Was Jesus Christ Born a Jew or Not? Luther and Protestant Anti-Judaism in Nazi Germany

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WAS JESUS CHRIST BORN A JEW OR NOT?
LUTHER AND PROTESTANT
ANTI-JUDAISM IN
NAZI GERMANY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Art
History

by
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May 2023

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Martin Luther’s role as the founder of German Protestantism placed him in a position where he was the hero for two opposing factions that formed within the German Evangelical Church in the wake of the Nazi party’s rise to power in 1933. The two factions were the pro-Nazi German Christians and the anti-Nazi Confessing Church. The two sides appealed to different aspects of Luther’s theology to defend their beliefs. Martin Luther’s theology, particularly his anti-Judaic beliefs was a crucial issue for the divided Protestant Church. Luther’s writings are crucial for determining how influential he was for both groups.
DEDICATION

To my mother, from whom I inherited a love for reading, writing, and learning. And for her constant support and encouragement.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. LUTHER’S THEOLOGY AND ANTI-JUDAISM</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Luther on the Spirit and the Flesh</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Luther on Jewish Ignorance</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Conclusion</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE GERMAN CHRISTIANS, PROTESTANTISM, AND NAZISM</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. The German Christians and National Socialism</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. The German Christians and Lutheran Theology</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Conclusion</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE CONFESSIONING CHURCH AND OPPOSING NAZISM</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Bonhoeffer, Luther and Confessing Church Doctrine</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. The Confessing Church in Nazi Germany</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Conclusion</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
V. CONCLUSION .........................................................................................87

REFERENCES ............................................................................................92
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A uniqueness of German history is that it is largely defined by a period of just 12 years in its more than 2000 years of known history. The period of Nazi rule from 1933-1945 dominates German history, and historians often find it inescapable. This remains true with Martin Luther. Luther is unrivaled in his historical importance in German religion. Supporters of the “Luther to Hitler” argument argue that Luther’s antisemitic writings directly influenced the German Protestants, which were crucial for them supporting the Nazi regime. Crucial to this argument is Luther’s unmatched importance to German Protestantism. Luther’s influence on German Protestantism goes far beyond just starting the Reformation. Luther’s theological writings shaped German Protestant theology and, in many ways, German culture as a whole. Martin Luther’s antisemitic writings, such as On the Jews and Their Lies and Vom Schem Hamphoras, are at the center of this argument because he fervidly attacked Judaism and called for drastic measures such as expelling Jews from German-speaking lands.¹ Luther’s antisemitic writings were used to justify antisemitism in Germany for centuries after his death. The interwar period and the period of Nazi rule is when Luther’s antisemitic writings became most important for understanding Luther’s influence on the antisemitism of German Protestants. The rise of Nazism brought with it a division among German Protestants. The allure of Nazism attracted many Protestants who, by 1933, found themselves in a

position of power by having the support of the new Nazi government. The pro-Nazi Protestants became known as the German Christians and spent the 12-years of Nazi rule attempting to coalesce their Christian and National Socialist beliefs. The German Christians saw Luther as a hero who understood the dangers of Judaism and warned Germans of the crisis that was now upon them. Not all Protestants aligned with the German Christians, however, as some saw the actions of the Nazi regime as evil and feared the German Christians were transforming German Protestantism for the worse. They, too, saw Luther as their primary influence. They attempted to defend the Lutheran Church from Nazi and German Christian influence.

German antisemitism is a well-researched topic that has produced many different theories. The goal of this research is to understand why Nazism happened in Germany. One theory is that Martin Luther was essential in developing antisemitism in German culture. Luther’s anti-Judaic writings, such as *On the Jews and Their Lies*, are central to the controversy. Luther’s writings connect to Nazism because of the violent language Luther uses. Historians differ on Luther’s role in developing antisemitism among German Protestants. David Nirenberg argues in *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* that Luther was crucial in developing anti-Judaism because he argued that salvation came from God alone and not good works. Nirenberg argues that this challenge by Luther was rooted in his belief that salvation was the primary purpose of life and that it could only be achieved through God’s grace because humans were sinful and thus could never attain salvation on their own. For this reason, a mediator was needed to connect humans to God. Nirenberg argues that because Luther saw salvation as possible only through Christ, he saw Judaism
as inherently wrong for rejecting Christ. Heiko A. Oberman argues in The Roots and Anti-Semitism: In the Age of Renaissance and Reformation that Luther’s position on Jews is nuanced, and he cannot simply be labeled as antisemitic. Oberman argues that Luther’s writings vary on the subject of Judaism, and reading more than just his anti-Judaic writings towards the end of his life is important. Oberman gives the example that in some writings Luther argues that converted Jews should be accepted as Christians, which would suggest that it was not a matter of race but of religion. Oberman also argues that Luther writes about Turkish Muslims, Catholics, and other non-Christians in a similarly derogatory manner.

For the German Christian movement, historians are most concerned with how they synthesized their Christian theology and Nazi ideology despite the apparent differences. Another focus of historians has been how the German Christians became as popular as they did in a relatively short time. Anders Gerdmar argues in Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation of Jews, From Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann that Gerhard Kittel’s theological disagreement with Judaism is a reflection of Martin Luther’s. He argues they share the same general issues, such as a lack of religiosity and spirituality, an over-reliance on the Law, and a distant relationship with God. Susannah Heschel’s book, The Aryan Jesus, is significant because it discusses the history and beliefs of the German Christian movement and its most well-known supporters, such as Gerhard Kittel and Wolf Meyer-Erlach. Heschel argues that the German Christian movement resulted from people intertwining ideas of racial purity with Christianity. She argues that the German Christians were concerned with racial
purity and feared Jewish influence. The attempts of German Christian theologians to create an “Aryan Jesus” revealed the perceived need to remove all traces of Judaism from any aspect of German culture, especially religion. The German Christians created a form of Christianity that, by the mid-1940s, was hardly recognizable to other Christians and more accurately reflected Nazi ideology. *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*, by Doris L. Bergen, is another significant work about the German Christian movement. Bergen argues that the popularity of the German Christian movement was because the ideals of the movement were already present in German society. However, the German Christians were able to combine Christianity with these ideals. The German Christian movement allowed Germans to “retain” some form of Christianity while supporting Nazi ideology. *Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch*, by Robert P. Ericksen, is another important work because it focuses on Gerhard Kittel. Kittel will be the central figure of chapter two because he is a significant supporter of the German Christian movement. Ericksen discusses the significance of Kittel as a well-known theologian at the University of Tübingen, supporting the German Christian movement. It meant that the German Christian movement appealed to even well-educated members of society and the Protestant church. Kittel is essential to understanding the German Christian movement because of his importance as a Protestant theologian. In *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany*, Christopher Probst argues that there is a clear connection between Luther and Protestant support for Nazism and that Luther’s anti-Semitic writings were significant in transitioning from purely theological differences
to anti-Jewishness. In another article from Probst, “An Incessant Army of Demons’: Wolf Meyer-Erlach, Luther, and ‘the Jews’ in Nazi Germany,” he argues that Luther was heavily influential on German Christian theologians such as Wolf Meyer-Erlach, who “employed” Luther to support Nazi ideology. Probst argues that Meyer-Erlach uses Luther’s “irrational” fears of Judaism to support his fears but also applies 20th-century German fears to Luther as further support of his own. This article reveals a connection between Luther and the German Christian movement. It also displays Luther’s influence and how Nazi and anti-Nazi supporters could use his writings.

Historians’ main focus on the Confessing Church has been its failure as a movement to oppose Nazism effectively. Historians have, however, also focused on the ability of individuals to oppose Nazism, in particular figures such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In Stephen Plant’s book, Bonhoeffer: Outstanding Christian Thinkers, he discusses Bonhoeffer’s approach to Christian ethics and why he was willing to oppose the Nazis because of his need to defend his ethics. Plant argues that Bonhoeffer differed from many German Protestants because he was unwilling to transform his morals to resemble Nazi ideology despite the risk to his well-being. His response to Nazi influence was the opposite of the German Christians. Plant argues that Bonhoeffer was an exception to German society at the time because he placed his faith and morality above service to his country. Plant’s book is crucial for displaying the difference between the Confessing Church and the German Christians. It highlights the Confessing Church’s prioritization of their morals as opposed to the German Christian’s prioritization of service to the state and protecting the Aryan race. In Bonhoeffer: Prophet and Martyr, John Queripel argues that
Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a crucial figure in German Protestantism because of his stance on ethics and morality and his demand for Christians to take action to do what is right. Queripel argues that despite being a founder of the Confessing Church movement, Bonhoeffer believed it was not doing enough to combat Nazi influence in German society, specifically German Protestantism. Bonhoeffer was frustrated with the Confessing Church’s unwillingness to challenge the Nazis and the German Christians more. Bonhoeffer was also opposed to the Confessing Church’s stance on Jews, that Jewishness was based on race rather than religion, and therefore even converted Jews in the Church were still Jews.

Historians link Martin Luther’s anti-Judaic writings to the antisemitism in German culture in the Weimar and Nazi eras because of his aggressive and derogatory language. However, Luther’s anti-Judaic beliefs are nuanced because of how important his theology is in shaping his views. Luther’s dislike of Judaism came from his belief that Jews lacked spirituality, were worldly, and had too distant of a relationship with God. Luther attacked the Jewish reliance on the Law in particular, because he saw it as the most significant sign of Jewish worldliness. He accused Jews of practicing the Law without spirituality. He feared that the lack of spirituality among Jews would spread to Christians through contact with Jews. Luther’s drastic call to expel Jews resulted from his fear of Jewish faithlessness spreading to Christians. Historians have argued that Martin Luther was crucial in influencing the German Protestants during the Nazi era, particularly by focusing on his anti-Judaic writings, but there is room to expand on that argument by examining the significance of his theological differences with Judaism. Luther views the
Old Testament as a Christian document that is predicting and preparing for the coming of Jesus Christ. Luther believes that Jews should have converted to and been assimilated into Christianity. Luther supported a type of “national purification” as described by Joanna Michlic in *Poland’s Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present*. Michlic writes that there are four ways to purify a nation; assimilation, separation or segregation, expulsion, and genocide.² Luther promotes the idea of assimilation of Jews for most of his life, then changes to supporting expulsion in *On the Jews and Their Lies*. Luther’s hope for assimilation was to bring Judaism into Christianity as a single religion. Susannah Heschel writes:

> the dejudaization of Christianity was rooted in the conundrum of Christian supersession: the appropriation by the New Testament and the early church of Judaism’s central theological teachings, including messiah, eschatology, apocalypticism, election, and Israel, as well as its scriptures, its prophets, and even its God while denying the continued validity of those teachings and texts within Judaism as an independent path to salvation.³

Heschel’s description also applies to Luther who recognized the connections between Judaism and Christianity but rejected the “validity” of Judaism as a way of attaining salvation.

During Nazi rule, Protestants were divided on their support for the Nazi government and two main branches formed; the pro-Nazi German Christians and the anti-Nazi Confessing Christians. Both movements saw Luther as their main influence and a

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hero, but they were attracted to different aspects of Luther’s theology. How important Luther was in influencing antisemitism among German Protestants is also a part of the debate. Luther’s influence on German Protestants is unmatched, but whether his anti-Judaic writings were the cause or a significant factor in why so many Protestants supported the Nazi regime is questionable. The German Christian movement, which supported the Nazi regime, did not follow Luther as closely as they believed. The German Christians were more influenced by Gnosticism than by Luther theologically. The biggest division between the German Christians and Lutheran doctrine was Luther’s defense of the Old Testament, which the German Christians saw as problematic. Luther defended the Old Testament as a crucial part of the Bible because, in his interpretation, it predicted the coming of Christ. The German Christians saw it as having too many discrepancies with the New Testament and believed it was too Jewish. The German Christians also supported the Nazi ideology of strength, power, and conquest and saw some passages of the Bible as weak, such as The Sermon on the Mount. The Confessing Church movement, which took up the anti-Nazi stance among German Protestants, was far more in line with Luther’s theology. They, too, defended the Old Testament and argued against the Nazi praising of power and strength, and defended the Sermon on the Mount as a crucial part of Christian theology. Luther’s role as the primary influencer of German Protestants placed him at the center of the divide between the German Christians and the Confessors. Both sides were attracted to different aspects of his theology and used his writings to support their views. However, the German Christians were heavily influenced by the Nazi party, and many highly educated German theologians were
attracted to Gnosticism. Luther’s influence on the German Christians became less significant by the mid-1940s than in 1933. Luther’s importance had been greatly reduced among German Christians in favor of Gnosticism which better aligned with Nazi ideology.
CHAPTER II
LUTHER’S THEOLOGY AND ANTI-JUDAISM

Few figures can compare to the long-lasting influence that Martin Luther had on German culture. The Evangelical Church of Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland), or the EKD, the central Protestant Church in Germany today, is based primarily on Luther’s teachings and interpretations of the Bible. Despite Luther’s significance in German history, his legacy is not without controversy. Luther’s anti-Judaic writings, such as *On the Jews and Their Lies*, are the most controversial. His writings played a critical role in the divide that formed among Protestants in Germany.

During the Nazi era, a rift formed within German Protestantism between those who supported the Nazi party and those that did not. Both pro-Nazi and anti-Nazi Christians used Lutheran teachings to defend their beliefs. Famous theologians such as Gerhard Kittel, a member of the pro-Nazi German Christian movement, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the founder of the anti-Nazi Confessing Church, were Lutheran theologians who interpreted Luther very differently. Luther’s role in both the German Christian movement and the Confessing Church was paramount but different. The German Christian movement used Luther’s anti-Judaic writings to defend their support of the Nazi movement. Indeed, members of the German Christian Movement, referred to as German Christians, praised Luther’s anti-Judaic writings, such as *On the Jews and Their Lies*, as proof of the “Jewish threat” to German culture.

Luther was also a hero and model for the Confessing Church. The Confessing Church was a breakaway group from the German Evangelical Church during the Nazi
era. They opposed the changes the German Christian movement made to Protestantism and their push for making the Protestant Church controlled by the state. The Confessing Church believed that the German Christians misunderstood Luther’s writings and that he would have never wanted the changes the German Christians were making. They used Lutheran teachings that focused on the importance of the Bible and faith in God as opposed to his anti-Judaic writings. The Confessing Church was not necessarily pro-Jewish, but mostly opposed the changes the German Christians wanted to make to Protestantism. Members of the Confessing Church often agreed with the German Christians that Jews were a problem, but differed in how to deal with the Jewish threat and whether Jews could convert to Christianity.\(^4\)

To understand why Luther was so crucial and interpreted so differently, it is important to understand what Martin Luther himself believed. The focus of this chapter therefore aims to understand Luther’s theology and, in particular, why he opposed Judaism. What about Luther’s beliefs led him to write such a derogatory treatise as *On the Jews and Their Lies*? Examining Luther’s beliefs through his writings is crucial for understanding why he held the beliefs he did and why he was so important to German Protestants nearly four hundred years after his death. Crucial to understanding Luther’s anti-Judaism is the theological basis of it, as opposed to him following Medieval German anti-Judaic tendencies. While Luther, especially in his later writings, used common anti-Semitic stereotypes, the core of his prejudice against Judaism was theological. Luther’s

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Christocentric views served as the core of his anti-Judaic tendencies. He could not imagine how a religion could exist without Christ. Luther saw Christ as the only way for humans to attain salvation from God. Humans alone are not deserving of God’s grace, but through the sacrifice of Christ they can be saved. This is at the center of Luther’s disagreement with Jewish theology. How can Jews, who read the prophecies, not believe that Christ is the Messiah? Luther’s opinion of Jews changed over time and became more anti-Judaic as he aged. Luther came to view Jews as a “miserable and accursed people” and wrote several works that argue against their theology.

