The German church was in turmoil. Some church leaders felt the church should make peace with the Nazis, who were strongly opposed to communism and "godliness." About human identity and community. Across Europe and the world, there had often been strong taboos against mixing races and ethnicities. So even though Bonhoeffer knew that what he was facing was inimical to Christian faith, he knew that such thinking was also widespread. Unlike most Germans, Bonhoeffer had experienced the church far beyond the Lutheran churches of Germany. In Rome, he had seen Christians of many races and nationalities worshiping together; in the United States, he had worshiped with African American Christians in Harlem; and via the ecumenical movement, he had worshiped with other European Christians. The immediate question before him was, what is the church's response to the Jewish question? But the question that stood behind that question was still, what is the church?
The church has the unconditional obligation...not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.

The translation is awkward, but he meant that a stick must be jammed into the spokes of the wheel to stop the vehicle. It is sometimes not enough to help those crushed by the evil actions of a state; at some point the church must directly take action against the state to stop it from perpetrating evil. This, he said, is permitted only when the church sees its very existence threatened by the state, and when the state ceases to be the state as defined by God. Bonhoeffer added that this condition exists if the state forces the “exclusion of baptized Jews from our Christian congregations or in the prohibition of our mission to the Jews.”

The church would be “in statu confessionis and here the state would be in the act of negating itself.” This Latin phrase, which means “in a state of confession,” was originally used as a specifically Lutheran phrase in the sixteenth century. By Bonhoeffer’s time it had come to mean a state of crisis in which the “confession” of the gospel was at stake. To “confess the gospel” simply meant to speak forth the good news of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer continued, “A state which includes within itself a terrorized church has lost its most faithful servant.”

Bonhoeffer went on to say that “to confess Christ” meant to do so to Jews as well as to Gentiles. He declared it vital for the church to attempt to bring the Messiah of the Jews to the Jewish people who did not yet know him. If Hitler’s laws were adopted, this would be impossible. His dramatic and somewhat shocking conclusion was that not only should the church allow Jews to be a part of the church, but that this was precisely what the church was: it was the place where Jews and Germans stand together. “What is at stake,” he said, “is by no means the question whether our German members of congregations can still tolerate church fellowship with the Jews. It is rather the task of Christian preaching to say: here is the church, where Jew and German stand together under the Word of God; here is the proof whether a church is still the church or not.”

To underscore his point, Bonhoeffer concluded with words from Luther’s commentary on Psalm 110:3: “There is no other rule or test for who is a member of the people of God or the church of Christ than this: where there is a little band of those who accept this word of the Lord, teach it purely and confess against those who persecute it, and for that reason suffers what is their due.”

In the spring of 1933, Bonhoeffer was declaring it the duty of the church to stand up for the Jews. This would have seemed radical to even staunch allies, especially since the Jews had not begun to suffer the horrors they would suffer in a few years. Bonhoeffer’s three conclusions—that the church must question the state, help the state’s victims, and work against the state, if necessary—were too much for almost everyone. But for him they were inescapable. In time, he would do all three.

The advent of the Nazi victory and the Nazis’ attempt to co-opt the church resulted in chaos within the church itself, and in fighting and politicking among the many factions of the church. Bonhoeffer wanted to drown out the cacophony of voices and look at these things calmly and logically. He knew that if these questions were not addressed properly, one would be reduced to merely “political answers” or “pragmatic” answers. One could begin to veer away from the true gospel, toward worshiping a god made in one’s own image, rather than God himself, the “eternally other” of whom Barth had spoken and written. During his time in New York City, he had seen many well-meaning Christians at Union Theological Seminary unwittingly abandon that God for many good reasons; so too many of the well-meaning Christians in Germany were now doing the same thing. They were convinced that if they bent their theology a bit, it wouldn’t matter—the results would be all right in the end. Many of them
The April 1 Boycott

In April 1933, Hitler declared a boycott of Jewish stores across Germany. The stated purpose was stopping the international press, which the Nazis maintained was controlled by the Jews, from printing lies about the Nazi regime. They always cast their aggressions as about the Nazi regime. They always cast their aggressions as against them and the German people.

