



Faith under Fire

A Review Article

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Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich, ed. by Dean Stroud. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. Pp. 215. \$20.00 (paper).

Paul Schneider (1897–1939) was the first Protestant pastor to die in a concentration camp. We should at least know his name. He died because he preached a sermon. People cared about what he preached, especially the Nazis, who had already forced his exit from his first church, which led to his reassignment to a two-point country parish more amenable to his preaching. Arrested several times during his first call, the harassment continued in his second: twice detained by the Gestapo. In late 1937, after leading the earlier service of his two-point parish, he didn't show up at his second parish: he had been intercepted on his way there by the Gestapo, arrested, imprisoned, and finally taken to Buchenwald, where he was severely tortured and eventually murdered. Again, we should at least remember his name, if not those of many others who shared the same fate.

In this important book, Dean Stroud has compiled a collection of sermons indicating that not all voices were silent in Germany during the time of the Third Reich. In addition to two sermons by Paul Schneider, there are others by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Martin Niemöller, Julius von Jan, Helmut Gollwitzer, Gerhard Ebeling, Rudolf Bultmann, Wilhelm Busch, and the Roman Catholic

It is always good to consider those who have risen to the challenge and to ask whether we would be up to it ourselves. If preaching has become too easy, we need to ask why.

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HITLER'S "CHRISTIANITY"

Stroud provides a helpful introductory overview of the historical and ideological context of these sermons. In a radio speech shortly after becoming chancellor, Hitler proclaimed his regard for Christianity as "the foundation of our national morality" and professed that "I would never ally myself with the parties which destroy Christianity." Statements of propaganda designed to alleviate alarm, they initially calmed most of the populace, which in the 1930s still largely belonged to their Christian churches. But what was to come was a thorough invasion of Christian theology by language, regulations, and practices foreign to it. The self-aggrandizing term "positive Christianity" was being promoted by National Socialism in order to camouflage Nazi ideology, and anything critical of the latter was deemed "negative."¹

To begin with, Hitler became the object of faith, the new savior of the people, whom people greeted with the term *Heil* (salvation). The new faith had its own Bible, *Mein Kampf*, and crucifixes were to be removed from all altars and replaced by the only unconquerable symbol, the swastika.² The kingdom of God was superseded by another *Reich* (kingdom), the Third Reich. In exams students were asked "What comes after the Third Reich?" The correct answer was "nothing," because the Third Reich would last forever. There was a new version of the Holy Trinity, it was Soil, Blood, and Race, and faithful, absolute adherence was mandatory. At rallies there were music, song, uniforms, and banners, as well as impassioned speeches. In film Hitler was portrayed as a god coming out of the heavens, bringing light into the darkness that had fallen over the land. Christmas celebrated less the birth of Jesus than an ancient Germanic festival of light in which the Germanic forebears anticipated the coming of Nazi light. The old beloved carol was reworded:

Silent Night! Holy Night! All is calm, all is bright,
Only the Chancellor steadfast in fight,
Watches o'er Germany by day and by night,
Always caring for us.³

¹Dean G. Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) 7: "Negativity in Nazi Germany was anything that suggested that Jews were human beings created by God and loved by him." In 1937 the Nazi lawyer appointed to be Minister for Church Affairs, Hans Kerrl, defined positive Christianity: "Positive Christianity is National Socialism... National Socialism is the doing of God's will... God's will reveals itself in German blood... Christianity is not dependent upon the Apostle's Creed... True Christianity is represented by the party, and the German people are now called by the party and especially by the Fuehrer to a real Christianity... The Fuehrer is the herald of a new revelation"—quoted from Steward W. Herman, Jr., *It's Your Souls We Want* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1943), by W. L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960) 239.

²See E. Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010) 171. Metaxas mentions that Christian hymns were revised to eliminate all references to "Israelite elements." Even "cedars of Lebanon," it was proposed, should be changed to "firs of the German forest" (173).

³Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow*, 12.

Hitler had replaced Bethlehem's child, coming in the fullness of time, as the true light of the world.

So there was a lot to deal with in sermons that proposed to remain faithful to the Christian gospel—especially the fact that Jesus was a Jew, a rather awkward item for anti-Semitic fanatics. So the latter made an Aryan of him, banned the Old Testament as an inauthentic part of the canon, and published a New Testament free of Jewish influence, selling some 200,000 copies.