Luther on the Spirit and the Flesh.

To understand Luther’s dislike of Judaism, it is crucial to understand Luther’s theology. The most crucial aspect of Martin Luther’s theology was the role of Jesus Christ as the savior. David Nirenberg lays out a division between spirit and flesh that is helpful for introducing the anti-Jewish Christian views that Luther later follows. Nirenberg argues that Luther’s belief that salvation was only given by God’s grace challenged the Catholic belief that good works attained salvation. Luther believed this teaching was Jewish in origin, and the Church in Rome had become “more ‘Jewish’ than the Jews.” Nirenberg writes: “They (Catholics) completely forgot Paul’s message that salvation comes only through faith and God’s grace, and pursued it instead through the learned ‘work’ of philosophical interpretation.”

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7 Ibid., 250.
suffering, full of sin, pain, and death. The world was despairing to him, and the only way to live in such a world was the promise of salvation. Salvation was not just Luther’s ultimate desire, but he saw it as the only thing anyone could ultimately hope for. The significance of salvation to Luther’s beliefs meant there had to be a way to achieve salvation. Only through God’s grace could one attain salvation, and because of the forgiveness of human sin with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, salvation was possible for all people. Theodora Suk Fong Jim writes in *Savior Gods and Soteria in Ancient Greece*: “The emphatic sense of sin in Christianity creates a need for salvation from its consequence through the death of Christ. As Paul pointed out in his letter to the Thessalonians, the forgiveness of sin is achieved through the mediation of a divine figure who could reconcile the faithful with God and thereby grant them eternal bliss instead of eternal damnation.”

Humans need Christ to attain salvation from sin and death. Christ is central because he is the mediator between God’s divinity and man’s sinfulness. Because of the centrality of Jesus’ sacrifice to Luther’s beliefs, all religions that did not recognize the divinity of Jesus were not only wrong but were not even religions. For Luther, religion could only be a religion if it offer’s salvation from death, and salvation from death could only be gained because of Jesus’ sacrifice. His disagreement with Jewish teaching stems from Luther’s belief in the singular importance of Jesus and salvation. Judaism does not recognize the divinity of Jesus, nor does it for Luther allow, therefore, for the possibility of salvation from death. For Judaism to not have the promise of

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salvation from death is incomprehensible to Luther. He cannot fathom believing in a religion that offered no salvation from a world of sin and pain, only death. Luther writes, “in brief, it is the Messiah, who would be the object of displeasure, disgust, and abomination for the unbelieving and hardened Jews, as Isaiah 53 prophecies. The Gentiles, on the other hand, would bid him welcome as their heart’s joy, delight, and every wish and desire. For he brings them deliverance from sin, death, devil, hell and every evil, eternally.”9 Luther’s statement reveals the centrality of Jesus’ sacrifice and salvation in his theology and the opposition of Jews toward it. He states that Jews are “unbelieving and hardened” because they refused to see the “truth” of Jesus’ divinity.

The divinity of Jesus is crucial to Luther’s theology. He adheres to the belief that Jesus is both fully man and fully God. For Luther, there is no God without Jesus and vice versa because God, for Luther, is a saving God. Salvation is crucial to Luther’s theology, and it can only be attained through Christ because God, by his grace, chose to save humans from death by taking the punishment for their sins. Luther views humans as completely unable to save themselves from death, but God chose to offer them salvation from death through his grace. In his lectures on the Psalms, Luther writes: “Christ is the strength of His church through whom it triumphs over the world.”10 Luther’s insistence on this belief is crucial for understanding his dislike of Judaism. Luther understood God

and Jesus as one and, as a result, for Jews to deny the divinity of Christ was also to deny God.

In his 1528 treatise, On War against the Turk, Luther writes:

> From this anyone can easily see that Muhammad is a destroyer of our Lord Christ and his kingdom, for whoever denies the articles concerning Christ— that he is the Son of God, that he died for us, and still lives and reigns at the right hand of God— what has he left of Christ? Father, Son, Holy Ghost, baptism, the sacrament, gospel, faith, and all Christian doctrine and life are gone, and instead of Christ there is nothing left other than Muhammad with his doctrine of works and especially of the sword.¹¹

Although Luther’s statement is regarding Islam and the perceived dangers of the Ottoman Empire, it reveals Luther’s belief that to deny the divinity of Jesus was to deny God.

Luther states that Muslims attempted to destroy Christianity by denying the divinity of Christ because to do so is to deny the most crucial aspect of Christianity, making all else meaningless.¹² For Luther, Jesus Christ is what makes Christianity real. Therefore, without Christ, religion is meaningless. Luther states that “the Father, Son, Holy Ghost, baptism, the sacrament, gospel, faith and all Christian doctrine and life are gone,” because Christ is what makes Christian doctrine have meaning.

Death is also crucial to understanding Luther’s theological differences with Judaism. As previously mentioned, Luther views the world as full of death, sin, and suffering. He viewed death as the painful end of an already painful existence. A crucial issue for Luther’s theology was how he understood how God could allow pain and

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¹² Luther’s view of Islam is similar to his view of Judaism in that it denies Christ and therefore has defeated the purpose of religion. Luther appears to have a more favorable opinion of Islam because there is salvation, but it is more ambiguous than in Christianity because there is no mediator.
suffering. This is an important question for all theologians, and for Luther, the only answer was Christ. Humans live in the world where they sin and suffer for their sins. Humans are imperfect and the only way for humans to escape suffering is through the grace of God. Luther writes:

the flesh, sin, death, and the world assail us. Not for even one moment are we safe from spiritual adultery. This is how it is because sin surrounds us on all sides and weaken godly feelings. Besides, the world persecutes us. Hence it is necessary to hear the word of god constantly, to proclaim the death of Christ constantly, and to ponder constantly, in order that our feelings may be enlightened.\(^{13}\)

By taking the punishment for human sin, Christ freed humans from the punishment of death. Christ serves as the only means to escape the pain of human life through salvation. Christianity is remarkable to Luther because it contains the belief that God forgave humans for their sins and offered them salvation from their sins and, more importantly, from death. The unique nature of Christ as fully God and fully man is of utmost importance for Luther. Because Christ serves as the mediator between God and man, he must be both God and man. Luther rigorously defends Christ’s divinity for this reason. In his explanation of why the virgin birth is true, Luther writes: “the seed of the woman, therefore, because it is to crush the Devil’s power, that is sin and death, must not be an ordinary human, since all humans have been brought under the Devil through sin and death.”\(^{14}\) Luther’s defense of the virgin birth is that the “Devil’s power” corrupts humans. Sin and death are defining factors of human life for Luther. Luther believed there must be

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salvation in order for life on Earth to be worth living. To die without salvation is the ultimate punishment for Luther. In Jewish teachings there is no promise of salvation. Luther writes: “but there is no remission of sin for these Jews, no prophet to console them with the assurance of such forgiveness, no definite time limit for their punishment, but only interminable wrath and disfavor, devoid of any mercy.”¹⁵ Luther’s statement reveals his view of Jewish theology as promoting hopelessness because there is no salvation. Luther’s statement that there is “no definite time limit for their punishment” further reveals his belief that human life is a punishment that ends with death for saved Christians. Jews do not believe in an end to their punishment, which Luther interprets as meaning they believe that they will remain in suffering for eternity. So for Jews to deny the divinity of Christ was to deny the divinity of God and his ability to save humans from death and to deny God of that ability was to deny God’s power entirely. Thus, Luther viewed Jews as arrogant and ignorant, to think they could deny God his power and simultaneously think that He favors them. Luther views this belief as pointless and not even religious. Luther could not understand how a religion could exist without the promise of salvation from a sinful world.

Another issue Luther had with Judaism was the emphasis Jews placed on the “flesh.” The “flesh,” as Luther refers to it, is all things related to humans. He refers to things such as laws and government as worldly, temporal, or relating to the flesh. Luther writes: “For this temporal and present life is a physical life, such as all the beasts live that

do not know God and the Word.”  

Attaining salvation is Luther’s ultimate goal and the only real reason he believes humans exist. In his lectures on the Psalms, Luther argues that the existence of an afterlife must be true. He writes:

suppose there is no life after this life; does it not follow that we have no need of God or his Word? What we need or do in this life we can have even without the Word. The beasts graze, live, and grow fat, although they do not have the Word of God or hear it. What need is there of the Word to get food and drink that has already been created? Therefore that God gives us His word, that He commands us to occupy ourselves with the Word, that He issues orders for sanctifying the Sabbath and for His worship— and this clearly proves that man was created not for this physical life only, like the other animals, but for eternal life, just as God, who has ordered and ordained the practices, is eternal.

He states that humans without God are no different from animals, but the promise of salvation is what separates humans from animals. Luther writes: “Paul also teaches that even if Adam had not sinned, he would still have lived a physical life in need of food, drink, rest. . . until he would have been translated by God to the spiritual life in which he would have lived without any animal qualities, if I may use this expression, namely, from within, from God alone, not from without, as had previously on herbs and fruit.”

Luther’s statement reveals his belief that the spirit, the human connection to God, is the only difference between humans and animals, as seen through Adam. Luther seeks freedom from the limitations of the body. Humans are limited because of their bodies and their dependency on something outside the body such as food. In contrast, the spirit is free and does not require food to be sustained but instead requires only faith. The

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17 Ibid., 158.
18 Ibid., 166.
limitations of the body are why Luther views the spirit as superior to the body. It is also why he cannot understand the Jewish reliance on the body. He believes that Jews give so much significance to the body through their rituals, yet the body is limited, where the spirit is not.

Additionally, understanding Luther’s view on the spiritual versus the temporal is key to understanding his disagreement with Jewish theology. Luther defines the spirit as having to do with God and being higher than the flesh, which has to do with the animalistic, material part of the human. This belief can be observed in his writings on Genesis, where he discusses the purpose of humans by examining Adam and the first sin. Luther writes:

Adam was not to live without food, drink, and procreation. But at a predetermined time, after the number of saints had become full, these physical activities would have come to an end; and Adam, together with his descendants, would have been to the eternal and spiritual life. Nevertheless, these activities of physical life—like eating, drinking, procreating, etc.—would have been a service pleasing to God; We could also have rendered this service to God without the defect of lust which there now after sin, without any sin, and without fear of death. . . But this we have, that we believe in a spiritual life after this life and a destination for this life in Paradise.19

Luther defines spirituality as closeness with God and sin as entirely human in nature. He states that before the original sin, Adam could eat, drink, and procreate without lust but would still be saved. After the original sin, Adam needed God to save him to gain salvation. Luther believes that one of the main differences between Christianity and Judaism is that Christianity focuses more on the spirit, or God, while Judaism focuses

19 Ibid., 113-114.
more on the flesh, such as laws and rituals. He argues that the emphasis Jews place on laws and rituals signifies their worldliness. Luther associates Jewish laws and rituals as temporal, while Christians rely on faith and prayer as spiritual. His theological differences with Catholicism are similar. He associates the Catholic view of transubstantiation and the practice of indulgences as being temporal rather than spiritual. Luther believed that these practices, as well as Jewish practices, take away from the undeniable importance of God in human life. Jewish laws, such as circumcision, serve as a sign of God’s favor to Jews. Luther believes this to be hubris, however, because it is a ritual humans perform on their worldly bodies and does nothing for the spirit. Luther writes: “we are not going to believe that Adam, the first teacher, was inferior to Moses, are we? For he (Adam) did not, like Moses, teach circumcision and the other ceremonies of the Law which the intractable nation needed to prevent superstitious practices.”

Luther argued that circumcision is a “superstitious practice” of Judaism. He refers to “ceremonies of the Law” to indicate the worldliness of circumcision because it is a ceremony that is based on the temporal human body rather than the human spirit. Luther argued that Jews did not place their full faith in God because they relied on rituals as physical proof. Luther writes:

Now we can see what an unerring thrust he strikes in a literal sense at the carnal Jews, who loved this vanity then and still love it even now. They left out the spirit which the Lord had been ready to give them, but they refused. To the present day they look for those carnal things from God and their Messiah, and they have no regard for faith in heavenly and spiritual goods.

20 Ibid., 493.
Luther claimed Jews “love vanity” and “have no regard” for spiritual things. Luther states: “I have said that the word vanity refers to any kind of unrighteousness whatsoever.” The significance of the Spirit in Christian life is one of the main differences between Christianity and Judaism in Luther’s understanding.

One Jewish ritual Luther finds particularly vain is the practice of circumcision. Luther writes: “they (Jews) also know that the foreskin is no obstacle to being a people of God. And still they brazenly strut before God, lie and boast about being God’s only people by reason of their physical circumcision, unmindful of the circumcision of the heart.” Luther’s stance on the ritual of circumcision is that Jews use it to show their favor with God, but God no longer views the Jews as his people alone. Circumcision is the ritual performed by Jews as part of their covenant with God for choosing Jews as His chosen people. Luther argued that since the arrival of Christ, Jews were no longer the chosen people because all people could be saved. It was Christians who were worshiping God correctly. Luther argued that circumcision of the body was not enough and that if the ritual is performed without “circumcision of the heart” as well, then it was useless.

Luther’s statement reveals the centrality of faith to his theology. He sees the bodily ritual of circumcision as useless without circumcision of the heart as well. Luther viewed faith and spirituality as far more important to God than rituals that he believed were there for the comfort of men. Luther also wrote:

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23 Ibid., 56.
25 Ibid., 159.
“Moses says in the words dealing with circumcision in Genesis 17, this was done in order that they might hear God and his word; that is, that they might let him be their God. Apart from this circumcision in itself would not help them, since it would then no longer be God’s circumcision, for it would be without God, contending against his word; it would have become merely a human work.”

Luther’s statement again reveals the significance of spirituality over the temporal ritual of circumcision. Luther argued that without the spirit, circumcision is now “merely a human work” because it is no longer done in the service of God. It is crucial for Luther that all rituals are performed with spirituality in order for them to be useful. For Luther, the most important ritual was prayer because it allowed the worshiper to speak directly with God. Prayer is a personal ritual that requires faith because it would be pointless to pray if one did not believe.

