

The Confessing Church: Excerpt from the Declaration of the Second Confessing Synod in Berlin-Dahlem (October 20, 1934)

Abstract

The Nazi regime's totalitarian claim to power also included the ecclesiastical-religious sphere. In 1933, Hitler promised to preserve the rights and integrity of the Christian churches, but his real aim was always their ideological "coordination" [*Gleichschaltung*] and ultimately their abolition. He was well aware, however, that an overly aggressive approach could trigger resistance from the churches and the population. Thus, to the very end, the Nazi regime failed to develop a consistent or definitive policy toward the churches. By 1932, the German Christian movement [*Glaubensbewegung Deutsche Christen*] had already established itself as a Protestant splinter group. It was organized according to the "Führer principle" and sought to merge ecclesiastical and racial doctrines. The creation of the new German Protestant Church [*Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (DEK) or Reich Church] on July 23, 1933, marked the first step in the direction of absolute state control over the Protestant Church. The new church was led by Bishop Ludwig Müller (1883–1945), and the majority of its members came from the German Christian movement. But when the new church leadership advocated the introduction of the Aryan paragraph for church offices and the abolition of the Old Testament, Pastor Martin Niemöller (1892–1984) protested by founding the Pastors' Emergency League. The Confessing Church, which developed out of it, issued the following "Church Emergency Law" at the Second Confessing Synod in October 1934 in Berlin-Dahlem. It challenged the authority and legitimacy of both the Reich Church and the German Christian movement and proclaimed itself the only legitimate Protestant Church. The Confessing Church, however, remained an internally divided minority organization, whose organizational basis was largely destroyed by mass arrests after 1936. In the end, the complete "coordination" of the Protestant Churches was never achieved, and numerous representatives of the church continued to oppose the Nazi regime. Still, the Protestant Church largely yielded to the power of the Nazi state.

Source

1. We declare that the Constitution of the German Evangelical Church has been destroyed. Its legally constituted organs no longer exist. The men who have seized the Church leadership in the Reich and the states have divorced themselves from the Christian Church.
2. In virtue of the right of Churches, religious communities and holders of ecclesiastical office, bound by scripture and confession, to act in an emergency, the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church establishes new organs of leadership. It appoints as leader and representative of the German Evangelical Church, as an association of confessionally determined Churches, the Fraternal Council of the German Evangelical Church and, from among it, the Council of the German Evangelical Church to direct its operations. Both organs are composed and organized in accordance with the confessions.
3. We summon the Christian communities, their pastors and elders, to accept no directives from the present Church Government and its authorities and to decline cooperation with those who wish to remain obedient to this ecclesiastical governance. We summon them to observe the directives of the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church and its recognized organs.

[...]

Source of English translation: Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919–1945*, vol. 2: *State, Economy and Society 1933–1939*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000, p. 390. Edited slightly by GHI staff. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

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