis is a terrible chapter in German history. Thousands of persons living in nursing homes and medical centers, asylums and other institutions were killed by the Germans through 1941. Roman Catholic bishops actively denounced the Nazi campaign, and it was halted after these catholic clerics embarrassed the German government internationally. All during this murderous period, there was silence from Lutheran pulpits. Half of all the victims of this program were residents of Lutheran institutions whose employees participated in the killings. Steigmann-Gall tells us that “not one public protest against euthanasia was ever launched by a Protestant Churchman.” (Steigmann-Gall, p. 202) Jantzen asks why the Protestant clergy were so quiet in this and on the Holocaust which was then underway throughout Europe. Why were the Lutheran pastors so absent in protest when so many of them were willing to engage in illegal activities to defend their freedom as a part of the Confessing Church to worship God? “Surely this is the blackest stain upon their record.” (Jantzen, p. 109)

Over the years, I have long wondered why the Nazis allowed the Confessing Church to exist. Bonhoeffer’s Confessing Seminaries were suppressed and were only sporadically in session in the war years. In a police state, why did the Nazis allow the Confessing Church to operate in parallel and in opposition to the official state church? Jantzen offers these thoughts:

1. **There was a shortage of pastors.** Many Confessing Church pastors were called into military service and, according to Metaxas, were placed in extreme danger on the military front during the war. Bonhoeffer lost many of his seminary students to death in this way.

2. **Strong support by laity.** Congregations that had Confessing Church pastors were protected by well-connected laity. The role of affluent and influential lay persons as protectors of their pastors is a largely untold story.

3. **Confessing Church pastors were able to turn anti-government rhetoric into theological or personnel arguments which were not seen as a threat by the government.** The state saw the Confessing Movement as an internal church civil war and not worthy of their intervention.
4. **Support by some bishops who protected Confessing Church pastors.** Many bishops walked a fine line defending clergy while not showing disloyalty to the state.

5. **The Church was largely irrelevant to the government and the culture.** By the late 1930’s the church was largely full of laity elderly and seen by the government as a relic of the national past and, thus, irrelevant.

6. **Nazi court decisions allowed the Confessing Church to be legal.** The confessional church was able to convince courts that they had a right to exist. Once recognized by the state, legal prosecution was minimized.

7. **Courage of Confessing Church pastors.** “Only clergy with strong characters were willing to endure arrest, suspension, docking of pay, tense confrontations with church-political opponents, and the harassment of local political leaders. Only pastors with courage were likely to stand up to the growing infiltration of national Socialist ideology into the churches.” (Jantzen, p. 168)

On many levels the Bonhoeffer book is a superb biography. It is a well written story about a genius who was called to greatness in terrible times. I am surprised, again and again, of Bonhoeffer’s maturity of thought even as he was so young. At the age of 21 he received his Doctorate of Theology from the most prestigious theological faculty in the world. At the age of 24, he submitted a post-doctoral thesis which gave him credentials to teach on a theological faculty. This from his post-doctoral thesis summarizes Bonhoeffer’s understanding of God: “God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings and to be placed at the disposal of human beings. God is free not from human beings but for them.” (Metaxas, p. 89-90)

Eric Metaxas writes that in Bonheoffer’s first congregation, the 26-year old newly ordained minister preached a Confirmation Sunday sermon to fifty confirmands - all boys and their families, in a working class section of Berlin on March 13, 1932. It was also Election Day in Germany, the election that would bring Adolph Hitler to power.

Bonhoeffer said this on that Sunday: “Today you will not be given fear of life but courage; and so today in the church we shall speak more than ever of hope, the hope that we have and which no one can take from you.” (Metaxas, p. 134)

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