Luther’s discussion on the role of the Law is also key to understanding his theology. Luther argues that there is a difference between what he calls “the Law” and the “law of the Lord.” He argues that “the Law” is of the flesh and the “law of the Lord” is of the spirit. Luther defines the value of the Law by quoting Romans 3:20: “Through the Law comes knowledge of sin.” Luther believed that the Law was “perverted” if misinterpreted. He writes that “their [Jews] meditation is not on the law of the Lord, but rather, to the contrary, the law of the Lord is in their meditation (which is a horrible situation). They are the ones who twist the Scriptures to their understanding and by their own fixed meditation compel the Scriptures to enter it and agree with it, when it ought to

26 Ibid., 160.
be the other way around.”  Luther argues that people do not follow the Law because of their faith in God but rather so that it fits their own beliefs. He believed that if people focused too much on the Law, they would rely too much on the Law. Luther saw relying on the Law too much as transforming into a human act instead of remembering the Law as God’s law. In The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology, Robert Kolb writes: “When sinners view obedience to the law as a means by which they may merit salvation, Luther squared it off against the gospel, for then it either leads to idolatry (trust in one’s own efforts) or crushes the sinner under the weight of its accusation or demand.” Faith was more important than obedience to the Law for Luther. Luther argued obedience to the carnal Law was not enough by itself, but that it needed the spiritual focus on the “law of the Lord” as well. Luther writes: “there are some who meditate and take delight in the Law, but not in the law of the Lord. These are jurists, whose delight is in various doctrines of men and traditions of the elders.” Luther states that those who “take delight” in the law are not focused on God’s grace and power. He sees this as an affront to God because believing that obedience to the Law can save a person takes from God’s power. Giving too much importance to the Law is trusting in one’s own efforts too much. Luther fears that if people follow the Law without remembering that the purpose of the Law is God’s way to guide humans, then people will forsake God in favor of their own

power to attain salvation. Luther sees this belief in Judaism through its reliance on laws, customs, and rituals in Judaism.

Luther believed Jews focused on the Law and their rituals more than they did on God. Luther saw this as arrogance by the Jews to believe that their laws were more important than a relationship with God. Luther saw the Jewish focus on the Law as an example of the importance Judaism places on human actions instead of God’s grace.

Magnus Zetterholm writes:

Martin Luther returned to Augustine’s original doctrine of justification. Luther, however, developed several dialectical relations that would result in an even sharper contrast between Judaism and Christianity. While ‘gospel’ and ‘law’ interact in bringing a person to Christ, ‘faith’ and ‘works’ must be separated when it comes to justification. For Luther, ‘works’ are always a consequence of ‘faith’ and the opposite relationship, that is, to believe it is possible to please God through good deeds represents the worst sin of all: self-righteousness. Thus, the normal way for a Jewish person to express his or her relation to the God of Israel by faithfulness represented by Torah observance, can, from Luther’s perspective, only lead to condemnation.31

The importance of faith and God’s grace in Luther’s theology leads him to view Jews as worldly. Luther views their reliance on the Law as worldly because it lacks spirituality. Luther understands Jewish ritual as lacking spirituality because they do not place the same emphasis on faith he does. Luther believes that God made it possible to be saved through Jesus Christ, and that without this gift salvation is not possible. Thus, Luther views Jews as reading the Law but not understanding it fully because they cannot achieve salvation through adherence to the Law without the sacrifice of Christ.

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The Christian counter to Jewish rituals and laws is the Gospel. Christians experience the spirit through the Gospel. Jeffrey G. Silcock writes: “Luther has an unshakeable confidence in the power of God’s Word, the principle means of the Spirit.”  

The authors also write that Luther believes that the word is the work of the “Divine Majesty himself.” Because the Bible is God’s word, Luther views it as being of a spiritual nature. The Gospel, however, is not simply a list of laws for Christians to follow but rather teachings for Christians to learn to live a better life. Luther emphasizes the teachings of faith in his writings to show Christians the importance of spirituality instead of ritual. Luther writes that while knowledge of sin came from the Law: “through the Gospel comes the knowledge and reception of grace and righteousness.” According to Luther, the Laws are important for Christians because they teach Christians about sin. The Gospel is more important because that is how Christians learn about God’s grace. Because God’s grace is the only way for humans to attain salvation from death, the Gospel must be more important. If Christians rely on the Law instead, they must believe they can save themselves through their actions and good deeds. Christian spirituality comes from prayer, reading the Gospels, and faith in God. Luther viewed the Christian approach to worshipping God as more spiritual because it does not rely on worldly rituals. Luther states:

> When the light of the Word and these signs of grace which have been given by God have been lost, men run, of necessity, after the desires of their hearts. . . These varied and dissolute practices of idolatry prove how great a gift it is to have the Word and those signs of grace which God has

33 Ibid., 486.
pointed out and commanded. But if the heathen had been willing to walk in the footsteps of the Jews, they would never have sunk to those monstrous practices. Nor would the Jews ever have had anything to do with those blasphemous rites if they had given heed to the Word.³⁴

Prayer and faith do not help Christians to attain salvation in Luther’s eyes because there is no way for them to attain salvation — there is only faith in salvation through God’s grace. Jewish rituals do nothing to attain salvation, partly because Luther does not believe it is possible, but Jews perform rituals to affirm their place as God’s chosen people instead of having faith in salvation. Luther views the Jewish reliance on the Law as a bad influence on Christians because it makes Christians believe that they can save themselves from punishment for their sins by living a good life. Luther stresses that the only way to attain salvation from death is through God’s grace. Luther views Jews as spreading misinformation and leading Christians away from God, which he argues is true with the Catholic Church. Luther writes that Jews “claim to be God’s people by reason of their deeds, works, and external show, and not because of sheer grace and mercy. . . in the same way as our papists, bishops monks, and priests, together with their following, who insist that they are God’s people and church; they believe that God should esteem them because they are baptized.”³⁵ Luther equates the Jewish reliance on the Law and rituals to the Catholic Church’s reliance on rituals. He feared that Jewish influence had led Christians astray from Christ’s message of salvation from sin and death.

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Luther’s view on politics is also important in understanding his theological differences with Judaism and his later legacy. Luther did not separate his religious beliefs from any aspect of his life, including politics. In *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, Eike Wolgast writes that Luther’s “Two Kingdoms” doctrine is how he views politics. In his Two Kingdoms doctrine, Luther argues that there is the “kingdom” governed by God’s word that focuses on eternal salvation and a kingdom governed by humans that gives them peace and security. Wolgast states that Luther views the two kingdoms in opposition, and yet both important. Luther views the kingdom of the Word as crucial because it is the way to achieve salvation, Luther’s ultimate goal. Temporal governments are also important because they allow humans to live peaceful lives on Earth. Luther supported obedience to temporal governments so that people could live in peace and security. Luther writes: “here, then, let us acknowledge that a good ruler is a gift of God, and let the people be attracted to peace. To those who confess their sins and pray, the Lord will give good rulers; their own willing and choosing will do nothing.” He did believe in a limit to temporal authority. If a secular government threatened the ability of Christians to practice in any way, then it should no longer be supported. Luther saw secular governments as good as long as they did not have power over the spiritual aspects of people’s lives. This teaching from Luther is crucial for the Confessing Church, which opposed the many changes the German

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37 Ibid., 650.
39 Ibid., 654.
Christians and the Nazi government made to Christianity in the name of Nazism and the German nation. Luther used Jews as an example of why Christians should not allow secular governments to overlap with spiritual life. Luther writes: “they (Jews) did not want to be comforted but to rely on themselves. . . so Jerusalem relied on its worship, its temple, its Law, its fortifications. This was entirely taken away from the people, therefore the city is desolate and forsaken.”⁴⁰ Luther’s view of Jews as concerned with the world is why he views them as an example of a temporal government becoming intertwined with religion. He views the Jewish belief that their kingdom would be restored on Earth as an example of their worldliness. Luther writes: “now follows the prophecy concerning the Kingdom of Christ that is to come after the return from captivity. But these words must be carefully noted, because the prophet speaks spiritually when he describes the church of Christ and skillfully depicts it, namely, that this kingdom is ruled by one scepter, which is the Gospel. . . the Jews are still looking for a physical kingdom of Christ in Jerusalem.”⁴¹ Luther believed Jews focused only on a worldly kingdom, rather than a spiritual one.

**Luther on Jewish ignorance.**

Another issue that Luther held with Judaism is that he did not believe it should exist because all Jews should be Christians. Luther’s Christocentric view dictates that the Bible, even the Hebrew Bible or the “Old Testament,” was the story of Christ. Luther believed the passages of the Old Testament predicted the coming of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. The coming of Christ meant that the prophecies were fulfilled because Christ

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⁴⁰ Ibid., 217.
⁴¹ Ibid., 27.
was the Messiah. Luther writes: “the most oppressive tyrant is the Law. . . the sin that has been committed is second tyrant, and it brings forth the third, namely, death and damnation. Who could be happy when he is answerable to these three? But now they have been vanquished, the Law has been fulfilled by Christ and then also by us who have been endowed by the Holy Spirit.”

Luther emphasizes that the Law has been “fulfilled,” and “thus the Law is no longer outrageous in its dictates but an agreeable companion.”

Luther writes that the Law without Christ is oppressive, or a “tyrant” as he calls it, but with Christ the Law is not oppressive. Without Christ the Law is able to condemn people for their sins, but it offers no salvation; therefore, it is oppressive. Christ offers salvation from sin and death meaning that the sins outlined by the Law do not equal certain damnation as they did before Christ. For Luther, it was clear that to follow the Law without believing in the divinity of Christ was to be oppressed by death willingly. He could not understand how Jews could not see this reality and chose to ignore the divinity of Christ despite being so clearly written in the Old Testament. Heiko A. Oberman writes: “the basis of Luther’s anti-Judaism was the conviction that ever since Christ’s appearance on Earth, the Jews have had no more future as Jews.”

Oberman’s statement accentuates Luther’s belief that there was no longer a need for Judaism because Christ had arrived and fulfilled the prophecy. For Luther, to be Jewish equaled denying Christ. To deny Christ was to deny God. Luther could not understand how Jews could deny God and yet call themselves the chosen people. Luther viewed Jews as obstinate because they

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42 Ibid., 98-99.
43 Ibid., 99.
refused to accept Christ as the Messiah. For Luther, there should not even be a need to convert Jews to Christianity because there should be no Jews at all. All people who believe in the Abrahamic God should be Christian. Luther commented about Jewish obstinacy in On the Jews and Their Lies, where he stated: “it is useless to argue with them about how God is triune, how he became man, and how Mary is the mother of God. No human reason nor any human heart will ever grant these things, much less the embittered, venomous, blind heart of the Jews.”

Luther advises Christians not to attempt to convince Jews of the Holy Trinity because it is useless. He states that their hearts are embittered, venomous, and blind because they refuse the divinity of Christ and refuse to convert to Christianity.

Not all of Luther’s works are as anti-Jewish as On the Jews and Their Lies. In some of his earlier works he appears to be sympathetic to Jews. To what degree Luther was sympathetic to Jews earlier in his life is debated by theologians. In That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew, Luther writes: “our fools, the popes, bishops, sophists, and monks and nuns– the crude asses’ heads– have hitherto so treated the Jews that anyone who wished to be a good Christian would almost have had to become a Jew. If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian.”

Luther’s statement shows him to be sympathetic to Jews because of their persecution at the hands of Christians. Kirsi I. Stjerna, the editor of “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew” in Christian Life in the World, writes that

Luther’s statement is often interpreted as revealing his compassion for Jews. Stjerna argues that Luther’s statements reveal his belief that religion should not be used for violence rather than his genuine support of Jews. Heiko A. Oberman argues that “young Luther” was not less anti-Judaic than “Old Luther” but that his way of approaching Jews changed. Oberman argues that Luther’s approach to converting Jews changed, but not his opinion of Jews, because they still denied Christ. Luther was more patient in his early writings and showed compassion to Jews, hoping they would convert to Christianity. As he got older, Luther became less willing to attempt to convert Jews. In his later writings, he demanded drastic actions be taken on Jews by the local governments, such as expulsion, because he believed at that point in his life that there was no hope of converting Jews. Luther’s view on government changes here. As previously noted, he stated that temporal governments should not have power of the spiritual parts of people’s lives. Here, he is calling for governments to exile Jews from German lands on the basis of religion.

Another significant component of understanding Luther’s anti-Judaic beliefs is his attempts to “drain” Jewishness from the Bible. Luther views the Old Testament as part of the story of Christ and predicts the coming of Christ. Heiko A. Oberman writes that Luther viewed the Old Testament as the “valid and manifest Word of God,” and he tried to “reclaim the Scriptures in their entirety from the perversities they were suffering at the

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hands of the Jews, whether through rabbinical or scholastic exegesis.”⁴⁹ Luther believed that the Old Testament was a crucial part of Christian doctrine that Jews and Catholics had misinterpreted. Isaac Kalimi writes: “Luther himself elsewhere emphasizes the essential continuity between the Old and the New Testaments, and even claimed that the New Testament is nothing more than the public proclamation of the Gospel already announced in the Old Testament. But he was convinced that the Jews, in rejecting this, has missed the entire point of their own scriptures.”⁵⁰ Luther believed that Jews had misinterpreted the Old Testament by not seeing that it predicted the coming of Christ. Luther writes about Jewish “misinterpretations” in *On the Jews and Their Lies* as well, stating: “no doubt it is necessary for the Jews to lie and to misinterpret in order to maintain their error over against such a clear and powerful text.”⁵¹ Not only does Luther state that the Jews misinterpret the Old Testament, but he calls it lying. Therefore, if Jews spread their interpretations, then they are spreading lies. Luther needed to remove the Jewish influences from the Old Testament. Because Luther viewed the Old Testament as being a Christian text that prophesized the coming of Christ, he felt it was important to remove any texts that did not directly support that. Luther chose to remove the book of

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Esther, for instance, because he described it as being too Jewish primarily because of its focus on the Law.\textsuperscript{52}

**Conclusion:**

Martin Luther’s theological differences with Judaism are clear in his writings. He attack’s the religion’s focus on rituals, Laws, and their denial of Christ. Luther’s writings also influenced antisemitic movements such as the German Christian Movement, and his drastic statements in *On the Jews and Their Lies*, calling for the expulsion of Jews from Germany makes it clear that Luther was not supportive of Jews. It is difficult to say, however, that Luther was antisemitic. It is important to define the difference between antisemitism and anti-Judaism. Antisemitism is prejudice against Jews based on their ethnic, cultural and religious differences. Anti-Judaism is prejudice against Jews on a theological basis, or prejudice to Judaism, as opposed to Jewishness in general. He was theologically opposed to Judaism, and he used racist stereotypes in some of his writings, such as Jews murdering Christian children.\textsuperscript{53} For Luther, however, his issue was with practicing Judaism rather than being ethnically Jewish, which is revealed through his belief that Jews should convert to Christianity. He believed that Jews should become Christian and would assimilate into society. His statements in *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* support this. Luther writes: “When they (Catholics) baptize them, they show them nothing of Christian doctrine or life, but only subject them to popishness and monkery.