Unfortunately, 1933 marked the 450th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther, who was now hailed as a German national hero whose Reformation accorded with National Socialist views of race and “national character.” Certainly, his anti-Semitic writings lent themselves to the propaganda, even while things like his position as a professor of Old Testament, his translation of it, his ordering its canon according to the Hebrew canon, and his 1523 essay “That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew”⁴ were ignored. The Rengsdorf Theses (October, 1933), drawn up by pro-Nazi Christians, stated that the Reformation marked the renewal of the national spirit and made the gospel accessible to the German national character. Responses immediately emerged: “Whoever treats the Reformation as a specifically German affair today interprets it as propaganda and places himself outside the evangelical church” (Barth, October, 1933).⁵ “To understand (Luther's) actions as a breakthrough of the Germanic spirit, or as the origin of the modern feeling for freedom, or as the establishment of a new religion is to completely misunderstand his mission”⁶ (Bonhoeffer, H. Sasse, and others, in the Bethel Confession, rev. November, 1933).

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The German Christian movement, which began a few years before the Nazis came to power, was the result, Stroud says, of the trauma of defeat in World War I and the malaise that infected the churches afterward. It was ripe for self-serving heroic talk supplied by a National Socialism that railed against weakness, timidity, and defeatism. Influenced by post-Enlightenment “liberal theology”⁷ and finding examples in other churches in the world that defined themselves by national heri-

⁴Luther's Works 45, 199–229. “While we are inclined to boast of our position we should remember that we are but Gentiles, while the Jews are of the lineage of Christ. We are aliens and in-laws; they are blood relatives, cousins, and brothers of our Lord” (201).

⁵Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow*, 24.

⁶Ibid., 25.

⁷In his path-breaking article of 1924, “Liberal Theology and the Latest Theological Movement,” in *Faith and Understanding*, ed. Robert Funk (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 28–52, Rudolf Bultmann outlines the inadequacies of post-Enlightenment “liberal theology,” such as that of Herrmann, Troeltsch, and Harnack, and acknowledges the new alternatives initiated by Karl Barth and the new “dialectical theology.”

tage, the German Christians were ripe for Nazi infestation. Demoralized by the losses of the war, disaffected by Weimar and its attempt at democracy, and swept up by Hitler's offer of a "strong" Germany, the German Christians acceded to governmental manipulation both ideologically and administratively, which was seen by others, both clergy and laypersons, as a denial of the gospel.

THE *KIRCHENKAMPF*

In April 1933, the Nazi parliament had adopted the "Aryan Paragraph," which mandated that all public servants who were not "racially pure" could no longer work in the public sector. Pastors, organists, sextons who were Jewish could no longer be employed by the church, nor Jewish professors in the universities. "Thus Nazi racial laws, not the Christian gospel, would dictate who could or who could not preach the gospel in Germany."⁸ A month before that the Nazi Parliament passed a law ending constitutional government and a month later Hitler rejected the duly elected churchwide bishop Friedrich von Bodelschwingh⁹ and worked to engineer his resignation.

These events provided the sparks that ignited the "church struggle" (*Kirchenkampf*) and brought it into the open. Regarding the "Aryan Paragraph," a group of pastors and theologians, including Rudolf Bultmann, reacted with a statement to counter this new law. "The New Testament and the Race Question" stated that the New Testament could not support such a law because the construct of "race" was foreign to it. As an exclusionary concept it could not reflect any Christian reality. Full equality among all believers in the faith community was assumed in Christian baptism, and the church could not depart from its New Testament identity.¹⁰

In September 1933, Martin Niemöller founded the Pastors' Emergency League, which virtually overnight counted two thousand pastors among its membership, protesting the Aryan Paragraph. Bonhoeffer was among them, and the League's membership soon grew to seven thousand pastors, despite their harassment and persecution. Karl Barth, teaching at Bonn, called for radical opposition to the "German Christians." His commentary on Romans (1918, rev. 1921) had already earned widespread influence, in which he asserted that theology does not begin with the human being but with God, who is the subject and predicate of Christian theology. The reader is not in charge of the biblical text; it is the biblical text that judges the reader. Barth's writings were, according to Stroud, "a call to arms against the German Christian movement and against any marriage between Christianity and Nazism."¹¹ Bonhoeffer argued that a state's legitimacy depends on

⁸Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow*, 29.

⁹Bodelschwingh, a highly respected churchman, was director of the Bethel Institute, a large community for people with epilepsy and other disabilities.

