

# Concordia Theological Quarterly



Volume 80:3-4

July/October 2016

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# American Lutherans and the Problem of Pre-World War II Germany

John P. Hellwege Jr.

How does one analyze and evaluate the shifting scene of culture? To do so is always a difficult and somewhat dangerous position. It is hard to grasp where present trends are leading to, as well as knowing how one is to respond to them from a truly biblical perspective. This paper will present a case study of how our fathers here in American Lutheranism dealt with the rise of the culture and political realities of Nazi Germany.

This era, known as the Third Reich, not only brought the atrocities of the Holocaust and the Second World War, but also created a challenge for people of that day to understand what was happening in Germany. Especially difficult was evaluating what was going on in Germany before the invasion of Poland. After the start of the Second World War and then the Holocaust, it was easy to point to the evils of Nazi Germany; however, for the first seven years of Hitler's reign, this was not as clear. The people in Germany and those outside Germany, as well as historians ever since, have struggled to comprehend what was happening under the Nazi regime.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the Lutherans in America followed these events with great interest because many hailed from German ancestry and virtually all were in some form of church fellowship with at least one church in Germany.

## I. Who to Believe?

While it is easy for modern observers to look back at this time and see Hitler's anti-Semitic and warmongering speeches as portents of what was to come, in that day it was not so easy to tell what was really a sign of trouble and what was simply political posturing. This was especially true for those in America. First of all, the information coming out of Germany

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Steven Ozment used most of his fourteen-page introduction to chronicle how most historians view German history through the lens of the Nazi regime, in Steven Ozment, *A Mighty Fortress: A New History of the German People* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

was confusing and varied. Martin Sommer wrote in the *Lutheran Witness* in 1934:

One reason for this is that the information which comes to us from Germany, both through letters and through the press, varies from week to week, if not day to day. What we write to-day concerning occurrences may not harmonize exactly with conditions as they will be when our reader receives this paper.<sup>2</sup>

After the Great War, and the prodigious propaganda campaign that was carried out in North America regarding Germany during that war, many became skeptical about press accounts. J.T. Mueller and others stated flatly that "A man cannot always believe what he reads in the daily press."<sup>3</sup>

Added to this were attestations from many in Germany that things were improving greatly under Hitler. Hitler managed to increase employment and therefore helped clean up Germany. He cracked down on prostitution and some pornography. He restored dignity to Germany, highlighted by hosting the Olympics in Berlin in 1936.

However, even in the eyes of American Lutheran observers, things were not all good in Germany in the mid-1930s. More and more red flags arose, ranging from the Nazi attempt to control the *Landeskirchen* ("territorial churches"), known as the *Kirchenkampf* ("church struggle"), to Nazi anti-Semitism, to the Neopaganism of Nazi beliefs. Therefore, the 1930s displayed a shift in American Lutheran perceptions of Nazi Germany from what was initially seen as a mixed bag, to ultimately seeing it as nothing short of evil.

## II. The Passion for Lutheran Orthodoxy

When we look at American Lutherans in the 1930s, the one concern that reigned over all others was the preservation of Lutheran orthodoxy in Germany. The preservation of proper Lutheran doctrine was the issue that underlay every other question. As J.E. Thoen explained in the *Lutheran Sentinel*:

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<sup>2</sup> Martin S. Sommer, "What is happening in Germany," *The Lutheran Witness* 53 (November 20, 1934): 402; hereafter *LuthWit*.

<sup>3</sup> J. T. Mueller, "Ein Zeugnis Für die Wahrheit," *Der Lutheraner* 89 (May 16, 1933): 168. Similar sentiments questioning the reliability of the press can be found in Ludwig Fuerbringer, "Nachrichten aus Deutschland," *Der Lutheraner* 89 (April 18, 1933) 137–138; and Martin S. Sommer, "What is happening in Germany," *LuthWit* 53 (November 20, 1934): 402.

When we speak of *True Lutheranism* we mean nothing less than real Biblical Christianity. The two cardinal principles of the Lutheran Reformation were: Scripture alone is the source and rule of Christian faith and life, and Salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ Jesus. Wherever and whenever one of these fundamental principles is mutilated or lost True Lutheranism is destroyed. If we desire that our church is to be and remain truly Lutheran it is necessary that we adhere strictly to these principles and refuse to affiliate with those who build on other foundations by tolerating doctrines and practices contrary to Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that while American Lutherans of all stripes were adamant about the need for orthodox Lutheranism, there were disagreements over what exactly this was.

This concern for orthodoxy led to two primary directions in their thought. First of all, they attempted to evaluate all of the different events and issues through decidedly theological lenses. Second, this concern for Lutheran orthodoxy manifested itself in a similar concern first and foremost for fellow Lutherans. This concern was hardly out of the ordinary, as virtually all North American Protestant bodies showed much more concern for their coreligionists than other Christians, let alone non-Christians.<sup>5</sup>

The one danger that came with the passion for Lutheran orthodoxy was that at times they used a one-dimensional approach to evaluating what was happening in Germany. Therefore, often problems in the German churches were simplistically blamed on theological errors. The events in the *Kirchenkampf*, however, were often very chaotic with some of the issues and party lines being blurred; the level of confusion and the difficult choices that Germans found themselves dealing with were regularly misunderstood by their American observers.

The biggest single theological disquiet that the American Lutherans had was the threat of liberalism and modernism. In fact, American Lutherans saw this problem as lurking behind virtually all other problems affecting the churches in Germany and all of German culture as well. It should be noted that American Lutheranism had far more unanimity on this point in the 1930s than it does today. In fact, out of the thirty major periodicals studied, only one defended the practice of Historical Criticism,

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<sup>4</sup> J. E. Thoen, "Will True Lutheranism Be Destroyed?" *Lutheran Sentinel* 18 (January 30, 1935): 35, italics original.

<sup>5</sup> William E. Nawyn, *American Protestantism's Response to Germany's Jews and Refugees, 1933–1941* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981), 185.

and that was the *Lutheran Church Quarterly*, published by the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Mount Airy in Philadelphia.

One of the more vivid ways that this played out was in how they viewed the pro-Nazi attacks on the Old Testament. While most people would see these assaults as anti-Semitism attacking the Bible, most American Lutherans saw this as Historical Criticism being applied in an extreme fashion. August Zich went so far as to declare: "If almost any American liberal were to listen to any of the comparatively few neo-pagan Nazi preachers he invariably would come away wondering what was wrong with it."<sup>6</sup>

### III. The Events of the *Kirchenkampf*

The single greatest issue in the eyes of American Lutherans in the midst of the dramatic events in Germany was the *Kirchenkampf*. Hitler's master plan was for a complete *Gleichschaltung* or "coordination" of all German life in which virtually every aspect of German culture and society was to be bent to serving the whims of Hitler.<sup>7</sup> Hitler accomplished much of this at an absolutely dizzying pace. In September, 1933, American Lutherans were told that:

Within a few months, all facilities, all organizations, all left-hand establishments, all terrestrial and church situations came under the reshaping of one man's hand, a man whose name until recently was unknown. I mean of course the present chancellor of the German Reich, Adolf Hitler.<sup>8</sup>

This movement for *Gleichschaltung* also included the German churches. When Hitler rose to power, there were twenty-eight different *Landeskirchen*, each operating independently of the rest. However, Hitler's master political theory included the *Führerprinzip* which was the basic principle that the German people, in any area of life, could best be led by a single leader, or *Führer*, who personified the *Volk*<sup>9</sup> and therefore could lead the

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<sup>6</sup> August Zich, "Nazi Pagans and Liberal Pastors," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 21 (October 28, 1934): 340.