When the Jews see that Judaism has such strong support in the Scripture, and that Christianity has become a mere babble without reliance on Scripture, how can they possibly compose themselves and become right and good Christians?"\(^{54}\) Converting Jews to Christianity remained a goal of Luther’s until late in his life when he came to believe that Jews could not be converted because they were obstinate and refused to see the error of their theology. Luther’s anti-Judaic writings were not against the Jewish people, however, like the writings of German Christians in the Nazi era. Luther’s main issue with Jews was that they practiced Judaism rather than seeing the errors of the religion and converting to Christianity. Heiko A. Oberman argues that Luther was not anti-Semitic but rather anti-Judaic. Oberman writes:

> However crude and perhaps even ‘pure Aryan’ as the title of Luther’s *On the Jews and Their Lies* may seem, comparison with Eck’s adamant recapitulation of the medieval charges of child murder makes clear that Luther is pursuing the true, objectifiable, and essentially debatable interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Not desecration of the host, and not Jewish bloodthirstiness, but rather theological misguidedness is what Luther attacks as life-threatening.\(^{55}\)

Luther feared the spreading of Jewish theology into German culture. He feared that Jews would spread teachings he felt were dangerous such as their reliance on rituals and laws and not on the spirit. Luther’s attitude toward Jews gradually became more hostile as he aged. His earlier writings revealed a desire to convert Jews, and Luther was more sympathetic to the oppression and prejudice they received from Christians. Near the end of his life, however, Luther abandoned hope of converting Jews and submitted to the


belief that they were unwilling to see what he thought of as the error of their ways and convert. Isaac Kalimi writes: “Most [Jews] would not leave Judaism, even after his reform of the church, then his friendly attitude toward them was overturned, and a hostile one replaced it. The longer he lived the less likely the mass conversion of the Jews appeared.”

Luther’s frustration with Jewish obstinacy fueled his resentment toward Jews and inspired his most anti-Judaic writings.

Luther’s writings were crucial to both the German Christian movement and the Confessing Church. The German Christians were drawn to Luther’s anti-Judaic, anti-Muslim, and Anti-Catholic writings and labeled him a hero. Well-known Lutheran theologians of the time, such as Gerhard Kittel, became supporters of the German Christian Movement and the reforms German Christians made. Members of the Confessing Church also labeled Luther a hero, but praised his theological reforms and in particular his writings on secular governments. The Confessing Church viewed Luther’s teaching that secular governments should not interfere with Christian life as evidence that opposing the reforms instituted by the Nazi regime and the German Christian Movement was justified. The Confessing Church opposed the many and sometimes drastic changes the German Christians were making to Christianity.

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CHAPTER III

THE GERMAN CHRISTIANS, PROTESTANTISM, AND NAZISM

Protestantism became the dominant branch of Christianity in Germany following Martin Luther’s reformation in the Sixteenth Century. Protestantism was most common in the northern half of Germany and was the dominant religion of Prussia and the German Empire after the Prussian-led unification of Germany in 1870. The different kingdoms and principalities in Germany during and before unification sponsored individual churches.57 Leaders of the Weimar Republic formed the German Evangelical Church Confederation (Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchenbund), abbreviated as DEK, in 1922, by uniting the different Protestant churches. In an attempt to marry their national socialist ideology and Christian values, Germans formed the German Christian movement in 1932. The Deutsche Christen (DC), or German Christians, were a radical group that started within the DEK as a Christian group that supported the Nazi party. The German Christians attempted to unify two ideologies that were arguably incompatible. Doris L. Bergen writes that despite opposing each other, Adolf Hitler and Dietrich Bonhoeffer agreed that Christianity and national socialism were incompatible.

Bergen writes:

For Bonhoeffer, one of the few Protestant clergymen who took an active role in plans to overthrow the Nazi regime, National Socialist ideology and Christianity were profoundly incompatible. Most Christians in Germany did not share Bonhoeffer’s conviction about the fundamental opposition between these two worldviews, but hard-core Nazi leaders did. Martin

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Bormann and Heinrich Himmler, as well as Adolf Hitler himself, considered Nazism and Christianity irreconcilable antagonists.\(^58\)

The German Christian movement’s rise to prominence is crucial to understanding life in Nazi Germany. Like the rest of German society, religion was transformed by the influence of the Nazi regime. Protestantism was closely linked to German nationalism. How did Nazism transform such an important part of German society? Germans feared their society was degrading, including religiously. It became of the utmost importance to protect German society and religion, from outside threats, particularly from Jewish-Bolshevism. They viewed Protestant Christian values as being the essence of German values. Therefore, a threat to Christianity was a threat to the German people or *Volk.* Bergen quotes the German Christians: “‘in the mission to the Jews, we see a serious threat to our *Volkstum.* That mission is the entryway for foreign blood into the body of our *Volk.’”\(^59\) The German Christians, like the Nazis, viewed themselves as defending German society from Jewish influence. The German Christians viewed Jewish values as being focused on the world. They argued that Jews loved money and placed more emphasis on living a good life on Earth than attaining salvation. Martin Luther’s role in the German Christian movement is also essential in understanding their popularity. Luther’s influence on German Christianity is unrivaled. Therefore, he had to play an important role in any Protestant movement, and the German Christians were no exception. In order to combine Lutheran theology and Nazi ideology, German Christians

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 1.

focused on their commonalities, their dislike and distrust of Jewish influence on
Christianity. The German Christians focus on Luther’s anti-Judaic writings to support
their views justify their support of the Nazi party and their anti-Jewish policies.

Although there were significant German Christians, such as Paul Althaus,
Emanuel Hirsch, and Wolf Meyer-Erlach, Gerhard Kittel is unique in his relationship
with Nazism and Lutheranism. Kittel was a well-known and well-respected Lutheran
theologian and professor of New Testament theology at the University of Tübingen. He
wrote several anti-Judaic works and speeches that were seen as heavily influential among
German Protestants.\textsuperscript{60} Examining Gerhard Kittel and his theology, anti-Judaic and anti-
Semitic writings, and his relationship with Nazism is vital for understanding the German
Christian movement. Martin Luther’s influence on the German Christians is revealed
through Kittel as well because Kittel believes he is protecting the values of Lutheran
theology by joining the German Christians. Like most German Christians, Gerhard Kittel
viewed Luther’s anti-Judaic writings as his attempt to protect Christianity from Jewish
influence, the same goal the German Christians had. Where Kittel differed from most
other German Christians is the importance he places on Luther’s other writings as
supporting his anti-Judaic message. Despite his differences with many German
Christians, Gerhard Kittel represents a strong theological connection to Luther within the
German Christian movement. Kittel’s theology is close to Luther’s theology but Kittel
appeals to the aggressive side of Luther that promotes violence against Jews. Kittel is a

\textsuperscript{60}Robert P. Ericksen, \textit{Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch}, (New
supporter of the segregation of Jews from German society. He appeals to Luther’s anti-Judaic writings for support because Luther justified discrimination of Jews in a theological sense that Kittel believed in.

**The German Christians and National Socialism**

The importance of Protestantism in German society is vital to understanding the German Christians. Nazism, although not a Christian ideology, existed in a predominantly Christian country where its supporters grew up learning Christian values. Doris L. Bergen writes: “Christianity permeated Nazi society. Nazi iconography is replete with Christian notions of sacrifice and redemption. Even committed National Socialists like the members of the German Christian movement clung fiercely to cultural manifestations of their religious tradition.” Many Germans were unwilling to abandon their Christian values entirely to embrace Nazism. They instead opted to alter their beliefs to comply with Nazi ideology. The German Christians believed the Nazi narrative that they were trying to protect German society from outside influences threatening to destroy it. The most concerning threat was Jewish Bolshevism. After Germany’s defeat in World War 1, German Protestants found themselves in an identity crisis as they struggled to understand how they fit into a new secular and socialist republic after their close ties and strong support for the Empire. John S. Conway argues that German Protestants viewed German unification as a sign of the “righteousness of their cause,” and the defeat in World War 1 challenged that view. Germany went from being a powerful and

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Protestant-led empire ruled by the Kaiser to a chaotic, socialist state during the Weimar years. Many Protestants viewed the Weimar government’s secular and liberal policies as destroying German and Christian values. They viewed the policies of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, or SPD, as being influenced by Jewish-Bolshevism. Many Protestants believed they needed to defend their values from degrading in the Weimar era. Protestants were intrigued by the idea of a united Volkskirche, or “people’s church,” that would unite their religious beliefs and national pride. John S. Conway writes: “Seeking to build on the evidence of national unity during the war years, and by identifying the church with all classes of people, the advocates of the Volkskirche saw in the church the one structure which could remain true to Germany’s historic traditions while offering consolation and comfort against the forces of darkness and evil which had so overwhelmed the beloved Fatherland.” German Christians believed a people’s church would protect their values and offer a sense of national unity. The Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchenbund, or DEK, was created in 1922, but it was reformed in 1933 by the German Christians and renamed the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche, still abbreviated to the DEK. By controlling the DEK, the German Christians could reform church doctrine to align with Nazi ideology.

Race, in general, was a significant concern for the German Christians. The German Christians saw race as a defining feature of Christianity and struggled with defining race and how it fits into their beliefs. Doris L. Bergen writes that race was the

63 Ibid.
“organizing principle” of the German Christians. For the German Christians belonging to the Volk, or the German people, it was crucial to how they saw themselves. The Volk, however, was threatened by the Jewish influence and required protection. The German Christians believed Christianity was a key component of being German and belonging to the Volk. However, the Jewish influence on Christianity was a challenge to that. Bergen writes that the German Christians regarded everything foreign as a potential threat to German society as “Jewish.” The German Christians were faced with the issue of reconciling Christianity and its Jewish elements with German values. Bergen writes that other groups, such as the neopagans, accused the German Christians of being a “Jewish infiltrated group that perpetuated the invasion of ‘foreign elements’ into German spiritual life.” Faced with the issue of Jewish influence on Christianity, the German Christians sought to remove that influence. However, removing Jewish elements from Christianity was not easily done without changing the religion entirely. Instead, the German Christians attempted to redefine Christianity, and one important way they did so was through the role of Jesus Christ. The German Christians redefined Jesus as an Aryan warrior who fought against Jewish influence. The German Christians needed to redefine Jesus as Aryan because they could not follow a Jewish God. The German Christians proposed multiple theories, some coming from before the German Christian movement began, that argued for Jesus being an Aryan rather than Jewish. One such theory is that

65 Ibid., 33.
66 Ibid., 37.
Jesus was a Galilean and that the Galileans descended from the Assyrian colonists that were Aryan. Heschel also writes that the German Christians redefined the role of Jesus Christ, arguing that these miraculous works were created or exaggerated by the Jews who wrote the New Testament. Walter Grundmann, president of the Institute for the Study and Elimination of Jewish Influence on German Church Life, defined Jesus as transcending race but being theologically opposed to Judaism. Heschel writes:

“Grundmann presented Jesus’ teachings as standing in absolute opposition to Judaism; theirs was a religion of law, his was a religion of intimacy with God. The goal of Jesus, he claimed, was to bring an end to Judaism, but instead fell as victim to the Jews, a violent and degenerate people.” Grundmann’s criticisms of Judaism mirrors Luther’s. Luther also argued that Judaism was too focused on the Law and not as much on spirituality. Luther argued that relying on the Law without recognizing the spiritual aspect of it meant that the Law had lost its value as part of religion. Luther also argues that Jesus had abolished the Old Law, or the Jewish Law, and disliked that Jews still used it. Luther writes: “you write that the Jews boast that their law will endure forever and that we Gentiles must become Jews. You must reply: In the first place, if it were true that the Messiah has come, then they themselves know that their law has ended.” Luther’s criticisms of the worldliness of Jews became an important part of the German Christians’ justification of supporting the Nazi party and in particular their anti-Semitic policies.

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68 Ibid., 56-57.
69 Ibid., Pg. 59.
70 Ibid., 152.
71 Ibid., 152.
Race mixing was also a concern for the German Christians. German Christians, like the Nazis, believed there was considerable “race mixing” between Jews and Germans. Race mixing was a genuine concern for Germans, who feared diluting their racial purity and the further assimilation of Jews into German culture. Gerhard Kittel argued against interracial marriages. Kittel argued that preventing Jews and Germans was important for preventing assimilation and upholding the guest status of Jews. Kittel writes: “countless mixed-bloods pervaded the body of the German people. Because in many cases they bore strongly Jewish features, they strengthened the influence of the Jewish element on the body of the people. More important, however, over the last hundred years there has been increasing mixing of the races.”73 Furthermore, Kittel argues that mixing Jews and Germans leads to Germans accepting Jewish sinfulness. Kittel writes:

Two motives drove this [racial mixing] development. One was money, as was well known, the old aristocratic families were especially likely to connect with wealthy Jewish families through marriage. The other was the strange but undisputable fact that the exotic can exercise a particular sexual appeal to which a passionate young person easily falls victim unless instinctual or legal precautions are in place.74

Kittel cites financial gain and sexual desire as reasons for Germans to seek marriage with Jews. He cited two carnal desires to prove further his point that Jews were worldly and indulged in their carnal desires. Marrying a Jew would thus lead to Germans accepting

74 Ibid., 213.
and imitating Jewish worldliness. Kittel’s statements reveal that race is integral to his antisemitic beliefs, even if he argues that religion is the most important part.

The German Christians also had to deal with the Old Testament and how it fits into their Aryan Christianity. There was already support among Protestants in Germany to remove the Old Testament from the Bible entirely because of its association with Judaism decades before the German Christian movement began.  

Protestants challenged how valuable the Old Testament was to Christians. German Christians brought the issue of the Old Testaments’ importance to the forefront of German religious life and eventually did remove it from the new Bibles they printed. The German Christians attacked the Old Testament for being too Jewish. They argued that it promoted Jewish values such as worldliness through reliance on the Law and rituals, a lack of spirituality, and teaching weakness by praising humility and other qualities they saw as weak. Bergen writes: “a 1932 publication, ‘Does the Old Testament Still Have Significance for a Christian?,’ outlined common criticisms: it was a ‘Jewish book’; it was ethically a poor example for children– ‘Jacob was a cheat, Abraham a liar, David an adulterer’; it was unscientific; it had been superseded by the New Testament.”

Theology was at the core of German Christian anti-Semitism. The German Christians, while also believing that Jews were a cultural and racial threat, believed that Judaism was already theologically harming to Christianity. The German Christians embraced ideas reminiscent of the Gnostics. The core of the issue that Gnostics had with

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76 Ibid., 144.
the Old Testament is that the God of the Old Testament was vastly different from the God of the New Testament. God was vengeful, jealous, angry, and destructive in the Old Testament. The Old Testament God also made mistakes: He chose only the Israelites as his chosen people initially and then went back on his word. He also created a Law that was impossible to adhere to fully. The Gnostics questioned how could God make mistakes if he was omnipotent and then how could he change so much in the New Testament. The God of the New Testament was loving and compassionate and became man to fulfill the Law and save all humans. The shift led Gnostics to determine that the God of the Old Testament differed from the God of the New Testament. Marcion of Sinope, a gnostic theologian, made this argument in the second century CE. Marcion argued that the New Testament God was an “alien god” that was entirely inhuman, unlike the Old Testament God that had human emotions such as anger and jealousy.77 Love was the defining feature of the “alien” God, who saved humanity from death and punishment for their sins through his compassion. This was in contrast to the Old Testament God, who offered no salvation but offered strict laws that could not help people attain salvation, no matter how closely one followed them. Adolf Von Harnack writes: “Agricola saw it even more clearly [than Luther]: he assessed the Law as a failed attempt on God’s part to lead mankind by means of threats. But can God make a mistake or fail?”78 Marcion noticed that the Old Testament was a theological issue for Christianity. The change that God made between the Old and New Testaments meant that God was

78 Ibid., 135.
either imperfect or there were two different Gods. Either way, the Old Testament hindered Christian theological coherence. The German Christian movement also saw the theological issues that the Old Testament presented to Christianity. For the German Christians, it was necessary to remove the Old Testament from the Bible to make Christianity theologically coherent. The German Christians attacked the Old Testament as being a Jewish book, because it promotes reliance on the Law, lack of spirituality, and no promise of salvation. The Old Testament portrayal of God, however, is critical in understanding their disapproval of the Old Testament.