¹⁰See Erich Dinkler, "Neues Testament und Rassenfrage: Zum Gutachten der Neutestamentler im Jahre 1933," in *Im Zeichen des Kreuzes: Aufsätze von Erich Dinkler* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992) 409–420.

¹¹Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow*, 33.

its ensuring the safety of all its citizens, and, in the case of the persecution of the Jews, the church must raise the question of the Nazi state's legitimacy. Stroud notes that Bonhoeffer was the first Lutheran to posit, even hypothetically, that a lawfully elected state government could become illegitimate.¹²

THE CONFESSING CHURCH

In May 1934, the first Confessing Synod met in Barmen, with over three hundred clergy and laity present, and unanimously adopted the Barmen Declaration. Its target was primarily the German Christian movement, asserting that it had endangered the church by going outside historical confessional bounds. It listed five confessional teachings that were counter to five heretical teachings held by the German Christians. Highly influenced by Barth's theology and leadership, the Declaration declared that Jesus Christ is the one Lord of the church and no human authority trumps his. The Barmen Declaration was seen as the basic statement of the whole Confessing Church.

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The use of the word "Confessing" to describe the movement was meant to convey that its purpose was not a political but a theological one, in contrast to the political accommodation that had beset the "German Christians." The gospel was at stake, and to proclaim it faithfully meant clearly articulated theology and, as the times called for, provocative preaching. "To speak of Christ as the authentic Führer and, by implication, not Hitler, was subversive speech."¹³ To uphold the Old Testament as word of God and Jesus as a Jew was inflammatory rhetoric. To advocate the cause of the weak and helpless, especially the mentally ill and disabled whom the Nazis regarded as socially worthless, was subversive. To place God's kingdom above all earthly kingdoms (like the Reich) subjected the preacher to immediate physical and professional danger.

The Confessing Church placed great trust in the local parish, and it was in the parishes that the church struggle took its course. Niemöller notes that attendance in the parishes grew, often beyond capacity, and cites a document in his own parish, which carried the names of over three thousand parishioners who "joyfully" placed themselves under the authority of the Confessing Church. The times meant that preaching became the central mission of the church, and personal safety could not excuse timidity in the pulpit. From his jail cell in 1937 Paul Schneider wrote to

¹²Ibid., 37.

¹³Ibid., 42.

his wife: “It is not that I and all the rest of us have said too much in our sermons, but rather that we have said far too little.”¹⁴

PROVOCATIVE PREACHING

So examples of provocative preaching, along with brief biographies of each preacher, complete the book. It is biblical preaching at its best, on both Old and New Testament texts. It is Christocentric preaching, insisting on the one lordship of Christ and no other. It is proclamation, in that the reader cannot escape the call to discipleship and the demands and promise it carries.

Paul Schneider to his parish in Hochelheim in 1934: “What is now coming together in the German Christian Faith Movement under the leadership of influential Nazis is nothing less than naked paganism.”¹⁵ And preaching on a text from the Old Testament Psalms to his last church in Dickenshied in 1937: “Today we should be aware of the fact that confessing Jesus will carry a price and that for his sake we will come into much distress and danger, much shame and persecution. Happy the man who does not turn aside from these consequences.”¹⁶

Martin Niemöller in 1936, from his pulpit in Berlin-Dahlem: “The more unbridled the public attacks against Christianity become, they show that it is not simply against the Old Testament and the apostle Paul—as they want us to believe—but rather it is against the one Lord in whom we believe, even Jesus of Nazareth.”¹⁷ After repeated arrests, in 1938, Niemöller was imprisoned in the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen and in 1941 was transferred to Dachau, where he did survive the war.

Karl Barth, in 1933, in the Castle Church in Bonn: “Christ belongs to the people of Israel. This people’s blood was in his veins, the very blood of God’s Son.... Jesus was a *Jew* in order to confirm and to fulfill this free and merciful promise of God ‘given to the fathers.’” Barth was forced to leave Germany in 1934 after refusing to swear the loyalty oath to Hitler that was required of university professors as civil servants. From Basel, Switzerland, he continued to be of immense influence in Germany by providing a theological foundation for opposition against Nazi inroads into the German churches.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a 1933 sermon in Berlin based on the Old Testament story of Gideon:

In the church we have only *one* altar—the altar of the Most High, the One and only, the Almighty, the Lord, to whom alone be honor and praise, the Creator before whom all creation bows down, before whom even the most powerful are but dust. We don’t have any side altars at which to worship human beings. The worship of God and not of humankind is what takes place at the altar of our

¹⁴Ibid., 47.