<sup>7</sup> William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 196–204.

<sup>8</sup> C. Mueller, "Die Jugend des neuen Deutschlands," *Lutherischer Herold* 11, no. 52 (September 28, 1933), 4; hereafter *LiH*.

<sup>9</sup> Since the term *Volk* for the Nazis meant more than just a "people," but was wrapped up in their idea of a united race, blood, and culture, I have chosen to keep the

people via their embodiment of the people. In applying the *Führerprinzip* to the church, this meant that the divergent *Landeskirchen* should be united into one *Reichskirche* ("imperial church") under the leadership of a single *Reichsbischof* ("imperial bishop").

Simply describing the different parties in this battle is actually harder than it sounds. On the one side is a movement known as the *Deutsche Christen* or "German Christians." However, this is not so much one movement as a series of movements that were in some ways intertwined and replacing each other. The *Deutsche Christen* intended to be the Christian soul of the Nazi party, while most of the Nazi leadership saw the *Deutsche Christen* more like useful idiots that could be used to bring the churches under Nazi control.<sup>10</sup>

The resistance to the *Deutsche Christen* was, from the beginning, somewhat fractured and disorganized. The resistance was headed by a series of groups that have been come to be known as the "Confessing Front," often with much of the same leadership shifting from one to the next. However, while the leadership was essentially the same within these groups, the membership was very fluid, rising and falling as the situation changed within the Protestant Church.

Further confusing matters, there was a core of more confessionally-minded Lutherans who never found themselves at home within the Confessing Front. This included the theological faculty of the University of Erlangen and the "intact" churches which were those that were never taken over by the *Deutsche Christen*, namely the Lutheran churches of Bavaria, Hanover, and Württemberg. At times there was cooperation between this "Confessional Church" and the Confessing Front, however even this was spotty and varied.<sup>11</sup>

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term *Volk* untranslated rather than lose some of the meaning by trying to bring it over into English.

<sup>10</sup> For further study of the "German Christians" see James A. Zabel, *Nazism and the Pastors: A Study of the ideas of Three Deutsche Christen Groups*, American Academy of Religion Dissertation Series 14, ed. H. Ganse Little, Jr. (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976) and Kurt Meier, *Die Deutsche Christen* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> A number of scholars including Klaus Scholder, Ernst Christian Helmreich, and Arthur C. Cochrane consider the later development of the Lutheran Confessional Church as a splinter from the Confessing Front. However, it has been shown that the Confessional Church really was a separate group that sometimes worked with the Confessing Front, but even made their own Lutheran response to the *Deutsche Christen* in the "Bethel Confession" before the Confessing Front created the "Barmen Declaration." For more on the Confessional Church see Lowell Green, *Lutherans Against*

For those in North America, while there was great concern over the events of the *Kirchenkampf*, the determination over which group or groups were in the right was based entirely on the perceived theological orthodoxy of the respective groups. There were a few who initially saw the *Deutsche Christen* as a misguided attempt to reform the church through politics.<sup>12</sup> However, the vast majority of American Lutherans judged the *Deutsche Christen* as theologically wanting. They saw the *Deutsche Christen* as being theologically liberal and therefore wrongheaded.<sup>13</sup> A few authors went so far as to say that the *Deutsche Christen* had left true Christianity or were outright heretics.<sup>14</sup>

What proved more difficult to analyze was the inherent strengths and weaknesses with the Confessing Front and the Confessional Church. As a whole, the North Americans were much more closely aligned with the Confessional Church, with the exception of the Synodical Conference who argued that due to theological liberalism the Lutheran *Landeskirchen* were Lutheran in name only and the only real Lutherans in Germany were in the Saxon Free Church.<sup>15</sup> What are especially of interest for this study are the lenses that the American Lutherans used to try to sort out all of this.

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Hitler: *The Untold Story* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007) and Guy C. Carter, "Confession at Bethel, August 1933—Enduring Witness: The Formation, Revision and Significance of the First Full Theological Confession of the Evangelical Church Struggle in Nazi Germany" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> E. Theodore Bachmann, "Protestantism in the Nazi State," *The Lutheran Church Quarterly* 8 (January 1935): 1–12; hereafter *LCQ*; "With Lutherans in Other Lands: Germany," *The Lutheran Companion* 41 (June 17, 1933): 750–751; hereafter *LCmpn*; and "Observing the Times," *Lutheran Standard* 92, no. 14 (April 7, 1934): 3; hereafter *LStd*.

<sup>13</sup> "German Church Delegates Denied Passports," *Lutheran Herald* 21 (August 10, 1937): 783; hereafter *LH*; Frederic Wenchel, "Nazi Germany and the Church II," *LuthWit* 56 (November 16, 1937): 390; and M. Reu, "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland," *Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 61 (April, 1937): 251–256; hereafter *KZ*.

<sup>14</sup> M. Hulsemann, "Die politische und religiöse Gestalt des dritten Reiches," *Kirchenblatt* 77, no. 8 (February 24, 1934): 8–9, 14; hereafter *KB*; M. Willkomm, "Zur Kirchliche Lage in Deutschland (Fortsetzung)," *Evangelisch Lutherisches Gemeinde-Blatt* 70 (January 27, 1935): 23–25; hereafter *ELGB*; and M. Reu, "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland," *KZ* 61 (March, 1937): 188–192.

<sup>15</sup> W. Bodamer, "Die kirchlichen Zustände in Deutschland," *ELGB* 71 (October 4, 1936): 310–313; W. Bodamer, "Die kirchlichen Zustände in Deutschland (Schluss)," *ELGB* 71 (October 18, 1936): 328–331; and August Zich, "The Church in Germany," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 24 (March 28, 1937): 100–101.



#### IV. The Threat of Unionism

For the Lutheran writers in America who feared that liberalism was undermining the true Lutheran faith in Germany, one significant area was the prospect of unionism in the German Churches. For most of the American Lutherans, this threat was shown most vividly in the formation of a united *Reichskirche*, since this meant that the Lutheran *Landeskirchen* would now be a part of the same church as the smaller Reformed churches and the large Church of the Old Prussian Union (*Kirche der Altpreußischen Union*). There was a further concern that the Confessing Front also expressed a form of unionism, since it was made up of Lutherans, Calvinists, and members of the Church of the Old Prussian Union.