Another important issue for the German Christians was their eschatological views. The German Christians, like the Medieval Gnostics, believed that the end times were near and the erasure of human sin through the destruction of the world by God. The Gnostics did not believe in creation. Part of their argument for the Old and New Testament Gods being different was that the New Testament God did not create the World but instead would destroy it and erase the sins of humanity. The eschatology of the Gnostics is similar to that of the German Christians. The German Christians also believed that the end times were near. The defeat and collapse of the German Empire were important in developing this belief. John S. Conway writes:

Only a handful of churchmen could believe that the overthrow of the Kaiser, the destruction of Germany’s world mission, and the establishment of a nominally atheist and socialist government, could be regarded as the fulfillment of God’s will. The vast majority retreated to a position of open opposition, or at best a grudging acknowledgment of their changed conditions. They were easily led to accept the widespread conspiracy
theory of the “stab-in-the-back” as an explanation or alibi for Germany’s downfall.79

German Protestants struggled with accepting the defeat of the German Empire, and for some, it was a sign of the end of the world. The Nazi regime’s coming to power even further supported that belief. The Nazi’s promotion of war and their policies of exterminating Jews and other minorities was a sign of God’s preparation to wipe the world clean of human sin.

Removing the Old Testament from the Christian canon was impossible before the Nazi regime’s rise to power. Any attempts to do so were seen as heretical. Under the atheistic, anti-Judaic Nazi state, however, the German Christians were free to do so. Nazi officials saw it as an attempt to erase the evils of Judaism, but for the German Christians, it removed the burden of Judaism that caused theological incoherence for Christianity. Gerhard Kittel argued that Judaism’s biggest flaw was that its rituals and laws were not connected to God but were rather rituals passed down and practiced because of tradition. Kittel argued that Christianity differed from Judaism because Jesus created a personal connection that made the laws and rituals real for Christians and more than just tedious rituals practiced for the sake of practicing them. Kittel believed that Jews had lost their sense of spiritualness, which he states in his 1933 speech, “The Jewish Question.” Kittel writes: “this led to the complete alienation from religion should not surprise anyone–nor should the fact that as a consequence, religion was more and more despised and

considered less and less relevant.”80 Judaism, for Kittel, lacked the key component that defined religions: spirituality.

Bergen also states that not all German Christians felt that the Old Testament should be removed, and some attempted to salvage parts of it.81 She writes that there was one German Christian group who attempted to “salvage” parts of the Ten Commandments in a Bible called God’s Word in German, from Luther’s Bible, according to Luther’s rules, in Luther’s spirit, which did not include all Ten Commandments, just parts deemed important. The German Christians differed significantly from Luther’s view of the Old Testament. Adolf Von Harnack argues that Luther understood the theological issues that the Old Testament posed for Christianity but did not attempt to remove it from Protestant canon because it was important for developing Christian morality. Von Harnack writes: “Luther believed that the Law was indispensable for the awakening of the conscience, and he also found other perspectives according to which the preaching of the Law as the clear expression of God’s holy will must not be allowed to cease.”82 Von Harnack argued that Luther was attached to the Old Testament because of the Psalms and the ten commandments. He argued that Luther could have removed the Old Testament from canon but by choosing not to German Protestants continued to see it as valuable, and even at times equal to the New Testament. Luther also argued that the Old Testament was as important as the New Testament because it predicted the coming of Christ.

81 Ibid., 145-147.
Luther’s view thus made the Old Testament a Christian text rather than a Jewish one. The German Christians’ approach of removing the Old Testament or keeping only small parts of it as Biblical canon was vastly different. The belief that the Old Testament taught Jewish values made the Old Testament dangerous to German society and thus had to be removed from canon.

An important distinction between the German Christian movement and other Protestant groups is the significance of politics. The German Christian movement embraces politics as a key part of Christianity that is either largely rejected or discouraged by many Lutherans. Luther argued against the involvement of Christians in politics. He argued that politics were worldly and thus were not as important as spiritual matters. Politics, especially political ambition, led to sin. Luther writes: “we say that the heaven denotes the church, but that earth denotes the governments and the political order. Christ himself calls the church the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God; but the earth is called the land of the living, where kings and princes rule.”

Politics was a crucial component of Nazi ideology, however, which it shared with the German Christian movement. The German Christians believed that the Church should have close ties with the state. There needed to be a state-sponsored Church with German Christians serving as its leaders. Doris L. Bergen writes: “The German Christians agreed that the anti-doctrinal church would be at all costs a state church. Most Germans were so committed to the notion of a state church that they articulated it only rarely.”

83 Martin Luther, Luther’s Works: Genesis 1-5. Volume 1, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 429.
The German Christian movement was not homogenous, and beliefs varied greatly on some issues. The lack of unity resulted in different groups forming within the movement. Doris L. Bergen gives the example of supraconfessionalism as divisive for German Christians. Bergen writes: “The supraconfessional church divided the German Christian movement itself. Some Christian clergy hesitated to embrace unequivocally the supraconfessional idea.”

The idea of having all Christians in Germany united under one interpretation of the Bible was unsettling for most Germans. One such example is Gerhard Kittel disagreeing with most German Christians on the race of Jesus. Kittel argued that Jesus was, in fact, racially Jewish and not Aryan. Anders Gerdmar writes: “Kittel does not side with those who, following H.S. Chamberlain and Friedrich Delitzsch, among others, propose that Jesus’ Galilean decent intimates that he was not Jewish, or that he was not of mixed blood. Kittel would never assent to the idea that Jesus was Aryan, which became popular in Deutsche Christen theology during the war years in particular.”

Kittel was a crucial leader of the German Christian movement and his writings influenced other German Christians. By disagreeing with a crucial component of German Christian theology, Kittel revealed that the movement was not uniform in its beliefs.

85 Ibid., 112.
The German Christians and Lutheran Theology

The German Christian movement’s position as both pro-Nazi and Christian made their theology complex and often contradictory. Their beliefs sometimes supported Nazi ideology and not Christian doctrine, and at other times the opposite was true. However, the German Christians were still very Protestant, and their beliefs were heavily influenced by Luther, as was the case with all German Protestants. Luther’s anti-Judaic writings, such as On the Jews and Their Lies, became crucial propaganda for the German Christians, but Luther’s other writings also influenced their beliefs. Gerhard Kittel is crucial to understanding the German Christian movement and its position relative to Christianity and Nazism. The combination of Christian and Nazi beliefs in German Christian theology is found in Kittel’s 1933 speech, “The Jewish Question.”

Kittel writes:

This carries with it the unconditional claim that the fight against Judaism must also be carried out on the basis of conscious and clear Christian conviction. It is not enough, then, to base this struggle solely on racialist views or popular religion. The true and complete answer can only be found if the Jewish Question is successfully supported in religious terms and the fight against it is given a Christian frame of reference.  

Kittel views “the Jewish Question” as an issue primarily of religion rather than race. Kittel, like Luther, argued that Judaism was theologically problematic and should be viewed as a religious issue rather than a racial one. Kittel states that decadence is the primary reason why Jews should not have been allowed to assimilate into German

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society. Kittel writes: “he [an assimilated Jew] has lost his home within Judaism, but he cannot sink his roots in any culturally appropriate way into German culture. This is his tragedy and his curse, for it comes from his decadence. This decadence, and nothing else, is the real problem besetting the Jewish question today.”

Kittel viewed secularized Jews as seriously threatening Christian and German values. Robert P. Ericksen writes:

“Judaism had not been true to its roots, he [Kittel] believed. It had become a secularized Jewry, ‘to some extent overflowing into modern relativism and atheism.’”

Kittel’s criticism of Judaism as “modern” and “atheist” echoes Luther’s criticisms of Judaism. Luther argues that Jews are too proud of earthly things such as the Law and rituals such as circumcision. Luther also feared that Jewish worldliness would influence Christians to praise the world.

Luther writes:

> The Jews will not give up their pride and boasting about their nobility and lineage. As was said above, their hearts are hardened. Our people, however, must be on their guard against them, lest they be misled by the impenitent, accursed people who give God the lie and haughtily despise all the world. For the Jews would like to entice us Christians to their faith, and they do this wherever they can.

Like many German Christians, Kittel believed that Judaism and the Enlightenment threatened to erode Christian values. Ericksen writes: “the Enlightenment perverted both Christianity and Judaism through secularization and Jewish emancipation. This was now

88 Ibid., 215.
the ‘Jewish problem.’”

Liberalism, an idea that came out of the Enlightenment, and Judaism promoted individualism which Kittel believed was sinful. One of the main concerns of individualism for Kittel was that he believed it led to atheism. He argued that the assimilated Jews were the biggest threats to German society because they were no longer practicing Jews and were not really Jewish. Kittel feared that they would spread atheism and individualism to Christians and erode the values of German society as had happened with Judaism.

Gerhard Kittel also argued that Jewish “rootlessness” was a crucial part of their decadence because they did not belong to any nation. He argues that the Jews did not belong to any nation and were thus always foreigners, but they tried to assimilate into other cultures. Kittel feared that Jewish assimilation led to Germans losing a sense of pride and belonging to their nation and Volk. Kittel’s argument is reflective of both the Nazi party and Luther. The German nation is crucial to Nazism, and the lack of a nation for Jews is problematic for the Nazis. The Volk is of the utmost importance to Nazi ideology. The German people, belonging to the Aryan race, are powerful but vulnerable to Jewish-Bolshevik influence. They see the Jews as foreigners without a country that do not belong anywhere but try to live among Germans. Luther also states that Jews are foreigners that do not belong among the German people. Luther argued that Jewish decadence would encourage Christians to embrace atheism and forsake God. Luther claims that Jewish “homelessness” is a sign of their sinfulness. Luther writes: “they will

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have no kingdom, as we see today in the case of the forsaken Jews, who are altogether homeless.” Kittel suggested that the best “answer” to the Jewish question was to give Jews guest status in Germany but be segregated from German society and removed from positions of influence. Kittel writes:

It seems that only two alternatives can be considered as solutions to the Jewish question: assimilation or guest status. For centuries the people of the Western world had instinctively operated on the assumption that the Jews were to be seen as guest-people who could pursue an existence in the Jewish section of town that, though subject to certain limitations—they were, after all, guests—was in general fairly peaceful.

Kittel argued that guest status for Jews had already been the status quo before the emancipation of Jews. Kittel does not believe that Jewish assimilation into German society is an option. He argued that because Christianity was favored in Europe, Jews converted out of convenience rather than genuinely wanting to convert. Kittel writes that because Jews converted out of convenience: “this led to a complete alienation from religion. . . for this reason the prevailing Judaism of the Twentieth-century has come to represent the putative cultural and political progress of atheist dissidents, especially since that in Weimar regime belonging to a Christian ‘confession’ no longer brought with it any advantage.”

Kittel viewed the lack of religiosity among Jews as proof of their cultural decline and believed it would happen among Germans. For this reason, Jews

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95 Ibid., 211-212.
96 Ibid., 212.
could not be assimilated into German society. They are not only foreign, but their values oppose German cultural values such as the Christian faith. Guest status was the only option because it was the only one that was morally feasible, but it prevented Jews from influencing Germans directly. Kittel also viewed the Weimar Republic as a further example of Jewish influence because he believed the Weimar Republic had embraced liberal ideals that suppressed religion. Kittel believed that the threat of the moral decline of German society was genuine and already happening. Removing Jews from places of influence was key to preventing further decline and reversing it.

The idea of the “homeless Jew” was met with resistance by Jews. Martin Buber, an Austrian Jewish philosopher, responded to Gerhard Kittel in a letter where he defended Judaism and Jewish religiosity. Buber writes: “‘authentic Jewry,’ as you say, ‘remains faithful to the symbol of the restless and homeless alien who wanders the earth.’ Judaism does not know of any such symbol. The ‘wandering Jew’ is a figment of Christian legend, not a Jewish figure. Authentic Jewry is ever aware of the fact that the promise may be fulfilled at any given moment in time, and its wandering may end.”

Buber argues that Jewish homelessness does not exist but is the perception of Christians. He also challenges Kittel’s guest-status proposal, arguing that it is not the answer to the Jewish question because it is a reversal from the current system of assimilation to an older system that did not appear to work the first time. Buber writes: “the ‘historical fact’ of ‘alien status,’ the reinstatement of which you, Herr Kollege, hold to be the ‘solution of

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the Jewish question,’ is partly the question itself. . . partly, it is the lack of an answer. To be sure, emancipation as it took place was not the true answer either. But it does not follow from this that one must now take recourse to that lack of an answer.” Buber believes that Kittel’s proposal will not work because it is not an “answer” to the Jewish question. Kittel responds to Buber by arguing that he is not attempting to defame Jews, but rather he is attempting to make a clear distinction between ethnic Jews and Germans. Kittel writes:

I staunchly and flatly dispute your contention that this can all be reduced to ‘the defamation of Jewry.’ It is not a defamation of Jewry for me to maintain that there are a substantial number of mediocre and bad writers amongst the Jewish literari, nor is it [a defamation of Jewry] to state that a Jewish-German writer may be significant in stature but that he is nevertheless not a German writer. It would entail a defamation of Jewry only if I were to maintain that a Jewish writer is necessarily a bad writer because he is a Jew. 

Kittel argues that it is important to distinguish between Jews and Germans. Kittel argues that Jews are culturally and morally different from Germans and thus need to be separate from Germans. He believes he is not defaming Jews but upholding the necessary distinction between two different peoples. Kittel’s response reveals the importance of German nationality to Germans of the time. Kittel wanted to make the difference between German-Jewish writers and German writers clear because he did not want the writings of Jews to be mistaken as German.

98 Ibid., 202.
Gerhard Kittel’s view on the status of Jews that converted to Christianity is also important. He argues that Jewish Christians should be accepted as Christians but not as Germans. Kittel believed Jewish Christians should be allowed to practice Christianity without interference, but their treatment based on race was different. Robert P. Ericksen writes, “a genuine Jewish Christian should be accepted as a Christian brother; but that does not make him a German. Thus, state measures against Jews can be carried over into the church, so long as the Christianity of a Jewish Christian is not denied.”

Kittel’s statement follows Luther’s Two Kingdoms doctrine, where he argues that the people should obey the government as long as it does not threaten their ability to practice Christianity. Luther’s Two Kingdoms doctrine makes the government’s role and citizens’ obedience to it clear as an important function of society. Christians should obey the government as long as their ability to practice Christianity is not threatened. Kittel views the restrictions the Nazi government placed on Jews as a good thing and believes it should be obeyed. Ericksen also writes that Kittel is trying to divorce himself from the “radical Nazi Christians, who tried to divorce Christianity from its Jewish roots.”

