

## Chapter 2

### Ominous Clouds on the Horizon

When Dietrich arrived home in Berlin, just a few days passed before he left Germany again for the neighbouring country of Switzerland. This was because one of his fellow students in New York, Erwin Sutz, had arranged for him to meet one of his most admired contemporary theological figures, Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968, born and died in Basel).<sup>1</sup> On July 23 1931, Barth, who was twenty years Dietrich's senior, invited him to dinner. Alone with Doctor Barth, Dietrich was finally able to ask him the questions he so long desired. At evening's end, Dietrich was even more impressed with him than by any of his earlier writings and lectures, and as a result, would often visit Barth over the next two years.

While Dietrich had only been across the Atlantic for nine months, in some respects it seemed like a lifetime. In the May 1928 Reichstag elections, with Weimar still in its so-called Golden Age, the Nazis only garnered a pathetic 2.6% of the national vote, while in the Silesian province, it was just a miserable 1%. However, two or so years later, on September 14 1930, just two days after Dietrich arrived in New York, the first threatening grey clouds of Nazi rule began to appear on the horizon. In the wake of the 1928 elections, the Nazi Party had been relegated to the ninth and smallest party in Germany and was regarded as little more than a joke. Just over two years later, with the Great Depression in full swing, they had become the second largest political party in the land, having secured 18% of the national vote, while in Breslau, they secured almost a quarter of the vote (24.2%).<sup>2</sup>

On August 1 1931, just nine days after his meeting with Barth, Dietrich was appointed adjunct lecturer in systematic theology in Berlin. However, around the same time, Dietrich wrote to Sutz that he sensed an exceptionally grim outlook at a tumultuous turning point in history. He was not yet certain what it was exactly, but he felt certain that the integrity of the church would be threatened, and wondered if it would even survive.<sup>3</sup> Eric Metaxas likened it to him imagining a beautiful mighty oak tree, with families picnicking under its seemingly invincible branches, with children climbing and swinging upon them, blissfully and fatally unaware that they were rotting and about to crush and kill them all.<sup>4</sup> For those around him, the change in him was obvious; his sermons became much harsher, and it seems, not so palatable to his congregations in general.

Four or so months after his return from New York, on November 15, 1931, aged 25, Dietrich was ordained at the Old Prussian United Saint Matthew's Church (St. Matthäikirche) in Berlin.<sup>5</sup> Almost a year later, on Reformation Sunday, November 6 1932<sup>6</sup> — the day Germany celebrated Martin Luther and the great cultural heritage of the Reformation,<sup>7</sup> and less than three months before Hitler took power — Dietrich was asked to preach in Berlin's famous Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. Today, only a damaged hulk of a bell tower now remains,<sup>8</sup> but back then, the Berlin congregation of that day might, like American Protestants on July 4, expect an uplifting patriotic sermon. Moreover, there is every reason to expect that President von Hindenburg,<sup>9</sup> Germany's famous national icon, was also present, as this was the very church he attended. Thus, the stage was set for a wonderful sermon to stroke and pamper nationalist and Reformationist pride.

However, influenced in no small part, one would imagine, by his American racial relations experience, Dietrich delivered a perfect example of his more recent severe sermons. It was like pouring a bucket of freezing cold water on his congregation. With the thuggery and intimidation of Hitler and Röhm's Brown Shirts (SA) running rampant,<sup>10</sup> Dietrich proclaimed that the German church was dying or was already dead, and condemned his congregation for the grotesquely inappropriate act of conducting a celebration in the midst of a funeral. "A fanfare of trumpets is no comfort to a dying man,"<sup>11</sup> he cried! It was not the last of such sermons delivered by Dietrich that year.

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Inevitably, Dietrich's philosophy of the universal church, synonymous with the ecumenical movement, would put him at odds with the National Socialist philosophy of a church defined solely and violently by racial identity and blood.

The idea of wedding the German Protestant church to a dangerous and bigoted national consciousness had a genesis that pre-dated Hitler's Reich by three years. However, Hitler and his other dyed-in-the-wool pure Nazi cohorts such as Himmler, Goebbels, Göring, Heydrich, and the like, did not really care much for Christianity, even in a bastardised form made more palatable and consistent with National Socialist doctrine. Himmler in particular, in nostalgic awe of the Germanic victory over the Roman legions in the Teutoburg Forest in 9AD,<sup>12</sup> longed for a reversion to the old pagan traditions, and found the Christian concepts of forgiveness, tolerance and mercy utterly banal, interpreting Christ's death on the cross as a

symbol of insipid weakness and Jewish victory. Now in his mind, and that of his fellow cronies, they would save the world from the Jews and thereby redeem humanity, something that Christ on the cross had been unable to do.<sup>13</sup>