In general, most of the writers feared unionism as an evil that would undermine the true faith. This was a theological concern that predated the attempts to create a united *Reichskirche* in Germany, since there were articles written in 1932, as well as later, warning of the dangers associated with unionism in the United States.<sup>16</sup> This shows an overall concern about unionism, which was further reflected in their concerns over the events in Germany. A couple of articles explained their stance further by arguing that for churches to have any form of union they must first have unity in doctrine.<sup>17</sup> The clearest statement of this sentiment was a quote by Hermann Sasse in response to the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

The Lutheran Church has a special task laid upon it, now that the movement for union has reached this point. It must reaffirm and win recognition for a principle which has exposed it to contempt and to the charge of impenitent confessionalism, namely, that true Church unity is utterly impossible without unity of faith, teaching and confession.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> M.C. Waller, "Unionism: What Does the Bible Say about Church Union?" *Lutheran Sentinel* 15 (January 20, 1932): 27–28; H.A. Preus, "What is Unionism?" *Lutheran Sentinel* 15 (April 27, 1932): 137–141; and J. T. Mueller, "Theological Observer—Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches: The Blindness of Modernistic Unionists," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 3 (March 1932): 217; hereafter *CTM*.

<sup>17</sup> Arndt, "Theological Observer—Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches: Ein gewaltiges Zeugnis gegen Irrlehre," *CTM* 7 (November 1936): 869–871; "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland. Ein Wort der Ev.luth Kirche Altpreussens an ihre Glieder," *KZ* 58 (May 1934) 319–320; and "Wird es Deutschland zu einer evangelischen Reichskirche kommen?" *LiH* 11, no. 32 (May 11, 1933): 13.

<sup>18</sup> Hermann Sasse, "Church Unity and the Lutheran Confessions," *Journal of the American Lutheran Conference* 1, no. 11 (November, 1936): 31–34.

Because of this, it is hardly surprising that the Lutheran writers in America reacted with tremendous concern in 1933 when it appeared that all of the *Landeskirchen* might be placed together into a *Reichskirche* formed from the different confessions. These concerns were raised from a number of sources across the American Lutheran spectrum. Most of the American Lutheran writers saw this *Reichskirche* as a new, expanded version of the Prussian Union.<sup>19</sup>

As the decade wore on, there was a growing concern that even if the initial *Reichskirche* was not really unionistic, there was a growing pressure for unionism within the *Reichskirche* as the differences between the confessions were being downplayed. Some writers further lamented that often there were pressures on the Lutheran pastors to soften distinctive Lutheran teachings in the church.<sup>20</sup> Many of the authors were upset by the pressure created by the *Deutsche Christen*, who from the beginning pressed to make the *Reichskirche* into a union church.<sup>21</sup> Then later it was lamented that the "Thuringian German Christians" were pushing to create a "Confessionless National Church."<sup>22</sup> However, more of the authors actually laid the blame for the pressure for unionism right at the feet of Hitler and the Nazis.<sup>23</sup> In particular, there was a concern that the Nazis were insisting that the ideology of Nazism was to override all Christian teachings.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> M. Reu, "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland," *KZ* 57 (December 1933): 759–767; H-n, "Miscellanea: Genesis der Union in Deutschland," *CTM* 8 (November 1937): 860–861; and "German Protestantism Under Nazi Government," *LH* 17 (June 27, 1933): 587.

<sup>20</sup> W. Bodamer, "Die kirchlichen Zustände in Deutschland," *ELGB* 71 (October 4, 1936): 310–313; "Um die Einheit der Deutschen Evangelischen Kirche," *LiH* 15, no. 45 (August 5, 1937): 10–11; and J.T. Mueller, "Theological Observer—Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches: Union als Gewissenslast," *CTM* 9 (January 1938): 66–67.

<sup>21</sup> W. Hoenecke, "Noch einmal zur Lage der Kirche in Deutschland," *ELGB* 68 (July 9, 1933): 215; "Wohin treibt die deutsche Reichskirche?" *KB* 77, no. 15 (April 14, 1934): 5–7; and "Die 'Deutsche Evangelische Reiskirche' (Fortsetzung)," *LiH* 11, no. 34 (May 25, 1933): 8–11.

<sup>22</sup> "Thüringen," *LiH* 14, no. 44 (July 30, 1936): 13.

<sup>23</sup> M. Reu, "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland" *KZ* 61 (December, 1937): 762; "German Church Delegates Denied Passports," *LH* 21 (August 10, 1937): 783; and Ek., "Ako to dnes vyzerá v Nemecku v kresťanskom živote?," *Svedok* 30 (August 1, 1936): 346–350.

<sup>24</sup> August Pieper, "Hitler und die Protestantische Kirche Deutschlands," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 31 (January 1934): 45–52; hereafter *TQ*; August Zich, "Church News from Germany," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 25 (March 27, 1938): 99–100; and

Since there was a great deal of concern about the *Deutsche Christen* and their advocating for unionism, it is of little surprise that the leaders of the church resistance movements were also evaluated in regards to their own responses to this unionism. A fairly common assessment of the Confessing Front is that it was inherently unionistic since it was made up of Lutherans, Reformed, and members of the Prussian Union.<sup>25</sup> The Barmen Declaration was specifically singled out as an example of a new declaration of faith that did not take into account the varying confessions.<sup>26</sup> However, these criticisms were not entirely without some moderation. Several of the writers, while not overly happy about the unionism found in the movement, understood it as a possibly necessary evil in order for these churches to work together against the far greater evil of the *Deutsche Christen*.<sup>27</sup>

For many of the Lutherans in America, especially those in fellowship with the Lutheran *Landeskirchen*, there was some hope and pride that the Confessional Church was avoiding unionism. In particular, there was a certain amount of encouragement that came from the fact that the Lutheran bishops of the intact churches refused to allow their churches to be swallowed up in a union within the *Reichskirche*.<sup>28</sup> There was also a fair amount of praise for the Lutheran leaders in Germany who refused to join

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interview with President Knubel in "At a Fork in the Road: World Lutheranism Reaches Place of Choice in Sphere of Duty to World Christianity," *The Lutheran* 20, no. 37 (June 15, 1938): 13; hereafter *Luth*.

<sup>25</sup> "Ein evangelisches Bekenntnis in den Kirchlichen Wirren der Gegenwart," *LiH* 12, no. 37 (June 14, 1934): 12–13; August Zich, "The Church in Germany," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 24 (June 20, 1937): 195–196; and W. Bodamer, "Die kirchlichen Verhältnisse in Deutschland," *ELGB* 74 (June 25, 1939): 198–201.

<sup>26</sup> W. Ösch, "Der Höhepunkt des Kirchenkampfes," *CTM* 6 (December 1935): 881–888; M. Reu, "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland: Kirchliche Konsolidierung?" *KZ* 61 (June 1937): 383–384; and J. T. Mueller, "Theological Observer—Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches: Ein ernstes Wort gegen die Barmer Unionsplattform," *CTM* 9 (September 1938): 708–709.

<sup>27</sup> Arndt, "Theological Observer—Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches: Die Stellung der Bekennenden Kirche verurteilt," *CTM* 7 (December 1936): 945–946; M. Hulsemann, "Die politische und religiöse Gestalt des dritten Reiches (Schluss)," *KB* 77, no. 9 (March 3, 1934): 7–8; and Max Monsky, "Zur Kirchlichen Lage in Deutschland," *LiH* 12, no. 47 (August 23, 1934): 4–6.