The German Christians also attempted to make Christianity a “masculine” religion. Masculinity was essential to Nazi ideology, while Christianity was deemed a “feminine” religion. Doris L. Bergen writes: “Nazi and neopagan critics accused Christianity of preaching weakness, humility, and defeatism, feminine traits antithetical

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101 Ibid., 33.
to National Socialist values.” The German Christians’ attempts to make Christianity masculine emphasize the importance of militarism in Nazi Germany. Christianity had to support the strong, militaristic German Volk rather than teach humility and praise suffering, both signs of weakness. The German Christians emphasized the importance of the body for Christians, echoing the Nazi party’s ideology that Aryans were robust, powerful, and beautiful. Susannah Heschel writes:

> The völkisch movement’s emphasis on this world, rather than the afterlife, led to a focus on the body and on the practice of Christianity, reinforcing the affinity of völkisch religion for racial conceptions. Völkisch leaders criticized conventional Christianity for its otherworldly concerns and its global missionizing, insisting that the central religious concern for German Christians should be the creation of God’s kingdom on earth.

The German Christians’ emphasis on the body contrasts Luther’s views. One of Luther’s primary attacks on Judaism was his perception that they praised worldliness and worldly success. The German Christians were forced to choose between Luther’s rejection of worldliness or the Nazi praise of it. They chose to follow the Nazi beliefs of manliness and success in the world. The German Christians also struggled with making the New Testament fit with Nazism. Doris L. Bergen writes: “the New Testament posed serious challenges as a manual of masculinity for the German Christians. Soldiers and warriors are scarce on its pages; Paul was a problem for proponents of manly religiosity, and too

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presented difficulties.” Bergen also states that the German Christians had to reshape
the image of Christ as a warrior who struggled against Judaism.

Despite the importance of the world for German Christians, they viewed the Jews
as worldly. The German Christians criticized Jewish worldliness, particularly the
stereotype that Jews were money-grubbers. Doris L. Bergen writes: “if ‘Jewish’ connoted
secular or immoral to German Christians, it could equally refer to legalistic or dogmatic
tendencies.” Luther’s similar criticisms of Jews in On the Jews and Their Lies reveal
his influence on the German Christians. Luther claims that Jews focus on worldly matters
rather than spiritual matters. Luther writes: “the Jews do not have any good things
concerning which He might be mindful of them. All of their things are false, as is clear
from the fact that their concerns and hopes deal only with things of the flesh.” Luther’s
view of Jews practicing extortion fit well into the German Christian narrative of Jewish
moral decline and the “stab in the back” myth. Luther writes: “the Jews, on the other
hand, are as holy as the barefoot friars who possess so much excess holiness that they can
use it to help others get to heaven, and still retain a rich and abundant supply to sell.”
Gerhard Kittel shares Luther’s belief of the moral decline of “modern Jews.” Robert P.
Ericksen writes:

Kittel believed the world out of joint, to his detriment personally and as a
patriotic German. In 1933 he saw a weak, defeated and demoralized
Germany. He saw uprootedness, immorality, rebelliousness, materialism,

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104 Doris L. Bergen, Twisted Cross: the German Christian Movement in the Third Reich (Chapel Hill:
105 Ibid., 32.
secularism, relativism; in short, he saw the breakdown of the ‘good ole days’ into a modern, urban, cosmopolitan, pluralistic world. He did not like what he saw, and he blamed it on the Enlightenment and all its progeny. Then, in harmony with National Socialism, Kittel learned to blame the Enlightenment, rationalism, secularism, immorality and decadence on Jews, especially assimilated Jews.

Kittel’s beliefs echoed Luther’s, however, who also argued for the moral decline of Jews. Both men argued that “modern Jews” were particularly bad because they were less religious than Jews of the Old Testament.

Crucial to understanding the German Christian movement is the role that race played in their theology. The connections between the German Christians and the Nazi party on the matter of race is more easily recognizable. But it is also important to examine the role that Luther’s anti-Judaic writings had in influencing the German Christians. Luther’s writings primarily criticized Judaism because of a difference in theology. However, in *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Luther used racial stereotypes to support his criticisms and called for the expulsion of Jews from Germany. Luther’s call for expulsion, in particular, became important for German Christians as justification for supporting the expulsion of Jews as well as other antisemitic laws. Gerhard Kittel’s proposal to relegate Jews to guest status exemplifies Luther’s influence. Kittel, like Luther, argued that Jewish decadence was dangerous to German society and disliked the assimilation of Jews.

**Conclusion:**

The German Christian movement was a unique combination of German nationalism and Lutheran theology, resulting in a movement that struggled to find its
identity. On the one hand, it was a pro-Nazi nationalist movement that sought to protect German culture from the dangers of Judaism and the Enlightenment by protecting Christianity. The German Christian movement was also a Protestant movement that sought to align German Christianity with German nationalism and National Socialism. The German Christians believed that being Christian, and more precisely Lutheran, was a crucial part of being German. It was imperative to protect Christian values to protect German culture as a whole. It was also imperative to align Christianity with Nazism because the Nazi party was the means through which protecting German culture was accomplished. Christianity and Nazism were in many ways in opposition. Many followers of each ideology often pointed out the dangers of the other. The German Christians united the two ideologies despite their opposition. However, the movement still struggled with creating a single identity. Figures such as Gerhard Kittel reveal the divisions within the movement through his belief that the Old Testament still held value.

Martin Luther’s role in the German Christian movement differed from his role in the Protestant Churches previously. German Christian theology was based on Lutheran theology, but the influence of national socialism and the Volksch movements shifted the German Christians in a different direction. Luther’s “two kingdoms” doctrine was crucial to German Christian theology. The German Christians’ attacks on Jewish worldliness and “atheist” tendencies are examples of Luther’s influence. However, there was a distinct non-Lutheran or non-Christian component of the German Christians. The nationalistic, racial, militaristic, and masculine components of the German Christians clearly reflected the national socialist and Volksch movement influences. Luther was also a German
national hero who was vital in increasing patriotism and support for National Socialism. Like them, the Nazi party used Luther as a national hero who fought against the Jewish threat. Luther’s position of importance within German Christianity made it easy for Protestants to support Nazi ideology because they rationalized Lutheran theology in agreement with Nazism.

The German Christian movement was appealing to Protestants in Nazi Germany. It allowed them to be both Protestant and Nazi and to keep their religion amidst the atheistic Nazi regime while also proving their support to the party. Robert P. Ericksen argues that Gerhard Kittel was an opportunist who recognized the possibility of moving his career forward under the new Nazi regime. Ericksen writes: “perhaps Kittel’s genuine feelings burst forth in 1933. His animosity towards Jews must have had some genuine foundation for him to have developed it in so thoroughgoing a manner. . . A better explanation is opportunism. It was very good for Kittel’s career to be anti-Jewish after 1933.”

Not all of the movement’s supporters were opportunists. For some, it allowed them the freedom to express their antisemitic beliefs without fear of repercussion as had been the case in the Weimar era. Regardless of reason the appeal of the German Christian led to many German Protestants joining and uniting their Christian beliefs with their desire for German greatness.

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CHAPTER IV

THE CONFESSIONING CHURCH AND OPPOSING NAZISM

German Protestantism was in crisis during the rule of the Nazi party. The Nazi regime’s ideology allowed German Protestants the freedom to change Christianity that some saw as necessary. The German Christian movement rose quickly from a small fringe group to being the leaders of German Protestantism through the support they received from the Nazi regime. Not all Protestants in Germany agreed with the changes the German Christians were proposing or with the policies of the Nazi regime. The Confessing Church formed in 1934 following the Nazi regime’s creation of the new state-supported church, the DEK, in 1933. The leaders of the Confessing Church opposed the proposals by the German Christians to change Christianity. In particular, they opposed the removal of the Old Testament from the biblical canon, the expulsion of Christians of Jewish descent from the Church, the Nazi regime’s control over the Church, and the Nazi regime’s treatment of pastors who disagreed with them. The members of the Confessing Church, or Confessors, wanted to conserve the values and beliefs that had been in place since Martin Luther created German Protestantism. The Confessing Church became the opposition group to Nazism within German Protestantism. As the opposition, the Confessing Church leaders were persecuted by the Nazi regime, and many of the most notable leaders were arrested and sent to concentration camps. The Confessing Church suffered because of its lack of leadership in being able to effectively resist the Nazi regime and the German Christian movement.
The founder of the Confessing Church branch of German Protestantism was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was born to a prominent family in Berlin and was considered to be highly intelligent, earning his doctorate degree in religion from the University of Berlin at twenty-one years old.\textsuperscript{109} Bonhoeffer was an important figure among German theologians. His legacy still looms large among German Protestants. Stephen Plant writes: “few theologians, of any century, are burdened by his celebrity status.”\textsuperscript{110} Bonhoeffer was executed only a few weeks before the end of the war, and he became a martyr among Protestants around the world. Bonhoeffer’s family learned of his death through a radio broadcast of a memorial service in his name in London.\textsuperscript{111} Despite founding the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer eventually moved on from the Church to take a more active approach in resisting Nazi rule. Bonhoeffer ultimately concluded that peaceful resistance was not enough for the evils of the Nazi regime. He was involved in several plots to assassinate Hitler and worked in the German military intelligence branch, the Abwehr, to sabotage the German war effort. Bonhoeffer became a symbol of Christian resilience in the face of tyranny and a hero for Protestants. I chose to use Dietrich Bonhoeffer to examine the Confessing Church because he best exemplifies how the Confessors viewed Luther’s theology and used it to defend their beliefs. Bonhoeffer does differ from the Confessing Church in some of his beliefs, but his theology and role as a founder and leader of the Confessing Church made him crucial to understanding the

Confessors. Bonhoeffer is interested in defending the Old Testament and assimilating Jews into German society like Luther did in his earlier writings. Bonhoeffer does not view the segregation, expulsion, or genocide of Jews as morally justifiable but he does believe they are theologically incorrect and hoped they would convert to Christianity.

The Confessing Church represented an important part of German society during Nazi rule. They were the opposition to Nazi power and their iron-fisted rule over Germany. The Confessing Church sought to conserve traditional Lutheran values from the influence of Nazism, particularly the German Christian movement, which saw an opportunity to make changes to Lutheranism they felt were necessary. The Confessing Church saw the German Christians as the religious wing of the Nazi order whose goal was to transform the Protestant Church into a form of Nazi propaganda. Confessing Church leaders held onto Lutheran teachings, such as defending the Old Testament as an important text and the idea of sola gratia, in opposition to the Nazi ideology of individual accomplishments. However, the Confessing Church found itself at a considerable disadvantage because the Nazi regime labeled the Confessors as traitors and persecuted them. The Confessing Church was criticized for not acting against the Nazi regime but questioning them from a distance. The Confessing Church played a crucial role in German society during Nazi rule because it served as one of the only groups in the country willing to oppose Nazism openly though it ultimately could not stop the Nazi government.
Bonhoeffer, Luther, and Confessing Church Doctrine

Martin Luther’s importance was unparalleled for German Protestants. His ideas on how Christians should live and how the Church should operate served as the basis for German Protestantism. Luther was also at the center of the issue for the German Christian and Confessing Church movements. Both sides saw Luther as a national hero and believed they were adhering to Lutheran tradition. The Confessing Church, however, differed from the German Christians by becoming the conservative party among Protestants. They sought to protect as much Lutheranism as possible from the German Christian’s proposed changes. The German Christians saw Luther’s antisemitic and anti-Catholic works as signs that Nazism was a righteous cause. The Confessing Church held on to Lutheran teachings, such as defending the Old Testament as a crucial part of Christianity, and that Christians must follow the teachings of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount. For the Confessors, the German Christians were not Christian at all but were the religious branch of the Nazi regime meant to turn the Protestant Church into a tool of Nazi propaganda. The Confessors believed it was their duty to resist the evils of Nazism and the lies of the German Christians.

The Confessing Church’s position as the anti-Nazi movement within German Protestantism was defined by their theological differences with the German Christians and the Nazi party. One of their most significant differences was their views on the importance of the Old Testament in Christianity. The Confessing Church opposed the German Christians’ disdain for the Old Testament and argued that it was a crucial part of Christianity. The German Christians saw the Old Testament as a Jewish text that had no
place in modern Christianity and held it back. The Confessing Church, however, believed that the Old Testament was crucial to the Christian experience, as Luther argued because it was still the law of God and was meant for Christians to follow. Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued that the Old Testament was important because Jesus did not come to destroy or replace the Old Testament, but to fulfill it, as he says in the Sermon on the Mount.

Bonhoeffer writes:

The law Jesus refers to is the law of the same old covenant, not a new law, but the same law which he quoted to the rich young man and the lawyer when they wanted to know the revealed will of God. It becomes a new law only because it is Christ who binds his followers to it. For Christians, therefore, the law is not a “better law” than that of the Pharisees, but one and the same; every letter of it, every jot and tittle, must remain in force and be observed until the end of the world. But there is a ‘better righteousness’ which is expected of Christians. Without it none can enter into the kingdom of heaven, for it is the indispensible condition of discipleship. None can have better righteousness but those to whom Christ is speaking here, those whom he has called. The call of Christ, in fact Christ himself, is the *sine qua non* of this better righteousness.\(^{112}\)

Bonhoeffer argued that the Law did not change, and thus Christians cannot ignore the Old Testament, but rather that Jesus made it so that humans could attain salvation despite not being able to follow the law fully. For Bonhoeffer, the Law was impossible for humans to follow without error. They needed God’s forgiveness to allow them to receive salvation despite their failure. Bonhoeffer states that Christ is what “binds” Christians to the Law. The Law, without Christ, was not enough, but Christ gave it meaning by forgiving human sin. Here he echoes Luther, who argued that following the Law, no matter how closely, was not enough to receive salvation. Luther wrote: “but human

nature was prepared in this way by the law of Moses, because the Law prepared but did not give, just as a boy is prepared by the tutor to be fit for his inheritance, but it is the father who gives it. Therefore Christ or the faithful people in the Law already seeks to enter into grace and the church of Christ.”

Luther uses the analogy of the boy and the tutor to convey that the Law was crucial in preparing people to receive Christ, but without Christ, it lacked meaning. Bonhoeffer closely follows Luther’s teachings on the Law and defends them against the German Christians. Bonhoeffer questions the German Christians’ willingness to remove the Old Testament from canon. Bonhoeffer writes:

>How tempting then to suppose that Jesus would give the old order its *coup de grâce* by repealing the law of the old covenant, and pronounce his followers free to enjoy the liberty of the Son of God! After all Jesus had said, the disciples might well have thought like Marcion, who accused the Jews of tampering with the text, and altered it to: 'Think ye that I am come to fulfill the law and the prophets? I am not come to fulfill, but to destroy.' Many others since Marcion have read and expounded this saying of Jesus as if that were what he had said. But Jesus says: 'You must not imagine that I have some to destroy the law or prophets...' And so saying he vindicates the authority of the law of the old covenant.

Bonhoeffer states that Jesus warned against people “like Marcion,” who called the Old Testament a Jewish text. He stated that people might argue that the laws of the Old Testament may have been “tampered” with by Jews, which fit the German Christian narrative.

Gnosticism is crucial to understanding the German Christian movement.