Goebbels spoke at a rally in Berlin that day, fulminating against the “Jewish atrocity propaganda,” and everywhere across Germany SA men intimidated shoppers from entering Jewish-owned stores, whose windows had been daubed in black or yellow paint with stars of David and the word Jude (Jew). The SA also handed out pamphlets and held placards: “Deutsche Wehrt Euch! Kauft Nicht Bei Juden” (Germans, defend yourselves from Jews!). Some signs were in English: “Germans, defend yourselves from Jews!”

People who recognized them would stake everything on it. But it would be a long and lonely road.

The hope, so eagerly nourished, that Hitler would soon ruin himself by mismanagement was shattered.

On the day of the boycott in Berlin, Dietrich’s grandmother was shopping. The patrician of the church of Jesus Christ was foolishness and heresy. From the time Bonhoeffer finished writing “The Church and the Jewish Question,” he saw this clearly and would stake everything on it. But it would be a long and lonely road.

Bonhoeffer was forever considering all sides of a question, sometimes to a fault.

Gerhard was a popular professor of law at Göttingen, so it wasn’t long before they were directly affected by the mounting anti-Semitism. At one point, the National Socialist student leaders in Göttingen called for a boycott of his classes. Sabine recalled:

“National Socialism established itself with lightning swiftness.”

On the actual day of the boycott in order to be there and to hear what the students would have to say, some students were standing there in SA uniform, straddling the doorway in their jackboots as only these SA men could and not allowing anyone to enter. “Leibholz must not lecture, he is a Jew. The lectures are not taking place.” obediently the students went home. A corresponding notice had been posted on the blackboard. After a while, Sabine and Gerhard needed only to walk down the street in Göttingen to breathe the poisonous atmosphere. People who recognized them crossed to the other side to avoid them. “In Göttingen,” Sabine said, “many tried to collaborate. Lecturers who had not achieved further promotion now saw their opportunity.” But a few were sensitized at what was taking place and were not afraid to express their horror. The theologian Walter Bauers met them on the street and launched into a tirade against Hitler. When Gerhard lost his position, another professor approached him and, with tears in his eyes, said, “Sir, you are my colleague and I am ashamed to be a German.” And a group of students from Gerhard’s seminar went to the Ministry to ask that he be allowed to teach.

Many of Gertrude’s relatives lost their jobs too. One Jewish school friend of Gerhard committed suicide. There was constant news of this sort. On Reformation Day, a few months after his decision not to preach at Gert’s father’s funeral, Bonhoeffer wrote Gert and Sabine in Göttingen:

I am tormented even now by the thought that I didn’t do as you asked me as a matter of course. To

Joseph Goebbels
Throughout 1933, the Nazis continued their campaign to legally bar Jews from state-affiliated institutions. More and more laws were enacted along the lines of the April 7 Reformation of the Civil Service. On April 22, Jews were prohibited from serving as patent lawyers, and Jewish doctors from working in institutions with state-run insurance. Jewish children were affected too. On April 25, strict limits were placed on how many of them could attend school. On May 6, the laws were expanded to include all public schools. On May 6, the laws included the spouses of non-Aryans. On September 29, Jews were banned from all cultural and entertainment activities, including the worlds of film, theater, literature, and the arts.

In October, all newspapers were placed under Nazi control, expelling Jews from the world of journalism. By the fall, the laws continued apace. 