<sup>28</sup> M. Reu, "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland," *KZ* 59 (December 1935): 745–761; August Pieper, "Die Zustände in der protestantischen Kirche Deutschlands," *TQ* 31 (October 1934): 270–278; and L.W. Boe, *LH* 18 (January 2, 1934) "Europe of Today," 5–6, 20–22.

in the unionistic Confessing Front. A number of writers expressed their joy when the Confessional Church and the Confessing Front parted ways.<sup>29</sup>

### V. The Separation of Church and State

When trying to unravel the Gordian knot that was Nazi Germany, one of the first theological distinctions that the North American Lutherans made use of was the distinction of the Two Kingdoms or Two Realms.<sup>30</sup> However, during this time period, the term “The Two Kingdoms” is conspicuously absent from the discussion, as most of the American Lutherans referred instead to the doctrine of the “separation of Church and State.”<sup>31</sup>

Many of the American Lutherans saw the American political ideal of the Separation of Church and State as an ultimate example of the way it should be.<sup>32</sup> It appears that they were conflating the American political dogma of the separation of church and state with Luther’s distinction of the two kingdoms. Yet it was clear that there was a real concern that the separation of Church and State must be properly maintained and this was reflected in a number of articles and books.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> W. Ösch, “Der Höhepunkt des Kirchenkampfes,” *CTM* 6 (December 1935): 881–888; M. Reu, “Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland: Kirchliche Lage,” *KZ* 60 (October 1936): 627–632; and Th. Buehring, “Kirchliche Nachrichten: Lehre, Gestalt und Ordnung der Lutherischen Kirche: Erklärung des „Deutschen Lutherischen Tages“ in Hannover,” *KB* 78, no. 35 (August 31, 1935): 11.

<sup>30</sup> Luther actually spoke of this as two kingdoms, two realms, and even at times spoke of there being more kingdoms including a kingdom of the devil. Kenneth Hagen, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *God and Caesar Revisited*, Luther Academy Conference Papers 1, ed. John R. Stevenson (Shorewood, MN: Luther Academy Conference, 1995), 28.

<sup>31</sup> This is not as surprising when one realizes that the term “the Two Kingdoms” had only been developed in Germany as recently as 1922. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 188.

<sup>32</sup> “Editorials and Comments: Church and State,” *The Ansgar Lutheran* 10, no. 15 (April 11, 1938): 3, 7; hereafter *AnL*; C. H. Becker, “The Relation Between Church and State,” *The Pastor’s Monthly* 10 (October 1932): 579–587; Theodore Graebner, “Separation of Church and State,” *CTM* 4 (April 1933): 249–255; and “The U.S. Constitution and the Augsburg Confession,” *LH* 21 (September 14, 1937): 904.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Fortenbaugh, review of *Seven Centuries of the Problem of Church and State*, by Frank Gavin, *LCQ* 12 (January 1939): 97–98; Walter A. Maier, review of *Seven Centuries of the Problem of Church and State*, by Frank Gavin, *Walther League Messenger* 47 (November, 1938): 192; hereafter *WLM*; Olaf Lysnes, review of *Church and State*, by G. T.

While there were more than a couple of absolutely shocking endorsements of Hitler and Nazism during the 1930s, much of the praise that American Lutherans had for Hitler was explained in terms of how he was fulfilling his responsibility in the civil realm to take care of the German nation, its culture, and its people. In this, the North American Lutheran publishers reminded their readers regularly of the terrible state that Germany had been in when Hitler came to power.<sup>34</sup>

The publishers gave the greatest support for Hitler in response to how quickly he turned around the German economy. There was amazement at just how positive things were starting to look for the German people within the first couple years of Hitler's tenure.<sup>35</sup> This included an emphasis on unemployment and how the German nation was working to uphold the value of labor as Lars Boe observed:

Judging superficially, they seem to be solving many of their difficulties in Germany and the other European lands far better than we are here. Unemployment is not as great. One gets the impression that they are approaching their problems not merely from the negative standpoint of relief, but on the more constructive platform of trying to get everyone on an earning and self-sustaining basis.<sup>36</sup>

One great fear that gripped the North American Lutheran publishers was the spread of communism. There were numerous articles expressing fear over the possible spread of communism in the United States. This led to a collective sigh of relief from them that Hitler had saved Germany from the specter of bolshevism. In this regard, Hitler was certainly seen as a savior in the left-hand realm by keeping communism out of Germany and often even beyond Germany as he was considered the first to truly stem the rising red tide.

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Lee, *LH* 16 (October 18, 1932): 1182; Theodore Graebner, review of *American Church Law*, by Carl Zollmann, *CTM* 4 (April 1933): 249–255; and review of *American Church Law*, by Carl Zollmann, *Luth* 15, no. 30 (April 27, 1933): 16.

<sup>34</sup> "The Church in General: The Churches Helping in Germany," *AnL* 5, no. 5 (February 3, 1932): 10; "Across the Desk: Worthless Money," *Luth* 15, no. 24 (March 16, 1933): 15; and Eugen Kühnemann, "Das neue Deutschland," *KB* 76, no. 49 (December 9, 1933): 4–5.

<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, the only reference to Germany in *The Lutheran Layman* was praising how beautiful, orderly, and clean Germany had become: Herman Wellensieck, "A Visit to Germany," *The Lutheran Layman* 5 (December, 1934): 48.

<sup>36</sup> Lars W. Boe, "Impressions of Germany," *AnL* 7, no. 53 (December 31, 1934): 5.

The writers were also concerned about the rampant immorality they saw in Germany until Hitler eradicated it when he came to power. This included the problem of the widespread publication of pornography in Germany.<sup>37</sup> There was also a concern about the widespread publishing of Bolshevik and anti-Christian literature in Germany. To this end, some of the authors even endorsed or at least expressed understanding of the Nazi book burnings as a legitimate means of cleaning up the society.<sup>38</sup> Others, however, were rather concerned about this and especially how widely the Nazis appeared to be casting their nets regarding which books were legitimate for burning.<sup>39</sup>

This did not mean that all that the Nazi government did was seen as good; however for many of the American Lutherans much of what was being done in the civil realm in Germany was seen as very positive. For instance, when asked by a reader in 1933 how the *Lutherischer Herold* could speak so positively about the Nazi regime, C.R. Tappert responded that what Hitler was doing in the secular realm was good and the problems only arose when he meddled in the churches.<sup>40</sup> Concerns were also raised about the treatment of the Jews. The greatest concern that the Lutheran writers in America had, however, was that the Nazi government was mixing Church and State. Yet for many what was going on in the civil realm in Germany was praised and a few even offered glowing support for Hitler in the very early 1930s. The most vocal praise was found in the *Walther League Messenger* where Walter A. Maier in April 1933 described Hitler as “a natural-born leader, accentuated by serious and sober judgments and moved by a rare understanding of Germany’s essential needs.”<sup>41</sup> Then in July 1933, Hans Kirsten, a Lutheran pastor in Germany praised Maier’s article as “calm, unprejudiced opinion” and referred to Hitler as “one of the great men of our history, but who, up to this time, has

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<sup>37</sup> “Conditions in Germany,” *LH* 19 (November 12, 1935): 1100; Theo. Buehring, “Kirchliche Nachrichten—Aus anderen Kreisen: Neuer—und doch alter—Geist in Deutschland,” *KB* 76, no. 19 (May 13, 1933): 12; and Walter A. Maier, “Editorials: ‘Hitler Shows the Way,’” *WLM* 41 (April 1933): 461.