¹⁵Ibid., 81.

¹⁶Ibid., 94–105.

¹⁷Ibid., 89.

church. Anyone who wants to do otherwise should stay away and cannot come with us into God's house. Anyone who wants to build an altar to himself or to any other human is mocking God, and God will not allow such mockery. To be in the church means to have the courage to be alone with God as Lord, to worship God and not any human person. And it does take courage. The thing that most hinders us from letting God be Lord, that is, from believing in God, is our cowardice. That is why we have Gideon, because he comes with us to the one altar of the Most High, the Almighty, and falls on his knees to this God alone.¹⁸

The only Roman Catholic voice in this collection is that of Clemens August von Galen, Bishop of Münster, who was horrified by the Nazis' program of raiding health care institutions for people with mental and physical disabilities, carting them off to concentration camps, and murdering them as people "worthless" to society. Von Galen in a 1941 sermon:

Now we come to the Fifth Commandment: "Thou shalt not kill"—that is set aside and violated right in front of the very people obligated to protect civil order and human life. And this is due to an exception made for the legal killing of innocent people, albeit sick, fellow human beings, simply because they are "unproductive" and can no longer produce goods.¹⁹

Already von Galen in his sermons had made the Nazis back down from their decision to remove all crucifixes from Catholic schools, and eventually he was placed under house arrest, the Nazis fearing anything more drastic for the bishop would result in an outright revolt in Münster.

"To be in the church means to have the courage to be alone with God as Lord, to worship God and not any human person."

Helmut Gollwitzer succeeded Martin Niemöller as pastor of the Berlin-Dahlem church after the latter's arrest in 1937. He eventually came to be known as one of the most powerful preachers in Germany. Three days after Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, an act that thrust Germany into war again, Gollwitzer based a Sunday sermon on dual texts from Isaiah and Matthew:

To be sure, in these days many pagan prayers are being lifted up to God in many countries and in many churches, weak winged prayers that barely reach the church ceiling. To pray rightly means not only to pray for God's protection and power. . . . To pray like pagans is to pray full of self-confidence and without repentance. . . . The only person who may make the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer—the request for daily bread that includes peace as well—is the person who acknowledges at the same time: We have each and everyone of us brought all this upon ourselves and we richly, richly deserve the consequences. Only that person may make the fourth petition who in the same breath makes the fifth: "And forgive us our guilt!" If I may name but one sin, we have become

¹⁸Ibid., 55.

¹⁹Ibid., 166.

very hard-hearted. We all must accuse ourselves of having brought so much misery upon ourselves by allowing so much evil to happen while we watched unmoved, and now this evil threatens us. . . . We have been cowardly and have only wanted to save our own lives. . . . We were all too ready to answer injustice with injustice and only looked to secure our own right and our own advantages while being indifferent to the rights and honor of the other person. Now the fruit that had to grow from that is visible. Woe to us if we are terrified by the fruit and not its cause—which is us. . . . To pray rightly is to pray with a repentant heart.²⁰

Of course, it was not long before the Gestapo expelled Gollwitzer from Berlin and forbade him to speak anywhere in the Reich. He volunteered to serve as an army medic, was captured by the Russians and imprisoned for four years. Eventually he returned both to academia in Bonn and Berlin, as well as to preaching in his Berlin-Dahlem congregation.

Julius von Jan publicly protested the interference of the state in church affairs, especially the arrest and persecution of pastors. When the pogrom against Jewish citizens known as “Kristallnacht” (“Night of Broken Glass”) occurred in November of 1938, he was convinced that in the face of such evil silence was no option. The next Sunday, a day of National Atonement, he spoke from the pulpit of his church in Oberlenningen:

We as Christians see how this injustice burdens our people before God and has to draw his punishment upon Germany. . . . Yes, it is a horrifying seed of hatred that has been scattered upon the soil once more. What a horrible harvest will grow from this if God does not send our people and us grace for sincere repentance.²¹

A few days later, about five hundred Nazi supporters attacked von Jan, beat him, accused him of treason, and he was jailed and eventually exiled from his parish. He was drafted and sent to the Russian front, survived the war, but in ill health, returned for a time to his home church, where he was greeted warmly, and lived out his final years in a Moravian community of the *Herrnhuter Brüdergemeinde*.

