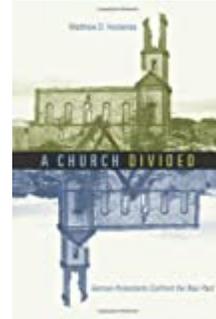


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Matthew D. Hockenos. *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. xii + 269 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34448-9.



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Grasping the Nettles

A plethora of studies about the end of the war in Europe surrounded the sixtieth anniversary of VE Day. While most works have focused on the defeat of National Socialist Germany and the military, political, and social processes within the last days of the Third Reich, it is encouraging to see works such as this book, which turns a light onto the situation that confronted German Protestants in the spring of 1945. How were Christians to answer for the cataclysm that enveloped the Fatherland in the last months of the war? As camps were liberated, cities pounded to rubble, and the Nazi leadership scuttled for cover, “ordinary” believers were forced to confront the truth of the regime that many of them had supported with loyalty and affection since 1933. Guilt, historical amnesia, profound dislocation, and the loss of the comforts of religion were as prevalent as hunger, homelessness, and the heartache of death. The struggle to face up to the truth that the Protestant churches in Germany had, for the most part, been complacent and tolerant of the National Socialist erosion of Christian values was difficult, to the point of impossible for many theologians, pastors and congregations.

For a brave few who demanded an honest reckoning, it was a hard and often unforgiving journey. It is for these reasons and others, that Matthew Hockenos’s book is a timely and welcome study. Hockenos writes in a “reader friendly” manner that makes his research accessible for the academic and general reader. He has a strong grasp of Protestant theology and theologians, German history and historians, which makes for clear and cogent arguments and lead to a clear and cogent history. Opening with a survey of the main questions involved, the differing historiographies and methodologies used, and the post-1945 chronology that is charted through the book, Hockenos introduces the reader to the complex task of trying to understand how German Protestants came to confront their recent past.

Divided German Protestantism was further separated into three primary divisions during the Third Reich—the majority of non-committed Christians, the *Bekennende Kirche*, and the pro-Nazi German Christian movement. At war’s end, these divisions remained, and with the exception of the defunct German Christians, continued well into the postwar era. Not surprisingly, the Con-

fessing Church could claim a history of defiance towards the Nazis; but they were outnumbered by the majority of Protestant congregations, which were unable to accept responsibility for the totality of German and Nazi barbarism. Consequently statements were mixed with a blend of penitence and myth. Sorrow that the churches had failed to live out their Christian faith went side by side with vague acknowledgements that dreadful things had been done to the Jews and others victimized by the Nazis.

What was inescapable was a growing sense of German Protestant victimhood—yes, Jews were victims, but so were German Christians. And this mood was soon raised to a new moral dimension through a myth of resistance that shamelessly paralleled German Protestant “resistance” with the experience of the Hebrews in the Exodus narrative, or the prevailing sense of despair with Isaiah’s proclamations to the sinful Israelites (pp. 52-53, 70). Not even the great Karl Barth could break through the theological amnesia. Myth was qualified with pragmatism at the Treysa conference in August 1945, where the famous anti-Nazi Pastor Martin Niemöller was chosen as the foreign relations contact (p. 49). Credibility could only be stretched so far.

Postwar declarations encapsulated the gulfs that separated the Protestant traditions along faith and political lines. In his discussion of the Stuttgart “Declaration of Guilt,” Hockenos illustrates the depth of division between “conservatives,” who wanted to avoid direct and confrontational handling of the immediate past, preferring a theological appreciation of guilt, and “reformers,” who wanted an honest and more political assessment of the churches’ role during the Third Reich. Consequently, the declaration pleased few and angered many. Protestant brethren outside Germany were satisfied that guilt had been acknowledged and the German churches were welcomed back into the ecumenical fold. In January 1946, Bishop Theophil Wurm’s open letter to Christians in England criticizing Allied occupation policies and the suffering of the German people further illustrated the gulf between honest assessment of the past and the growing power of the myth of German victimhood. The brave attempt to wrestle with the challenges to traditional Lutheran and Calvinist theologies and ethics expressed in the 1947 Darmstadt statement was a brave call to face the past honestly. These documents are complex treatises that encompass major theological nuances; the author explains and explores them clearly and concisely.

Hockenos deals with the Protestant Church’s relationship with Jews and Judaism in the last two chapters. Between 1945 and 1950 a virtual revolution in theology took place that was to be repeated throughout the Christian world—Protestant and Catholic. In 1945 theologians were determined to repudiate antisemitism as alien to the Gospel, but traditional anti-Judaism was still considered acceptable. Five years later the German Protestant Church formally rejected 1500 years of supercessionism as contrary to Christian faith. The Berlin-Weissensee statement of April 1950 launched a significant reform of traditional anti-Jewish theology: “We believe God’s promise to be valid for his Chosen People even after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. We state that by omission and silence we became implicated before the God of mercy in the outrage which has been perpetrated against the Jews by people of our nation.... We ask all Christians to disassociate themselves from all antisemitism” (Appendix 8).

Hockenos’s analysis is simple. The Church was forced to reckon with the human reality of the Holocaust and horrible truth that much of the justification for the slaughter lay in the soft underbelly of Christian theologies of contempt and conversion. The Church’s apathy towards the Jews was finally acknowledged. More significantly for the “metanoia” of the Church was the acknowledgement that German Christians had neglected and ignored the suffering of Christians of Jewish descent (pp. 137-150). Once a human face was recognized, supporting an inhuman and deadly religious rationale became untenable. Fear, superstition, irrationality, and prejudice cultivated for centuries played no small part in the destruction of Jewish men, women, and children. It was a long process to reform minds and hearts—Jews were still targeted for special preaching and missions. For former inmates of the camps the evangelical zeal of sincere Protestant Christians must have been particularly galling. A final repudiation of conversion missions to Jews did not occur until 1980 (pp. 153-155).

While it would have been helpful to have some contextual comments about other contemporary Christians, particularly German Catholics, this minor criticism in no way detracts from Hockenos’s discussion. The author’s ability and skill to communicate the history and theologies of the immediate post-war period in a fluent manner is complimented by a very full series of notes with more than sufficient additional reading for the most avid enthusiast of German Church history. Hockenos’s work is a valuable addition to German religious history and an excellent resource for research bibliographies.

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