<sup>38</sup> “Hitler Burns Bolshevik Books,” *LH* 17 (June 20, 1933): 564–565; “With Lutherans in Other Lands: Germany,” *LCmpn* 41 (September 16, 1933): 1181; and J. T. Mueller, “Hitlers Bücherverbrennung,” *Der Lutheraner* 89 (August 8, 1933): 267–268.

<sup>39</sup> “Ueber die feierliche Verbrennung undeutscher und schmutziger Literatur in Berlin,” *LiH* 11, no. 39 (June 29, 1933): 5.

<sup>40</sup> C. R. Tappert, “Antworten auf allerlei Fragen,” *LiH* 11, no. 45 (August 10, 1933): 8–10.

<sup>41</sup> Walter A. Maier, “Editorials: ‘Hitler Shows the Way,’” *WLM* 41 (April 1933): 461.

been maligned and dragged through the dirt of the streets by the unscrupulous foreign press under Jewish control."<sup>42</sup> However, these statements were questioned by readers and within a couple of years Maier repudiated Hitler and his totalitarianism.<sup>43</sup>

For most of the Americans it was hard to miss the antagonism that existed between the two kingdoms in Nazi Germany. For some, these tensions were seen as unavoidable since there was a strong church and a strong government involved, and especially when elements such as nationalism are injected into both.<sup>44</sup> The readers of the *Kirchliche Zeitschrift* were advised that the nature of the massive upheaval that Germany had experienced naturally placed a great stress on the church and it warned German churches as well as North Americans that they should not fall into the extremes of quietism on one hand or getting caught up in the movement of the hour on the other side and thereby fail to rightly distinguish the two kingdoms.<sup>45</sup>

Some of the writers saw the clash of the church and state in Germany as inevitable, because both were making totalitarian claims on the individual. This was a radical clash of worldviews that each claimed to give total meaning to one's life and therefore the two must ultimately battle each other.<sup>46</sup> Karl Barth was cited in *The Lutheran Companion* as pointing out this unavoidable conflict: "Nazism, he says, is not only a political experiment, but is maintained as a religious institution of salvation; the Church cannot, therefore, adopt a neutral attitude."<sup>47</sup> As a result, many saw the Nazi program of *Gleichschaltung* as a real threat to the church since

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<sup>42</sup> Hans Kirsten, "Hitler Shows the Way," *WLM* 41 (July 1933): 662.

<sup>43</sup> Walter A. Maier, "Editorials: The Old Game," *WLM* 46 (March 1938): 422.

<sup>44</sup> Nathan R. Melhorn, "That Which We Call Nationalism," *Luth* 15, no. 40 (July 6, 1933): 3-4; "Germany's Church Problems," *Luth* 20, no. 13 (December 29, 1937): 2; and J. Jenny, "Observations and Impressions of Church and Religious Life in European Countries," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 19 (November 6, 1932): 361-364.

<sup>45</sup> D. Schöffel, "Das Luthertum und die religiöse Krise der Gegenwart," *KZ* 60 (March 1936): 129-134.

<sup>46</sup> Arthur von der Thur, "Gleichschaltung des Evangeliums," *LiH* 11, no. 39 (June 29, 1933): 2-3; and Daniel Nystrom, "The Spectator: A Review of Current News and Opinion," *LCmpn* 47 (February 16, 1939): 199.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Nystrom, "The Spectator: A Review of Current News and Opinion," *LCmpn* 47 (December 14, 1939): 1576.

the church was seen as being forced into the Nazi program and world-view.<sup>48</sup>

There were, however, a few voices that said that there really was no problem between the Two Kingdoms in Germany. These writers insisted that Hitler and the Nazis were actually in favor of a Lutheran separation of the Church and State. While this might seem incredible today, there was some evidence in favor of this position. As proof, they pointed to the numerous statements by Hitler and other Nazi leaders that they were actually in favor of this type of separation. The most common source cited was how Hitler argued in *Mein Kampf* that a political leader cannot be a religious reformer.<sup>49</sup> They also cited Hitler's various speeches in which he declared that he was not interested in meddling in the church's affairs.<sup>50</sup> There were some writers that even held out hope that Hitler was going to step in and preserve the separation.<sup>51</sup> Beyond just Hitler, some of the Nazi leaders, including Gottfried Feder, Joseph Goebbels, Herman Goering, and Hanns Kerrl were also quoted to show that they were truly in favor of keeping a proper separation between church and state.<sup>52</sup>

Many were greatly concerned that the Nazi government was attempting to make the German churches subservient to the state via the *Reichskirche* and particularly through the *Deutsche Christen* and thereby mixing Church and State.<sup>53</sup> Henry Smith Leiper went so far as to say that in

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<sup>48</sup> Arthur von der Thur, "Vor neuen Entscheidungen im deutschen Kirchenstreit," *LiH* 13, no. 52 (September 26, 1935): 11; and "At a Fork in the Road: World Lutheranism Reaches Place of Choice in Sphere of Duty to World Christianity," *Luth* 20, no. 37 (June 15, 1938): 13.

<sup>49</sup> M. Lehninger, "Zur kirchlichen Lage in Deutschland," *TQ* 33 (July 1936): 195; M. Reu, "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland," *KZ* 57 (June 1933): 377–378.

<sup>50</sup> "Ueber die kirchliche Lage in Deutschland," *LiH* 16, no. 33 (May 19, 1938): 10–11; M. Lehninger, "Zur kirchlichen Lage in Deutschland," *TQ* 33 (July 1936): 195–197.

<sup>51</sup> "Do We Appreciate the Blessings of Religious Liberty?" *LH* 18 (March 13, 1934): 244.

<sup>52</sup> M. Lehninger, "Zur kirchlichen Lage in Deutschland," *TQ* 33 (July 1936): 197–198; M. Reu, "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland. Aus Generalfeldmarschall Görings Rede," *KZ* 62 (May 1938): 319–320.

<sup>53</sup> E. C. Fendt, "An Estimate of the Religious Situation in Germany," *Journal of the American Lutheran Conference* 1, no. 1 (January 1936): 61. The same article was also printed in: *LCmpn* 43 (November 2, 1935): 1382–1384; *LH* 19 (October 29, 1935): 1056–1057; and *LStd* 93, no. 44 (November 2, 1935): 6–7.