Several of the homilists in this collection have had their own respective collections of sermons published: Barth, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, Ebeling, and Gollwitzer. Directly related to the subject of this book is Ebeling’s *Predigten eines “Illegalen” aus den Jahren 1939–1945*, yet to be translated into English.²² These “Sermons of Someone ‘Illegal’” refer to Ebeling’s ordination in the Confessing Church, an “illegal” entity; they were preached to a group of laypeople who set themselves apart from their parish in Thuringia that was led by a German Christian pastor. Stroud includes Ebeling’s sermon at the funeral of one of those incapacitated patients whom the Nazis had judged useless and had marked for extermination.

²⁰Ibid., 115–126.

²¹Ibid., 112–113.

²²*Predigten eines “Illegalen” aus den Jahren 1939–1945* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1995).

SIGNIFICANCE

Why is a book like this so important? First of all, it contributes to the debate on whether or to what lengths Germans, especially clergy, spoke out against the atrocities of the Nazi regime. Removed from it all by time and distance, we are generally aware of only one main voice of resistance, namely that of Bonhoeffer, but seldom aware and less often reminded of others. Stroud's book is an adventure into history, that is, in its real definition, the word deriving from the Greek word *historein*, which means "to inquire" or "to visit" with a view toward engagement that may produce introspection and, if needed, change. And that is when things get into theology and the items that faithful evangelical preaching needs to address.

Stroud's book holds before us courageous examples of preaching under pressures far more dangerous than we experience in this country

So reimagining the Trinity, deemphasizing biblical preaching (especially on the Old Testament), seeing the church's role as echoing social and political trends of the moment, or as either rife with nationalist exceptionalism or pressured into complete silence on matters political, disregarding and holding suspect any kind of traditional Christian systematic theology, and holding as archaic the concept of the Lordship of Christ marked Nazi Christianity. Those were the days: featured rallies at sports stadia with liturgies including national songs, processions of uniformed acolytes carrying emblems of national devotion, and triumphant displays of national power with the latest weaponry flying overhead. That's why history, in the sense of "to visit," is important. Because, as old Santayanan wisdom reminds us, if we don't learn from the mistakes of the past we are doomed to repeat them.

When Bonhoeffer came to New York to study at Union Seminary in 1930–1931, he was struck by the lack of rigorous theological thinking. He complained: "There is no theology here. . . . [The students] talk a blue streak without the slightest substantive foundation and with no evidence of any criteria. [They] are completely clueless with respect to what dogmatics is really about. They are unfamiliar with even the most basic questions. They become intoxicated with liberal and humanitarian phrases, laugh at the fundamentalists, and yet basically are not even up to their level."²³ It was not the prowess of the Union faculty that Bonhoeffer was referring to, but rather what the students thought important in their studies and brought with them from their churches. The sermons that he had heard, he said, "were reduced to parenthetical church remarks about newspaper events," and added that he had heard only one sermon in which one could hear

²³Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 101; Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), notes: "(Bonhoeffer) was very offended when, during a seminar, students laughed loudly at theological terms, such as a quotation from Luther about sin and grace, as if people in modern times could only regard such language as grotesque. What theology was for him was almost unknown to his American fellow students" (67).

something like a “genuine proclamation,” a sermon delivered by an African-American preacher.²⁴

HOPEFUL SIGNS

Perhaps the churches have learned something since then. Perhaps not. Certainly, the sermons of Martin Luther King Jr., filled with biblical, especially Old Testament, allusions, were proclamations that moved both society and church to a better place. Among others, the sermons of Fred Craddock, Walter Brueggemann, and William Willimon have been influential in leading preaching to focus on the demand and the promise of the biblical text. But there is still the preaching of the prosperity gospel, of vapid nationalistic devotion, of a false masculinity that deemphasizes the cross of Christ as a sign of weakness that draw people by the thousands into the great megachurches of our time. The demands of the audiences pressure modern preaching away from the very reasons for pulpits in the first place, seeking entertainment in place of the real proclamation of the gospel. It is tough to stand up to those pressures.

Stroud’s book holds before us courageous examples of preaching under pressures far more dangerous than we experience in this country. His book accents the power that resides in biblical preaching, an indispensable ingredient of church life. It calls us to examine our own preaching, to consider how seriously the biblical text is studied, explained, and applied, and how the gospel in its unveiled veracity is clearly articulated. Present experiences of internal and external pressures faced by American churches pale in comparison to those faced under the Third Reich or in more modern totalitarian and less pluralistic venues today. It is always good to review those who have risen to the challenge and to ask whether we would be up to it ourselves. If preaching has become too easy, we need to ask why. ⊕

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²⁴Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 106.