The aggressive attacks from the German Christians during April shocked a number of pastors and theologians into action. Heinrich Vogel published his “Eight Articles of Evangelical Doctrine.” Some Westphalian pastors published a declaration that, like Bonhoeffer’s essay, roundly rejected as heresy the exclusion of baptized Jews from German churches. The young Reformation movement came into being, representing a number of theological points of view—all opposed to the German Christians, but not agreed on much else. And Gerhard Jacobi, who would work arm in arm with Bonhoeffer in the church struggle, began meeting with other pastors at the Café am Knie in Charlottenburg. There were so many theological and political points of view in the opposition that they could never muster a single, focused plan of resistance. But they would try.

“Where Books Are Burned . . .”

In May 1933, the madness continued apace. Gleichschaltung was much discussed. This idea, which Göring referenced at the German Christians’ conference in Berlin the previous month, meant that everything in “German” society must fall in line with the Nazi worldview. This included the world of books and ideas.

Karl Bonhoeffer had a front-row seat to see how the Nazis exerted pressure on the universities. When the Nazi minister for cultural affairs spoke at Berlin University, Bonhoeffer recalled with shame that even though he found the man’s attitude insulting, neither he nor his colleagues felt sufficient courage to walk out in protest. He was at the University of Berlin another five years, and only with some effort did he manage to avoid displaying a portrait of Hitler. Anti-Semitism had existed for decades among the students of German universities, but now they expressed it formally. That spring the German Students Association planned to celebrate an “Action against the un-German Spirit” on May 10. At 11:00 p.m. thousands of students gathered in every university town across Germany. From Heidelberg to Tübingen to Freiburg to Göttingen, where the Leibholzes lived, they marched in torchlight parades and were then whipped into wild-eyed enthusiasm as Nazi officials raved about the glories of what the brave young men and women of Germany were about to do. At midnight the whole thing roared to grand effect in a great Sauberung (cleansing) where huge bonfires were lit and into which the students hurled thousands of books.

Thus Germany would be “purged” of the pernicious un-German thoughts of authors such as Helen Keller, Jack London, and H. G. Wells. Erich Maria Remarque’s books were included, as were those of many others, including Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann. In 1821, in his play Almúnia, the German poet Heinrich Heine wrote the chilling words: “Where books are burned, they will, in the end, burn people, too.” That night across Germany his books were among those thrown into the cracking flames. Sigmund Freud, whose books were also burned that night, made a similar remark: “Only our books! In earlier times they would have burned us with them.” In Berlin, at the Opernplatz, stood the great pile of wood that would become the bonfire. The bonfires were only the beginning, and much worse lay in store for the Jewish people and those Germans who would come to their aid.

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Addressing the thirty thousand, the vampiric homunculus Joseph Goebbels ranted into the darkness: “German men and women! The age of arrogant Jewish intellectualism is now at an end! . . . You are doing the right thing at this midnight hour—to consign to the flames the unclean spirit of the past. This is a great, powerful, and symbolic act. . . . Out of these ashes the phoenix of a new age will arise. . . . O Century! O Science! It is a joy to be alive!”

As with so much else in the Third Reich, the scene had an undeniably macabre aspect to it: the midnight bonfire feeding like a succubus on the noble thoughts and words of great men and women. Goebbels, the propagandist, well knew that to stage a torchlight parade, followed by a bonfire at the stroke of midnight, evoked something ancient and tribal and pegan and invoked the gods of the German Volk, who represented strength and ruthlesslessness and blood and soil. The ritual was not meant to be Christian in any sense: indeed it was very much meant to be anti-Christian, though it wouldn’t do to say so, since most of those present might have bailed to hear such a thing, though they well felt it. The torches and the drums and the procession were meant to create an atmosphere of ominousness and foreboding and fear, and to summon forces who knew nothing of the weak virtues of the Christian faith, but stood in fundamental opposition to them and to the monotheistic religion of the despised Jews.

The torches were the only beginning, and much worse lay in store for the Jewish people and those Germans who would come to their aid.

Though the momentum of the Third Reich grew with apparently unstoppable force, Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew with growing certainty that he must act as a spoke in the wheel of evil, even if it cost him his life.

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