Germany God was allowed only if He salutes Hitler.<sup>54</sup> Michael Reu, in light of Hitler's call for church elections in 1937, stated that one of the three main questions facing the German Church was "Should the Protestant Church become an instrument of the Nazi State?"<sup>55</sup>

While it seemed clear to virtually all North American Lutherans that the *Deutsche Christen* were guilty of mixing the Church and State some went a step further and saw all of the *Landeskirchen* as guilty, too. This was so seen primarily by those who were in fellowship with the Saxon Free Church in Germany, most notably the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod. They viewed any form of state-supported church as an improper mixing of the Church and State and therefore viewed all sides in the *Kirchenkampf* as equally guilty on this count. It was made clear to the North American Lutheran public that the problems in the fights between the Church and State in Germany were all confined to the *Landeskirchen*.<sup>56</sup>

## VI. Direct Threats to Christianity in Germany

Since the preservation of pure Christianity was of foremost concern for the American Lutheran Churches, it is also important to understand their concern over the existential threat to Christianity in Europe that was being posed by Communism. Not only was Communism seen as a force for evil, but it was also considered to be synonymous with atheism. This was no idle concern, for as historian James Kegel describes it:

During the same period that the *Kirchenkampf* was raging in Germany, the entire Russian Lutheran Church was wiped out. It is important to keep this backdrop in mind as we investigate American Lutheran reaction to Hitler. What often appears as approval of National Socialist aims and an apparent excusing of excesses in religious policy or antisemitism is often based upon the contrast with Stalinism in Russia. It seems likely that American Lutherans would have been less for-

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<sup>54</sup> Henry Smith Leiper, "The Issues in the German Church Struggle," *AnL* 7, no. 25 (June 18, 1934): 5–6.

<sup>55</sup> M. Reu, "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland," *KZ* 61 (March 1937): 188–192. The article was also reprinted as "Staat und Kirche in Deutschland," *LiH* 15, no. 27 (April 1, 1937): 13–14.

<sup>56</sup> Geo. O. Lillegard, "The Church and the World," *Lutheran Sentinel* 21 (January 26, 1938): 20–21.

bearing and willing to excuse German government claims without the example of Stalinist terror.<sup>57</sup>

For the American Lutherans, the Soviet Union's persecution and systematic attempts to eradicate Christianity and all religion was the greatest single threat to all Christianity. These concerns overshadowed all reports of persecution of Christians and even that of Jews in Germany during this era.<sup>58</sup> There were a number voicing outrage at how the American press was busy lamenting the persecution of the Jews in Germany while overlooking the widespread murder and destruction of Christians in the Soviet Union. Walter A. Maier, who was one of the most vocal critics of this perceived injustice, wrote of communism:

The Christian must renew his vow of hostility to this enthroned blasphemy and redouble his interest and prayers in behalf of the oppressed millions of Christians in Russia concerning whom we have heard far less than the allegedly persecuted Jews of Germany.<sup>59</sup>

This concern led to a general agreement that Hitler's rise to power was good in that it stopped communism from spreading into Germany. However, the perceptions of how good this was varied greatly. A number stated that Christians should be thankful for Hitler because he stopped communism from spreading in Germany and therefore to other areas of Europe as well.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, others were more concerned that, while the stopping of communism in Germany was good, Hitler was not much better, as the *Lutheran Herald* editorialized: "The issue was between the choice of a red or a brown dictator, and the German people decided for Hitler, who was at least in favor of some form of religion as against the atheistic communists."<sup>61</sup>

Next to Marxist atheism, the rise of neo-paganism in Germany was the greatest threat to the continued existence of Christianity in the eyes of the American Lutherans. Their concern was over the series of movements that sought to undermine the Christian church in Germany and even supplant

<sup>57</sup> James David Kegel, "A Church Come of Age: American Lutheranism and National Socialism, the German Church Conflict, and the reconstitution of the church: 1933–1948" (ThD diss., Lutheran School of Theology, 1988): 18.

<sup>58</sup> "The Bible in Germany," *Lutheran Sentinel* 22 (August 12, 1939): 238.

<sup>59</sup> Walter A. Maier, "The Church Will Never Recognize Atheism," *WLM* 42 (December 1933): 239.

<sup>60</sup> "Hitler Burns Bolshevik Books," *LH* 17 (June 20, 1933): 564–565; Martin Ulbrich, "Brief aus der alten Heimat," *LiH* 11, no. 21 (February 23, 1933): 4–5.

<sup>61</sup> "Religious Liberty in Germany Threatened," *LH* 17 (December 12, 1933): 1139.

it.<sup>62</sup> As a result, the editors of these periodicals commented on the various neo-pagan movements and reported with alarm their growth in power and prestige.

While every North American Lutheran group was concerned about this German neo-paganism, the assessments of how rampant it was and even the nature of it varied greatly. There were a few who saw the neo-pagans as a vocal, yet largely powerless, minority.<sup>63</sup> Others explained that these groups were small, but wielded a disproportionately large amount of power.<sup>64</sup> Still others saw this neo-pagan movement as a fairly large and quickly growing threat to the existence of orthodox Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Of those that saw it as a real threat, there were a number of citations of how the neo-pagans were calling for the end of Christianity in Germany.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The power and prevalence of neo-paganism in Nazi thought has been debated over the years. A number have argued that Nazi thought was based on Christian anti-Semitism. This argument has been most recently put forth in Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). However, a larger body of work has pointed to the inherent neo-paganism in Nazi thought: from Klaus Scholder, "Judaism and Christianity in the Ideology and Politics of National Socialism, 1919–1945" in *A Requiem for Hitler and Other New Perspectives on the German Church Struggle*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 168–181; to George L. Mosse, "The Mystical Origins of Nazism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (1961): 81–96; to the most recent work: Karla Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis* (New York: Routledge, 2006). The debate between Steigmann-Gall and Poewe was also analyzed by Uwe Siemon-Netto, review of *The Holy Reich*, by Richard Steigmann-Gall, and review of *New Religions and the Nazis*, by Karla Poewe, *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (Winter 2007): 479–482. Siemon-Netto points to Poewe as having the better researched and better defended stance in explaining the Nazi regime as based on neo-paganism.

<sup>63</sup> H. Dierks, "The New Germany II," *LuthWit* 55 (October 20, 1936): 346–347; Walter A. Maier, "Turret of the Times: Neo-pagan propaganda in Germany makes no appreciable gains," *WLM* 46 (February 1938): 384; and E. C. Fendt, "An Estimate of the Religious Situation in Germany," *Journal of the American Lutheran Conference* 1, no. 1 (January 1936): 61. This same article was also printed in: *LCmpn* 43 (November 2, 1935): 1382–1384; *LH* 19, no. 44 (October 29, 1935): 1056–1057; and *LStd* 93, no. 44 (November 2, 1935): 6–7.

<sup>64</sup> Frederic Wenchel, "Nazi Germany and the Church II," *LuthWit* 56 (November 16, 1937): 390; and "The Younger National Socialists in Germany," *Journal of the American Lutheran Conference* 3, no. 12 (December 1938): 70.

<sup>65</sup> "Will das deutsche Volk noch christlich sein?" *LiH* 16, no. 25 (March 24, 1938): 11; and John Aberly, "Notes and Studies: Religion in the Third Reich," *LCQ* 11 (October 1938): 386.

