The Church and the Jewish Question

*(Die Kirche vor der Juden Frage)*

April 1933

This essay, written for a discussion group of pastors meeting at the house of Gerhard Jacobi in April 1933, was intended by Bonhoeffer to address the major questions that had come to dominate church discussions at that time, namely, the rising demand for an Aryan Clause in the church and its potential effects on baptized non-Aryans, especially those who held office in the congregations. These were facing not only discrimination but also rejection by the German Christians. Originally, Bonhoeffer had drawn up six theses that analyzed this problem. However, in the meantime, the boycott directed against Jewish merchants and the passage of the discriminatory laws of April 7, 1933 moved Bonhoeffer to write a completely new section to precede discussion of the six theses. This new section dealt solely with the question of discrimination against and victimization of the Jews without any reference to differentiating between the baptized and the non-baptized Jew. It was this wholly new section, presented in the beginning, that created such a stir among the pastors that some left the gathering.²

One must, therefore, examine this paper in context. If originally Bonhoeffer's paper was to constitute an argument against the demeaning status the Reich Church would force on baptized non-Aryans, the new section was calling for church action in defense of Jews regardless of their baptismal status. Bonhoeffer advocated, first, that the church admonish the state; second, that it help the victims regardless of their religious affiliation; and, third, that the church consider jamming the spokes in the wheel of state. This third challenge is what proved too much for the more conservative, order-loving members of the church. It smacked of revolution and sedition.

This challenge is what those present took to be the essence of the paper, not the later published introductory statements with the lingering, unconscious anti-Semitism that some recent commentators have deracinated from context and seized upon to make a biased case against Bonhoeffer as merely the best of a universally bad lot of Germans.³ In retrospect, the published essay is weakened by traces of the anti-Semitism common among theologians at the time. It likewise
remains somewhat problematic in its interpretation of Luther’s doctrine of the “two kingdoms,” appearing to advocate a certain deference to the state in a moment that called for stark confrontation. Despite these deficiencies, the essay stands as an important, courageous call for the church to act at a time when few dared even speak out in defense of the Jews. There is little doubt that Bonhoeffer’s assessment of the situation created by Nazi persecution of Jews, then in its beginning stage, was both precocious and accurate. In his opinion, to accept this “legalized” denial of civil rights of a whole group of people threatened the integrity of all Christians in Germany. Even if these initial observations on the issue lacked the later, more daring affirmation of the church’s duty to intervene, he did succeed in drawing attention within his church to something most church leaders preferred to ignore: the Christian proclamation itself had been endangered by the Aryan legislation. His call to the revolutionary act of “jamming a spoke in the wheel” of state would be issued only when, according to Bonhoeffer, the state had failed in its duty either by the excess of law and order that led to tyranny or by the defect of law and order that led to anarchy. In a way, nazism had sinned in both directions in its laws denying basic human rights and in the anarchy of its criminal government. The church, he said, was approaching the point where it would “be called to protect the state qua state from itself and to preserve it.”

It seems clear from this that Bonhoeffer had broadened Luther’s doctrine of two realms to include confrontation of the sword of state with the gospel. He makes the “Jewish Question” a Christian church question. He raised what was to become the test question of Christian identity: how closely a Christian identifies with the Jewish people whether baptized or not. Admittedly, these issues represent only the beginning of a new phase in an eventual reconciliation with Judaism. Nonetheless, as German theologian Heinz Eduard Tödt has noted, it was an important beginning: “In 1933 Bonhoeffer was almost alone in his opinions; he was the only one who considered solidarity with the Jews, especially with non-Christian Jews, to be a matter of such importance as to obligate the Christian churches to risk a massive conflict with that state—a risk which could threaten their very existence.”4 In Hitler’s Third Reich such a paper was a rarity.

Did Bonhoeffer ever retract the anti-Semitism that has hung over the published text from centuries of Christian anti-Jewish bias? There is ample evidence that he did. His later judgment on Confessing Church synods always seemed to depend on whether the resolutions included defense of the Jewish people, not merely the baptized among them. His biographer, Eberhard Bethge, reports that he dampened the enthusiastic reception of many a seemingly courageous synodal pronouncement with his own disappointment if the synod in question failed to speak out for the Jews. Church timidity on this issue was one of the reasons he joined the political resistance movement.5 Some of the beginning of that resistance to Hitler is evidenced in the selection that follows.

Now here, of course, the state sees itself to be limited in two respects. Both too much law and order and too little law and order compel the church to speak. There is too little law and order when a group of people becomes
lawless, though in real life it is sometimes extraordinarily difficult to distin-
guish real lawlessness from a formally permitted minimum of law. Even in
slavery a minimum of law and order was preserved, and yet a reintroduc-
tion of slavery would mean real lawlessness. It is at any rate worth noting
that Christian churches tolerated slavery for eighteen centuries and that a
new law was made only at a time when the Christian substance of the
church could at least be put in question, with the help of the churches, but
not essentially or even solely by them. Nevertheless, a step back in this
direction would be to the church the expression of a lawless state. It there-
fore follows that the concept of law is subject to historical change, and this
in its turn once again confirms the state in its characteristic history-making
law. It is not the church, but the state, which makes and changes the law.

Too little law and order stands in contrast to too much law and order.
That means that the state develops its power to such an extent that it
deprives Christian preaching and Christian faith (not freedom of con-
science—that would be the humanitarian illusion, which is illusory because
any life in a state constrains the so-called "free conscience") of their
rights—a grotesque situation, as the state only receives its peculiar rights
from this proclamation and from this faith, and entrones itself by means
of them. The church must reject this encroachment of the order of the
state precisely because of its better knowledge of the state and of the limi-
tations of its action. The state which endangers the Christian proclamation
negates itself.

All this means that there are three possible ways in which the church can
act toward the state: in the first place, as has been said, it can ask the state
whether its actions are legitimate and in accordance with its character as
state, i.e., it can throw the state back on its responsibilities. Second, it can
aid the victims of state action. The church has an unconditional obligation
to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the
Christian community. "Do good to all people." In both these courses of
action, the church serves the free state in its free way, and at times when
laws are changed the church may in no way withdraw itself from these two
tasks. The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the
wheel, but to jam a spoke in the wheel itself. Such action would be direct
political action, and is only possible and desirable when the church sees the
state fail in its function of creating law and order, i.e., when it sees the state
unrestrainedly bring about too much or too little law and order. In both
these cases it must see the existence of the state, and with it its own exis-
tence, threatened. There would be too little law if any group of subjects
were deprived of their rights, too much where the state intervened in the
character of the church and its proclamation, e.g., in the forced exclusion
of baptized Jews from our Christian congregations or in the prohibition of
our mission to the Jews. Here the Christian church would find itself in sta-
tus confessionis and here the state would be in the act of negating itself. A
state which includes within itself a terrorized church has lost its most faith-
ful servant. But even this third action of the church, which on occasion
leads to conflict with the existing state, is only the paradoxical expression of its ultimate recognition of the state; indeed, the church itself knows itself to be called here to protect the state \textit{qua} state from itself and to preserve it. In the Jewish problem the first two possibilities will be the compelling demands of the hour. The necessity of direct political action by the church is, on the other hand, to be decided at any time by an \textquote{Evangelical Council} and cannot therefore ever be casuistically decided beforehand. . . . \cite{NRS, pp. 224–26}