Gnosticism is also in opposition to the Confessing Church’s ideology. Hans Blumenberg

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argues that Saint Augustine was the crucial figure in eliminating Gnosticism from Christianity. Blumenberg writes:

the elaboration of *creatio ex nihilo* [creation from nothing] as *concretatio* [cocreation (of matter and form)] was Augustine’s lasting achievement in his commentaries on Genesis. Exegesis no longer could, and no longer wanted to, overlook the fact that God, in the biblical account of creation, had expressly given each of His works the confirmation that it was good. Then where did the bad in the world come from? The answer that Augustine gave to this question was to have the most important consequences of all the decisions he made for the Middle Ages. With a gesture just as stirring as it was fateful, he took for man and upon man the responsibility for the burden of oppression the world.\(^{115}\)

Blumenberg argues that Augustine answered the questions of the Gnostics by stating that evil existed in the world as the result of free will. When humans acted of their own will, they chose to sin rather than live a righteous life. Luther followed this same line of thinking and argued that free will was equal to sin; it was an attempt by humans to move away from God’s will. This is also critical to understanding the division between the Confessing Church and the German Christians. The Confessing Church followed Luther and Augustine’s theology, placing the blame for sin on humans. The German Christians differed on their views of human sinfulness, but often they argue that humans individually are sinful, but the German *Volk* is righteous. Wolf Meyer-Erlach writes:

“true Christianity always stands in the midst of this world, in the God-given orders of marriage, the family, the *Volkstum*, the Fatherland. True faith always breaks open the deadly constriction that priests and scribes cast around life. We are all priests: we are, as

Luther says, all bishops." Meyer-Erlach argues that true freedom is only given by God, but that the Church had become too focused on laws and rituals to lead Christians to that realization, and only a German Church could accomplish that. The German Christians reflected Nazi ideology which praised individual excellence as long as it was in service to the state. For the German Christians, the individual alone was sinful, but as part of the German nation was not. The Confessing Church saw this as problematic, however, as they were placing loyalty to Germans above loyalty to God.

Protestant Morality was a critical reason for the Confessing Church opposing Nazism. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer examined the importance of each verse in the Sermon on the Mount and why it is important for Christians to follow. The Sermon on the Mount, was problematic for Nazi ideology as it opposed most of their many important beliefs. The beatitudes were in complete opposition to Nazi ideology, which Friedrich Nietzsche may have influenced. In *On the Geneology of Morality*, Nietzsche argued that the moral code that was present in Europe in his time came from Judeo-Christian tradition but had replaced an older moral code that promoted “goodness” through power and success. The Nazi party adopted the older “Roman warrior” morality and promoted moral goodness as being successful, especially through service to the state. The Sermon on the Mount teaches what the Nazis saw as weakness, which

117 Ibid., 424-425.
promoted Jewish culture. In 1936, Ludwig Müller wrote *God’s Word in German: The Sermon on the Mount, Germanized*, in which he rewrote the Sermon on the Mount to fit the German people better. Ludwig writes: “Happy the man who bears his suffering like a man. He will find the strength never to sink into despair.” Müller promoted the ideas of suffering with honor and manliness, which were important parts of Nazi ideology. Müller felt that the Sermon on the Mount could be improved to be more relatable to Germans.

Müller wrote: “for whom is the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ rendered into the kind of German we speak today? For those to whom biblical language has become alien. For those who believe that something isn’t quite right about the Christian churches and Christianity itself, but who would like to make their own judgments about Christ and about what he wants.” Müller writes that there are Germans who feel alienated from Christianity and deserve a chance to “make their own judgments” about Christianity. Müller’s statement reveals the belief among German Christians that Christianity was in need of change. The Confessing Church saw this way of thinking as particularly dangerous. For the Confessors, if the German Christians believed that Christianity was in need of being fixed, then they justified changing it in any way they saw fit. Bonhoeffer’s *A Testament to Freedom* is crucial for revealing the Confessing Church’s ideology because Bonhoeffer defends the Sermon on the Mount and Christianity as a whole. He argues that Christianity does not need to be corrected and to do so was to defy God’s word.

Bonhoeffer writes: “is it not possible that we cling too closely to our own favorite

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120 Ibid., 386.
presentation of the gospel, and to a type of preaching which was all very well in its own time and place and for the social set-up for which it was originally intended? . . . Does not our preaching contain too much of our own opinions and too little of Jesus Christ?" Bonhoeffer argued that Christians had become too focused on their own interpretations rather than trying to understand the meaning of the Scriptures as Christ intended. Bonhoeffer sees Müller and other German Christians as focusing on interpreting the Scriptures how they want to, rather than how Christ wanted them to be interpreted. Bonhoeffer and the Confessors saw the Nazi party as promoting violence and hatred. For the Confessors, the Sermon on the Mount became even more significant as it spoke to their situation. The Confessors were persecuted by the Nazi regime and opposed the war and their antisemitic policies. The Confessors believed that the moral code of Christianity compelled them to resist Nazi ideology, even if it meant persecution.

Bonhoeffer’s support of Jews did not mean that he saw them as theologically correct. Bonhoeffer believed that Christians had certain expectations that Jews did not have because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer states: “but there is a ‘better righteousness’ which is expected of Christians.” This “better righteousness” is what Bonhoeffer believes separates Christians from everyone else, including Jews. Bonhoeffer writes: “it is not the law which distinguishes the disciples from the Jews, but the ‘better righteousness. The righteousness of the disciples, we are told, exceeds that of the scribes. That is because it is something extraordinary and unusual.” Crucially to Bonhoeffer,

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122 Ibid., 120.
123 Ibid., 124.
he argues that this righteousness is not inherent but that it is expected of Christians. Christians have expectations to live up to that are presented to them by the Old Testament. Bonhoeffer also argues that it is obedience to God that creates Christian ethics. God is the Law, and through him, the Law is made possible to follow. Stephen Plant writes: “Bonhoeffer and Hauerwas insist, Christian ethics is at one with God. And in obedience to God Christians are at one with the natural, working, and the grain of the universe. It is all other ethics that are fissiparous, all other ethics that are dualistic, all other ethics that are sectarian.”

Bonhoeffer believed that Christian ethics were different from all other ethics because Christian ethics are based on the obedience to God whose laws are perfect.

Bonhoeffer argued, like Luther, that the Old Testament predicted the coming of Christ. For this reason, the Old Testament is not a Jewish book but Christian. Luther also believed that one of the primary functions of the Old Testament is that it predicts the coming of Christ and outlines why he is necessary. Bonhoeffer continues this tradition, arguing that Jesus did not create a new religion but fulfilled the promises made by God in the Old Testament. Bonhoeffer writes: “Jesus manifests his perfect union with the will of God as revealed in the Old Testament law and prophets. He has in fact nothing to add to the commandments of God, except this, that he keeps them. He fulfills the law.”

Bonhoeffer argued that Jesus did not change anything, but rather he completed the prophecy that predicted his coming and fulfilled the Law. For Bonhoeffer, fulfillment of

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the Law meant to make it possible for humans to live up to. Before Jesus, it was impossible to follow the Law perfectly. After Jesus Christ, humans did not have to follow the Law exactly; they could fail and still receive salvation.

The Confessing Church supported its opposition to Nazism with Luther’s teachings. John Queripel writes: “this thought [sola gratia] of course had a radical outworking within the political and social order by stripping away all distinctions of self-righteousness.”126 Queripel argues that Luther’s teaching of salvation through only God’s grace was as socially revolutionary as it was religiously because it made all people equally sinful and thus on equal footing before God. Queripel writes: “if no one was more justified than anyone else before the great Lord then why should one seek justification before the lesser lords?”127 Sola Gratia reemerged as an issue for the Nazi party. The Nazis promoted the idea of success through victory. In Nazi ideology, those who served the state well, especially as soldiers, were more morally good than those who did not fight, who they saw as cowards and traitors for not serving the state. The Confessing Church held on to the Lutheran teaching of Sola Gratia. They believed that if serving the state meant committing sinful acts, it was not justified.

Martin Luther’s influence on Dietrich Bonhoeffer is critical to understanding Bonhoeffer’s theology. Luther was crucial for all German Protestants, but the interpretations of Lutheran theology differed greatly among each group. Bonhoeffer’s theology was analogous to Luther’s. Stephen Plant argues that Bonhoeffer’s theology was

127 Ibid., 6.
formed primarily through his reading of Luther’s translation of the Bible because it was a distinctly German translation and because of Luther’s belief in the centrality of Christ.

Plant writes:

Bonhoeffer thought it was significant that he base his exegesis upon a German translation of the Bible: ‘Anyone really concerned with the salvation of his soul,’ he said in 1935, ‘has found that Luther’s German version of Holy Scripture still best fulfills the demand for the presentation of the Gospel in a German way. Here is Christianity which is both present and German.

Plant argues that Luther’s Bible being in German was crucial for Bonhoeffer because it gives it a personal connection. Plant also argues that Bonhoeffer closely followed Luther’s interpretation of the Bible. Stephen Plant writes: “Bonhoeffer adopted Luther’s understanding of Scripture—its unity, its centrality for theology and the nature of its authority rooted in Christ—as his own.”

Bonhoeffer is also critical to understanding the Confessing Church because he represents its followers’ loyalty to Lutheran teachings. Bonhoeffer’s defense of the Old Testament was important in shaping the Confessing Church’s theological stance, but so was his view on Luther’s “two kingdoms” doctrine. Luther argued for the separation of church and state in order to prevent the state from interfering with the church for political gain. This was crucial for Bonhoeffer’s stance against Nazism because he saw the German Christians as an example of the dangers of political influence on Christianity. Bonhoeffer believed that the importance of politics in German society was a contributing factor to the rise of Nazism. Stephen Plant writes:

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Bonhoeffer accepted that the reasons behind collusion of most Germans in Nazi policy and practice were complex. They had little to do with fear—too many Germans fought bravely in the Nazi cause for that casual explanation to be sustainable. Rather, the explanation lay in the deep-rooted German tradition of uncritical obedience to authority. For Bonhoeffer, God’s demand for responsible human ‘action in a bold venture of faith’ is in the sharpest possible contrast to blind obedience. Obeying God calls for complete obedience, yet not blind obedience, for it involves both discernment and responsibility.\textsuperscript{129}

For Bonhoeffer, blind obedience to the state was why so many Germans did not act against the Nazi regime. He also saw it as why there was a need to separate the church from the state. Bonhoeffer writes:

\begin{quote}
He [Paul] is not concerned to excuse or condemn any secular power. No State is entitled to read into St. Paul’s words justification of its own existence. Should any State take to heart these words, they would be just as much a challenge to repentance for that State as they are for the Church. . . St. Paul certainly does not speak to the Christians in this way because the governments of this world are so good, but because the Church must obey the will of God, whether the State be bad or good.
\end{quote}

Bonhoeffer argues that the state does not have the right to “read into” Paul’s words what it wants for its own political use. This is what the German Christians were doing as Bonhoeffer saw it. They were interpreting the Bible in a way that allowed them to continue to call themselves Christian while supporting the Nazi party. Bonhoeffer feared that the German Christians would make the Church another political tool of the Nazi regime.

The Confessing Church’s approach to addressing Martin Luther’s anti-Judaic writings was to respond with his pro-Judaic writings from earlier in his life and his

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 140-141.
defense of the Old Testament. Christopher J. Probst writes that Confessing Church pastor Hermann Steinlein wrote a defense of Luther in response to German Christian claims that he was against the Old Testament. Probst wrote:

The most convincing proofs come from the ‘three anti-Jewish writings of 1542/43,’ which he says contain roughly 850 biblical quotations, 600 of which come from the Old Testament. By his count, 80 percent of Luther’s biblical citations in *On the Jews and Their Lies* are from Hebrew Scriptures. Luther’s ‘very energetic fight against Judaism’ relies primarily upon evidence summoned from the Old Testament, which the reformer regarded as ‘unshakeable’ truth.\(^{130}\)

Probst also argues that most Confessing Church theologians were anti-Jewish, but not did not support the genocide of Jews.\(^{131}\) Probst argues that the Confessing Church theologians argued that Luther defended the Old Testament, not Jews. Probst writes:

“[Gerhard] Schmidt sums up cogently, ‘he does not reject the O.T. because of the Jews, but rather the opposite: because of the O.T. he rejects the Jews!’ This summary is indicative not only of Schmidt’s position toward Jewish people but also his affirmation of the Old Testament as the Word of God, both positions being in accordance with Luther’s views.”\(^{132}\) Gerhard Schmidt’s statement reveals the Confessing Church belief that Luther opposed Judaism on a theological level, which also applied to their view of Jews. The Confessing Church disagreed with Jews theologically but generally did not agree with the Nazi stance of Jewish racial inferiority. Probst also uses Hansgeorg Schroth as an example of the Confessing Church’s view of Luther’s anti-Judaic writings. Probst writes: “he [Schroth] argues, the reformer proceeded from an essentially medieval mindset that

\(^{130}\) Christopher J. Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 77.

\(^{131}\) Ibid., 81.

\(^{132}\) Ibid., 80.
regarded the Jew as holding a ‘completely foreign nature’ and thus deserved isolation from the Volk.”

Schroths’s statement reveals the Confessing Church’s stance of defending Luther as a product of his time. They saw Luther’s anti-Judaic attitudes as a medieval response to coming into contact with a different ethnic group. The Confessing Church’s response to Luther’s anti-Judaic writings was to defend them. The Confessors defended Luther as being only theologically opposed to Jews, as they were, and that he was a product of his time. The Confessors saw Luther as a theological hero, and his anti-Judaic writings made sense to their theology, but to use them as a defense for genocide was problematic.

The Confessing Church in Nazi Germany

The Confessing Church had a crucial role within Nazi German society. The Confessing Church was a form of resistance to Nazi rule and was thus heavily persecuted. However, the Confessing Church struggled to effectively resist the Nazi regime. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and several other Protestant theologians founded the Confessing Church movement to defend German Protestant values from being destroyed by the German Christian movement. However, the reality of opposing the Nazi regime proved to be difficult. Members of the Confessing Church had differing opinions on how to resist, but most chose to peacefully oppose the Nazi government. Most of the Confessing Church members chose to oppose the Nazi regime on a purely theological level. They saw the German Christian movement as the religious wing of the Nazi party and opposed their theology. The Confessing Church saw the German Christians as

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133 Ibid., 106.
making too many changes. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the few who chose to take action against the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer also believed in passive resistance early in the Nazi era. However, his opinion changed after the war began, and rumors of the atrocities committed by the SS spread around Germany. John Queripel writes:

For Bonhoeffer it was clearly necessary to stop the state carrying out evil not just in the religious realm but wherever and against whomever it was being perpetrated. Such thinking led to Bonhoeffer’s later involvement in the conspiracy and even to be part of the plot to assassinate the Fuhrer. The journey to such a position must not of course have been very easy for one who had at one stage been so drawn to the non-violent resistance of Gandhi.

Bonhoeffer’s belief that the inaction of the Confessing Church was enough when faced with the tyranny of the Nazi regime was shared by many others who questioned the inaction and indecisiveness of the Confessors. Bonhoeffer believed that in order to stop such a destructive and evil regime as the Nazis, action was needed. Eventually, Bonhoeffer lost faith in the Confessing Church. John Queripel wrote that one of the most important reasons that Bonhoeffer lost faith in the Confessing Church was: “the increasing inability and ineffectiveness of its opposition to the Nazi juggernaut.”