<sup>66</sup> Th. F., "Das Ende des Christentums?" *LiH* 17, no. 45 (August 17, 1939): 5–6; Hugo von Gaffan Perdelwitz, "Protestant Germany Today," *AnL* 7, no. 17 (April 23, 1934): 4–7;

While there was never unanimity amongst the North American Lutherans as to whether or not there was a uniform persecution of Christians by the Nazis, most did see at least sporadic examples of persecution of the Church. This was most keenly felt by those who were in fellowship with one or more of the *Landeskirchen*, as those in fellowship with the Lutheran free churches tended to see these persecutions more as punishments for political meddling by pastors and church leaders. Those that did perceive actions by the Nazi government as the persecution of Christians, faithful pastors, and bishops were quick to sound the alarm and denounce those measures. By late 1938, even Michael Reu, who was the last major North American Lutheran apologist for the Nazi government, saw Nazism as anti-Christian and demonic—not that it was trying to destroy the church; rather, it was trying to control it.<sup>67</sup>

### VII. Wrestling with Pro-Nazi Theology

Related to the neo-pagan ideas that were spreading in Germany there were new theological ideas which made their way into the German churches as well, and American Lutheran theologians were forced to wrestle with these new constructs. These ideas were at least partially connected to the neo-pagan ideas, yet were also given a distinctly Christian hue making them all the harder to evaluate. Furthermore, these ideas were supported by some of the greatest German theologians of the time, who therefore offered their support to the Nazi cause.<sup>68</sup>

In 1926, Adolf Hitler declared Article 24 of the Nazi Party Program to be unalterable. This article stated:

We insist upon freedom for all religious confessions in the state, providing they do not endanger its existence or offend the German race's sense of decency and morality. The Party as such stands for a positive Christianity, without binding itself denominationally to a particular confession. It fights against the Jewish-materialistic spirit at home and abroad and believes that any lasting recovery of our people must be

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and Martin S. Sommer, "The Church in Germany," *LuthWit* 53 (March 27, 1934): 121–122.

<sup>67</sup> M. Reu, "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland," *KZ* 62 (December 1938): 750–760.

<sup>68</sup> Robert P. Eriksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emmanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

based on the spiritual principle: the welfare of the community comes before that of the individual.<sup>69</sup>

This raises the question of what is meant by “positive Christianity.” Hitler and the Nazis shrewdly left the term undefined, thereby allowing others to pour into it whatever meaning they wanted.

At first, many American Lutherans thought that this was good; for instance, August Pieper defined “positive Christianity” as not Liberalism.<sup>70</sup> The most thorough and glowing review of “positive Christianity” argued that there really is no “negative Christianity,” rather it is positive in that it is in favor of holding firm to the faith. The author pointed to Luther and how the crucified and risen Christ is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls; therefore “positive Christianity” holds to this with no compromise. The editors applauded what they perceived as a firm stand for the truth of the Gospel.<sup>71</sup>

As the 1930s went on, more and more Lutherans became skeptical due to the nebulous nature of “positive Christianity.” First, there was suspicion that this might be a means of manipulating people. By the end, most came to conclude that this was essentially a social-Gospel type of idea to support the Nazi reforms.<sup>72</sup>

One of the most central aspects of the Nazi ideology was that there was something unique and vital in the nature of the German people as a *Volk*. Karla Poewe adroitly defines the concept of *völkisch* as a term that

refers to the sense of being grasped by the reality of nation that arises out of the unity of space, blood, and spirit and that constrains all into one community (*Volksgemeinschaft*). Here nation is the concrete spiritual mediator between providence and individual. And note, this definition assumes the fusion of religion and politics, religion and nation, biology and spirit, as well as tragedy and heroism. These are

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Matheson, *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1981), 1.

<sup>70</sup> August Pieper, “Hitler und die Protestantische Kirche Deutschlands,” *TQ* 31 (January 1934): 45–52.

<sup>71</sup> Joh. Jeremias, “Positives Christentum,” *LiH* 12, no. 49 (September 6, 1934): 6; and J. T. Mueller, “Theological Observer—Kirchlich-Zeitgeschichtliches: Positives Christentum,” *CTM* 6 (January 1935): 70–71.

<sup>72</sup> “Persecution of Christians,” *LH* 22 (November 29, 1938): 1200–1201.

all aspects that made German faith so compelling to those who regarded Christianity as part of the demise of Western civilization.<sup>73</sup>

Poewe further points out that this is not a Christian notion, but a neo-Pagan idea based on the *Volk*.<sup>74</sup>

In the extreme form, *völkisch* thought was a type of dualism that viewed the world as embattled in a struggle between good and evil with the German *Volk* being the representatives of good and the Jewish *Volk* as being the representatives of evil forces in the world.<sup>75</sup> While this is really a form of neo-paganism, there were some Christian thinkers in Germany, such as Emmanuel Hirsch and Paul Althaus, who attempted to moderate this by arguing that one of the orders of creation that God placed in the world was the *Volk* and that therefore the church in a given part of the world had a special responsibility to its *Volk*.

Some of the North Americans who took a more sympathetic view of the *völkisch* theology saw it as a way of explaining how the Church had a responsibility to the people to which they were called. This was therefore seen as an extension of the traditional Lutheran teaching on the orders of creation.

In particular, a fair bit of attention was paid to Althaus' work on the orders of creation. Many applauded this emphasis of Althaus, especially how he emphasized the Lutheran understanding that the orders of creation, while divinely ordained, are nonetheless tainted by human sin.<sup>76</sup> Some of the writers echoed Althaus' teaching that since God placed us within these orders, one has a duty to live within and serve these orders. Michael Reu and others argued that the church in a given area has a specific call to serve the *Volk* in which it has been placed.<sup>77</sup> Althaus was

<sup>73</sup> Poewe, "The Völkisch Origins of National Socialism," 2.

<sup>74</sup> Poewe, "The Völkisch Origins of National Socialism," 3.

<sup>75</sup> Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, vol. 1, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 74–87; and Scholder, "Judaism and Christianity in the Ideology and Politics of National Socialism, 1919–1945."

<sup>76</sup> Review of *Theologie der Ordnungen*, by Paul Althaus, *KZ* 59 (April 1935): 248–249; review of *Theologie der Ordnungen*, by Paul Althaus, *KZ* 61 (March 1936): 180; and E. E. Fischer, review of *Theologie der Ordnungen*, by Paul Althaus, *LCQ* 8 (January 1935): 96–97.