In between the wars, Christianity in Germany was in crisis. For one thing, after the humiliation of Versailles, what relevance did Jerusalem and a document nearly two millennia old hold for Germany? A new Reformation, in the eyes of many German Christians, was desperately needed to restore German pride and prestige. This was, as it turned out, the German Christian movement, founded in Thuringia on radical German nationalism and racism. On May 26 1932, they issued their *Guiding Principles*, which included a prohibition on “racial mixing,” thus making racial purity of the German *Volk* sacred, an anathema to the philosophy of Dietrich. In a dubious parallel to the New Testament conversion of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus, they likened it to Hitler’s temporary blindness suffered on the front during the Great War, proclaiming: “

We put our trust in our God-sent Führer who was almost blinded when he heard God’s call: ‘You must save Germany.’ And who, once his sight was restored, began that great work which led to the wonderful day of 30<sup>th</sup> January 1933.”<sup>14</sup>

If one were to replace four words in the above with Satan, destroy, evil and terrible, you would at least have a proclamation much closer to the truth. For Dietrich, the National Socialist ideology and Christianity were profoundly incompatible; this was one point at least which found these bitter antagonists in total agreement. However, in a curious twist, the German Christians, while certainly an anathema to Dietrich’s ideas of universality and ecumenism, were also disagreeable to the fascist megalomaniacs they were attempting to court.

Hitler did not care for them, but they, numbering around 600,000 by early 1933, certainly wanted Hitler, a man they had elevated to idolatrous reverence.<sup>15</sup> While they were useful in such numbers in bringing the Nazis to power, Hitler felt no obligation to prop up any form of Christianity, no matter how much it was bastardised to appeal to the National Socialist dogma. On the other hand, they were certainly no threat to his power base, and since their sons were willing to fight for the glorious Aryan Fatherland, and not stand in the way of the agenda of mass engineered genocide, and yes, even encourage it, the regime viewed them as nothing more than mildly annoying.

Dietrich, however, saw them as much more insidious and destructive. He rightly viewed them as bastardising Christianity in Germany, even to the point of disowning the Old Testament, with their obsequious and idolatrous courting of Hitler, the most nominal of Catholics. By early November 1932, when Dietrich delivered his controversial Reformation Sunday sermon, their dubious *Guiding Principles* issued six months earlier, followed eleven days later in Berlin by their “set of public guidelines,” were no doubt greatly troubling and repugnant to Dietrich. In Point 9, they forbade the marriage of Germans and Jews; worse still was Point 7: “We see in race, national heritage (*Volkstum*) and the nation an order of life that has been given and entrusted to us by God....Therefore the mingling of races is to be opposed.”<sup>16</sup>

- 1 Error: Reference source not found Position 287.0 of Metaxas. The dates of the birth and death of Karl Barth in Basel Switzerland are given at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Karl-Barth>.
- 2 Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Positions 906.9 and 911.1 of *Microcosm*.
- 3 Error: Reference source not found Position 290.3 onwards of Metaxas and page 404 of *A testament to freedom: the essential writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton, published by HarperSanFrancisco, 1990, ISBN 0060608137, 9780060608132.
- 4 Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Position 290.8 of Metaxas.
- 5 Pages 221-222 of Bethge and page 209 of *What Will A Man Give In Exchange For His Soul?* by George D. Johnson, published by Xlibris Corporation, 2011, ISBN 1465380981, 9781465380982.
- 6 Page 214 of *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer's Christology* by H. Gaylon Barker, published by Fortress Press, 2015, ISBN 1506400493, 9781506400495.
- 7 Position 292.0 of Metaxas.
- 8 Position 291.7 of Metaxas.
- 9 Position 292.4 of Metaxas.
- 10 Position 914.3 of *Microcosm* documents Breslau's spiralling violence in the summer of 1932. This was documented in *The Times* (London), of June 24, June 27, August 4 and August 8 1932.
- 11 Position 293.7 of Metaxas.
- 12 Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found For information on this famous battle from antiquity, see the article on the Smithsonian Institute website at <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-ambush-that-changed-history-72636736/>. This article also mentions Peter S. Wells book *The Battle that Stopped Rome: Emperor Augustus, Arminius, and the Slaughter of the Legions in the Teutoburg Forest* published by W.W. Norton 2004, ISBN 0393326438, 9780393326437.
- 13 Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Page 21 of *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich* by Dean G. Stroud, published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013, ISBN 0802869025, 9780802869029.
- 14 Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Page 22 of Dean G. Stroud.
- 15 Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Error: Reference source not found Page 22 of Dean G. Stroud.
- 16 Page 23 of Dean G. Stroud.