Bonhoeffer believed that the Nazi regime was too evil and too destructive to take a lukewarm stance against.

The Confessing Church, despite its opposition to Nazism and the German Christian movement, was not particularly pro-Judaism. There was still a significant theological divide between the Confessing Church and Judaism. As close followers of

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Luther, they share many of his disagreements with Jewish doctrine. One of the most important issues the Confessing Church had with Judaism was the role of the Law. The Confessors believed Jews focused too much on the Law and saw it as a replacement for God’s grace. Bonhoeffer writes: “but that means that he [Jesus] must die. He alone understands the true nature of the law as God’s law: the law is not itself God, nor is God the law. It was the error of Israel to put the law in God’s place, to make the law their God and their God a law.”

Bonhoeffer, like Luther and the German Christians, believed that Jews had become too reliant on the Law and lacked the spirituality needed to give the Law meaning. Other Confessing Christians shared Bonhoeffer’s beliefs. Victoria J. Barnett and Wolfgang Erlach write: “but the visible church hardly offered the Jews a refuge. Herein lay the arrogance of evangelism: playing with the fire of its claim to absolute truth, Christianity placed itself in a light that would ‘illuminate’ the Jews if they became Christians but consume them if they remained Jews.”

The Confessing Church still saw Jews as problematic for not converting to Christianity. Jews still denied Jesus, and thus God, which made them theologically problematic for Christians. The Confessing Church differed from the German Christians by not moving beyond theology where the German Christians became focused on race and culture.

Despite the criticisms the Confessing Church received, there were attempts to aid the Jewish population, particularly through emigration. Pastor Heinrich Grüber was a Confessing Christian that was crucial in helping Jews escape Germany to the Netherlands.

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in the years prior to the country’s defeat and annexation by Germany. Grüber set up a network with Confessing Church pastors from across Germany to aid in helping Jews escape to the Netherlands. Grüber’s network also cooperated with Catholic priests that formed a similar relief agency called the Raphael Association.\textsuperscript{137} Other attempts by the Confessing Church to oppose the German Christians included writing petitions and public statements against the German Christians and the State Church. Confessing Church pastor Hermann Diem wrote in a letter to the Bavarian Bishop Hans Meier:

\begin{quote}
As Christians we can no longer tolerate the fact that the church in Germany keeps silent about the persecution of the Jews. In the Church of the Gospel, all members are co-responsible for the proper exercise of the preaching office. For this reason, we acknowledge our complicity in this [the Church’s] failure in this matter. . . What compels us, first of all, is the simple commandment to love our neighbor as Jesus explained in the parable of the Good Samaritan, explicitly rejecting any limitations to fellow believers, racial comrades, and fellow members of the Volk.\textsuperscript{138}
\end{quote}

Diem’s petition reveals the Confessing Church’s position as remaining loyal to the Church and the Bible over the state. Diem writes that the Confessors are “compelled” by the Word of God to defend their neighbor against unjust persecution. Standing against Nazism was crucial for the Confessing Church, but how they carried out their opposition differed. For some, it was necessary to help the persecuted Jews escape Germany. For others, it was important to call out the Nazi government and the Church for its complicity. For others, it was best to oppose the German Christians on a purely theological level.

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 156.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 215.
There were some similarities between the Confessing Church and the German Christian movement. Both sides agreed that society had become less spiritual and more individualistic. Stephen Plant writes: “yet for Bonhoeffer the moral crisis that met the eye so appallingly in Nazi Germany was an outcrop of a more serious crisis in human ethics. . . The Nazis had brought Europe’s moral calamity to a head; but because it went deeper than Nazi misrule of criminality it would not dissipate when the Nazis were consigned to the dustbin of history.” Plant argues that Bonhoeffer recognized that the Nazis did not form out of nothing, but that there was a “moral crisis” in Europe that had been building up for centuries. Plant also writes: “liberal culture had gone too far in individualizing ethics and the life of faith. All theological concepts, Bonhoeffer asserted, are social. In particular, sin is social, since it disrupts social relations between people as well as the relation of human beings with God. Ethics is not simply a matter for private reflection and decision; it is central to the life of a community.” Bonhoeffer believed that western society had become too individualistic and that the community, especially the Church community, did not have the importance it once had in people’s life. In his discussion of the importance of the “means” and the “ends,” Bonhoeffer writes: “and grant that this [the “Ends”] is the same to the individual and to the community, yet surely that of the latter is plainly greater and more perfect to discover and preserve: for to do this even for a single individual were a matter for contentment; but to do it for a whole nation, and for communities generally, were more noble and godlike.”

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140 Ibid, 111-112.
desires of individuals were often selfish, while the desires of the community were often for the betterment of the entire community and thus were more “noble and godlike.”

Plant also states that Bonhoeffer saw this decline in the community’s importance due to the Enlightenment and liberalism. The German Christians shared similar concerns, as they believed German society in particular was in decline as a result of individualism. The Confessors differed in whom they blamed for the “moral crisis” and how they believed it should be corrected. Both the Confessors and German Christians supported the return of a strong community to the Church, but German Christians believed it was first necessary to remove the cause of the issue: Judaism.

**Conclusion:**

The Confessing Church’s theological opposition to the German Christians was rooted in its loyalty to Lutheran doctrine. Luther was perceived in contrasting ways by the German Christians and the Confessors. The Confessors chose to focus on the side of Luther that defended the Old Testament and defended Jesus being an ethnic Jew rather than the side of Luther that wrote *On the Jews and their Lies*. Both movements interpreted Luther in different ways and used his writings to support their beliefs. The Confessing Church chose to focus on Luther’s positive contributions to Christian theology. For the Confessors, Luther was not a national hero, but a Christian hero whose writings were crucial in forming their theology. The Confessing Church believed themselves to have stayed true to Lutheran teachings and saw the German Christians as un-Christian and a splinter group that was a better reflection of Nazi ideology than Protestant theology. The German Christian rejection of the Old Testament was a critical
issue between the two Church movements. The German Christians based their rejection of the Old Testament on a gnostic interpretation of the Old Testament. They saw the Old Testament as problematic for Christianity because the God of the Old Testament differed greatly from the God of the New Testament. The Confessing Church, more precisely Dietrich Bonhoeffer, countered with the argument that Jesus addresses this issue in the Sermon on the Mount. The Confessing Church took its stance as the opposition to Nazism and the German Christians on a theological level.

The Confessing Church was also ideologically opposed to Nazism, namely their anti-Jewish policies, pro-war and pro-violence beliefs, and anti-Christian beliefs and policies. The Confessors saw the anti-Jewish legislation enacted as morally wrong. The Confessing Church was a crucial part of Nazi-era German society because of its position as the theological opposition to the Nazi party. The Confessing Church Christians represent the Germans that did not side with the Nazis or blindly support them. The Confessors were the conservatives in that they wanted to conserve German society, particularly Protestant theology, from before Nazi rule. The best example of the Confessing Church’s conservative desires is its founder and leader, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer remained true to Martin Luther’s teachings even after he was arrested and held in prisons and concentration camps leading up to his execution.

The Confessing Church was heavily criticized for opposing Nazism only on a theological basis and not taking action against them. This criticism is in part a response to the stance that Dietrich Bonhoeffer takes to leave the Confessing Church and have a more active role in resistance by joining the Abwehr. The question remains as to why the other
Confessors did not follow in the footsteps of their founder and leader. This question is also important in understanding the German people and their relationship with the Nazi regime. The Confessors were not necessarily pro-Jewish, but they did believe that the killing of Jews was morally wrong. However, the Confessing Church is criticized for its stance on Jews without taking into account the difficulty of actually aiding Jews in Nazi Germany. The Confessing Church was persecuted for its opposition to Nazi rule, and the punishment for aiding the persecuted Jews became more harsh as the war continued.

Victoria J. Barnett and Wolfgang Gerlach write: “assistance to Jews was made more difficult by intensified anti-Jewish legislation, and the military conscription of pastors that began in September 1939. Belatedly mobilized, many Christians now discovered that their options for defending the Jews had become much more limited.”

The Confessing Church’s critical mistake was the failure to act earlier in the Nazi era. Barnett and Gerlach write:

Only now did some Christians begin to wake up. In the Early years of the Nazi regime, the Confessing Church had been unable to bring itself to make a unanimous statement on behalf of the Jews. Now the chance for public statements had passed. During the last four years of the reign of terror, the inaction of the Church was replaced by direct, spontaneous deed—liberated, in a sense, from theological reflection. The cellars and attic, closets and cabinets of pastors and lay Christians offered places of asylum for the persecuted.

Where the Confessing Church failed to act against the Nazi regime as an organization, some of its members were inspired to help the persecuted Jews. The example Bonhoeffer

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set was crucial in inspiring other Confessors to do the same. The Confessing Church failed as a movement to effectively oppose Nazism and the German Christian movement, but it was essential for encouraging individuals to act against Nazism and aid the persecuted. By following the example set by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Confessing Church was able to help some Jews escape or find refuge.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Martin Luther’s anti-Judaic writings were based on his theological disagreements with Judaism. Luther saw Judaism as theologically problematic to Christianity and feared Jewish theology would negatively influence Christian’s understanding of the Bible. Luther’s anti-Judaic writings near the end of his life became the subject of much controversy. The pro-Nazi German Christian movement used Luther’s anti-Judaic writings to defend their support of the Nazi party and its antisemitic policies. However, Luther was not the only person to influence the German Christians. The Gnostics played a crucial role in developing their theology. Luther was the Confessing Church’s primary influence, whose theology remained close to Luther’s. Religion is significant in that discussion because it was a crucial part of German culture and national identity. Luther was a national hero and the primary influencer of Protestantism in Germany. German Protestant churches based their theology around his. Understanding Luther’s theology is vital to understanding his role in influencing the German Protestants who supported or joined the Nazi party. Luther saw Jews as having a distant relationship with God and living for the world. Luther identifies Jewish reliance on the Law as being particularly problematic. He argues that Jews focus on the Law as a crucial part of their religion, but because they do not believe in Christ, they believe in a Law that cannot be fulfilled and thus has no substance. Lutheran Germans adopted Luther’s criticisms of Judaism in the following centuries. German Protestants in the Weimar era gravitated towards Luther’s
criticisms again with the rise of anti-Jewish sentiments in the wake of German defeat in World War 1 and the “stab in the back” conspiracy.

The German Christian movement portrays the rise in anti-Jewish sentiments among Protestants. The German Christians feared Jewish influence would decay German culture and Lutheranism. The German Christians saw Germany’s defeat in World War 1, the weakness and corruption of the Weimar Republic, and the rise of communism as signs of the collapse of German society. They hoped the Nazi party would end the threat and protect German society and religion. The German Christians used Luther’s anti-Judaic writings to support their claims of the Jewish threat and saw Luther as a hero who recognized the Jewish threat before most other people. However, the German Christian movement’s theology varied greatly and differed between German Christian theologians and non-theologians. The theologians were influenced by figures other than Luther, particularly the Gnostics. The German Christians were attracted to the Gnostics’ criticism of the Old Testament, which included too many Jewish elements, and wanted it removed from Biblical canon. The German Christians used their freedom under the Nazi regime to pursue this route and remove the Old Testament from Biblical canon. The German Christians, while still influenced by Luther, were influenced by other groups and found it challenging to combine Lutheran theology with Nazism outside of his anti-Judaic writings.

The Confessing Church movement formed after the German Christian’s creation and rise to power in the DEK. The Confessors opposed the German Christians’ theology and saw them as the religious wing of the Nazi party rather than a legitimate religious
movement. The Confessors feared that the changes the German Christians made would not stop at removing the Old Testament from canon but would transform the DEK into a tool of Nazi propaganda. Luther heavily influenced the Confessing Church, and its primary leaders, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, defended the Old Testament and the other theological elements under German Christian attack with Luther’s theology. Luther also defended the Old Testament as a crucial component of the Bible on equal footing with the New Testament. Luther argued that the Old Testament was essential for giving humans a sense of morality, and it predicted the coming of Christ. The Nazi Government persecuted the Confessing Church for its opposition to the German Christians, and several prominent leaders were imprisoned or executed.

A crucial question of modern German history is how were the Nazis able to take control of Germany? This question has resulted in numerous answers from many different historians. Germany seems to be peculiar in that they not only allowed a fascist movement to take control of the government, but one that started the deadliest war in history and committed atrocities on a grand scale. A crucial component of understanding how and why the Nazis came to power in Germany is understanding why so many Germans supported them. The Protestant, middle-class Germans were particularly supportive of the Nazi party. Examining the religious component is crucial to answering this question. The link between Martin Luther’s anti-Judaic writings and the Nazi party’s antisemitic policies is important because of the Protestant support for the Nazi party. Luther’s writings criticize Jews primarily theologically, but he also calls for the expulsion of Jews and for Germans to attack Jews. However, the Nazi party was not a Christian
movement and was ideologically opposed to many Christian beliefs. How, then, could Protestant Germans be both Christians and Nazi supporters? The German Christian movement dealt with this issue and tried to consolidate their Christian and National Socialist beliefs, which proved difficult. For many German Christians, it meant transforming Christianity to fit into Nazi ideology, such as making Jesus an Aryan martyr who fought against Judaism and changing scriptures to promote strength and war rather than perseverance through suffering and humility.

Luther was the key figure for the Confessing Church and the German Christians. Christopher J. Probst writes: “support for Luther cut across the spectrum in the Church struggle. Members of the German Christians, the Confessing Church, and those in the Protestant middle all appealed to Luther to support their views on various issues. For many, this was also true with respect to Luther’s views on Jews and Judaism.”

The German Christians and the Confessing Church used Luther’s writings to support their views, but they focused on different aspects of Lutheran theology. The German Christians focused on Luther’s anti-Judaic writings. They saw him as warning Germans of the Jewish threat and interpreted his writings as anti-Jewish. The Confessing Church viewed Luther as the founder of their Church and a theological hero more so than a national hero. They interpreted Luther’s writings to mean he was a staunch defender of the Old Testament rather than an anti-Semite nationalist. They interpreted his anti-Judaic writings to mean that he was criticizing Jews for their lack of spirituality and religiosity.

143 Christopher J. Probst, Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 82.
rather than attacking them for being racially inferior. Luther’s position is unique because he is crucial to both sides of the Protestant Church’s struggle despite their antithetical beliefs.

Before World War 2, the Nazi regime, and the German Christian movement, Martin Luther was a significant figure in the lives of many Germans. Roughly half of the German population was Protestant in 1933 and thus was exposed to Luther’s theology. How has Luther’s legacy changed since 1945? Luther had an unparalleled role in the DEK. Through the German Christians, the DEK also had a significant role in helping the Nazi regime by garnering support among the predominantly Protestant population. Luther’s anti-Judaic writings also took on a new meaning after the horrors of the Holocaust. The connection between Luther’s anti-Judaic writings, especially his call for expulsion and violence against Jews, seems in line with Nazi ideology after the Holocaust. Luther does not have the same role in the lives of Germans as he once did. How did the Nazi regime change the way people viewed the hero of German Protestantism?
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