<sup>77</sup> M. Reu, "Kirchliche Chronik—Ausland: Deutschland," *KZ* 59 (October 1935): 617–640; and "Grundsätze und Forderungen," *LiH* 11, no. 48 (August 31, 1933): 14.

particularly praised for insisting that while he felt bound to his *Volk*, he was first and foremost a Christian and would not give that up.<sup>78</sup>

While there were some who applauded the extension of the orders of creation to include the *Volk*, others were rather skeptical about it. There were some rather strong denunciations of this theological move. In particular, this was seen as undermining the Gospel, since the advocates of understanding a *völkisch* aspect to theology tended to make the church subservient to the *Volk*.<sup>79</sup> Some writers were further concerned that in Germany the civil leaders were attempting to force the church to be subservient to its neo-pagan *völkisch* thought. This concern came particularly later in the 1930s, especially from 1937 on.<sup>80</sup> The German theologian that some authors highlighted for his criticism of *völkisch* theology was Hermann Sasse. Sasse was praised not only for rejecting the notion that Lutheranism was somehow a Germanic religion rather than universal Christianity, but he was also praised for arguing that in the Bible the only *Volk* that mattered was the people (*Volk*) of God.<sup>81</sup> Sasse further argued that the idea of *Volk* would have been foreign to the reformers, since it came out of rationalism.<sup>82</sup> He pointed out that the Confessions give the “Natural orders as a) Natural law, b) marriage (family), c) economy,” and correct order of priority as “a) marriage (family), b) economy, c) politics.”<sup>83</sup> Sasse concluded: “Within these orders, the *Volk* has no place.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Paul Althaus, “Germanische Religion, deutsche Art und Christusglaube,” *LiH* 13, no. 15 (January 10, 1935): 4–5.

<sup>79</sup> Th. Engelder, “Kirche, Staat, Obrigkeit, Volk, Rasse, Familie—und Gottes Wort,” *CTM* 6 (December 1935): 881–888; M. Reu, “Wer sind die “deutschen Christen? Schluss,” *KZ* 57 (December 1933): 720–739; and “Christentum und Germanentum,” *KB* 78, no. 14 (April 6, 1935): 5–6.

<sup>80</sup> “Church and State Relationship in Germany,” *Luth* 20, no. 18 (February 2, 1938): 2.

<sup>81</sup> J.T. Mueller, review of *Here we Stand: The Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith*, by Hermann Sasse, *CTM* 9 (August 1938): 634–637; Hermann Sasse, “Das Volk nach der Lehre der evangelischen Kirche,” *KZ* 58 (April 1934): 193–218; and Hermann Sasse, “Die lutherische Kirche der Welt in der Gegenwart,” *KB* 78, no. 41 (October 12, 1935): 5–6.

<sup>82</sup> Hermann Sasse, “Das Volk nach der Lehre der evangelischen Kirche,” *KZ* 58 (April 1934): 196.

<sup>83</sup> Sasse, “Das Volk nach der Lehre der evangelischen Kirche,” 210.

<sup>84</sup> Sasse, “Das Volk nach der Lehre der evangelischen Kirche,” 212.

### VIII. Nazi Anti-Semitism

The one aspect that is most often discussed and questioned was how the North Americans viewed Nazi anti-Semitism.<sup>85</sup> In this regard, the record is decidedly mixed. On the one side, there were two multi-part articles published which were chillingly entitled "*Die Judenfrage*" ("The Question About the Jews"), which was the very term used in Nazi propaganda, and these articles read like something that could have been published under Goebbels' direction.<sup>86</sup> However, the majority of the North Americans rejected these views, and by the middle of 1934 these ideas were no longer put into print in American Lutheran circles.

A common theme that was echoed time after time was that Christians should show love towards the Jews as neighbors and therefore as people included in the biblical command to "love your neighbor as yourself." The writers from a variety of Lutheran church bodies all agreed that Christians have a duty towards all, including the Jews, to treat them with respect and love. They then pointed out that this duty eliminates all possibility for racial hatred.<sup>87</sup>

Elias Newman of the Zion Society for Israel was the one who took the lead in defending Luther from charges that he was anti-Semitic and that Lutheran ideas were behind Nazi anti-Semitism. Newman, a Christian Jew, was able to stand up and argue from a stronger perspective than the Gentiles that Luther was distinguishing between the Jewish race and the Jewish religion. He pointedly insisted: "Luther was no anti-Semite. His

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<sup>85</sup> Examples include Kenneth Barnes, "American Lutherans and the Third Reich," in *What Kind of God? Essays in Honor of Richard Rubenstein*, ed. B. Rubenstein and M. Berenbaum (Lanham, NY: University Press of America, 1995), Frederick I. Murphy, "The American Christian Press and Pre-War Hitler's Germany," (PhD diss., Yale University, 1970), William E. Nawyn, *American Protestantism's Response to Germany's Jews and Refugees, 1933-1941* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), and Robert W. Ross, *So It Was True: The American Protestant Press and the Nazi Persecution of the Jews* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

<sup>86</sup> W. Reinecke's two part article, "Die Judenfrage," in *KZ* 57 (July, 1933): 412-417; "Die Judenfrage: Schluss," *KZ* 57 (August, 1933): 473-479 and R. Joh. Flierl's three-part article "Die Judenfrage," *KB* 77 (January 13, 1934): 4-7; *KB* 77, no. 3 (January 20, 1934): 6-9, 14; *KB*, 77, no. 4 (January 27, 1934): 6-8.

<sup>87</sup> "Anti-Semitism," *LH* 22 (November 29, 1938): 1199; J. A. Pfeiffer, "Church News: The Christian Frame of Mind toward the Jew," *LStd* 95, no. 42 (October 9, 1937): 11-12; and Osborne Hauge, "Diplomat Condemns Nazi Rule," *LCmpn* 46 (March 17, 1938): 330-331.



violent language was always directed against the Jewish religion, which he considered false, and never against the Jewish race."<sup>88</sup>

### IX. Conclusion

Years later, Hermann Sasse wrote to Kurt Marquart that confessionally Lutheran professors at first

sympathized with the Nazi Movement because they did not understand its revolutionary and anti-Christian character. They lacked the great gift of discerning spirits. . . . They did not know that Hitler was a criminal. . . . Unfortunately, some of our Free Church brethren were also blind. . . . Hitler would never tolerate a church which did not accept his program, including all the laws against the Jews and even faithful Jewish-Christians. But the Lutherans in Germany were blind. . . . Nothing has done more damage to the name of Lutheranism in Germany than this complete failure to see the realities of Nazism and to apply the eternal Law of God also to Hitler and the political powers of the world.<sup>89</sup>

In some ways, this same charge can be leveled at North American Lutherans as well. However, as we have seen, their physical distance did help them to do a better job of analyzing what was happening in Germany.

More than anything else, when they utilized their theological tools of concern about liberal thought, and unionism, as well as applying the correct limits of the state according to the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms and the need to love one's neighbor, they ended up coming to the right answers. In fact, it appears that the more the North Americans were mesmerized by purely secular concerns, the more trouble they had in giving a proper analysis of the situation in Germany. But when they leaned more on their theological standards, they were better able to see clearly.

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<sup>88</sup> Elias Newman, "Martin Luther and the Jews," *LH* 23 (May 23, 1939): 489.

<sup>89</sup> From a letter to Kurt Marquart dated Sept. 10, 1967, quoted in John R. Wilch, "Hermann Sasse and Third Reich Threats to the Church," in *Hermann Sasse: A Man for Our Times?: Essays from the 20th Annual Lutheran Life Lectures, Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada (30 October–1 November 1995): an International Theological Symposium Marking the Centennial of the Birth of Dr. Hermann Sasse*, eds. John R. Stephenson, and Thomas M. Winger (Saint Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 1998).

