A BRIEF ESSAY ON GERMAN PIETISM AND ITS ROLE IN THE OPPOSITION TO NAZISM'S CULTURE OF DEATH

The following essay was extracted, in several parts, from *War Comes To God's House.* One of the main themes of *War Comes* is that remnants of German Pietism, centered around the world renowned Bethel Institution, now the v. Bodelschwingh Foundation Bethel (see http://www.bethel.eu/about-us/the-bethel-chronicle.html), formed the backbone of Protestant opposition to Nazism and all of its 'culture of death'. Bethel was renowned for its care and treatment of thousands of epileptics and other poor, needy souls under the credo that "… *each person is a unique personality, created and loved by God"* – the exact opposite of the secular, Social Darwinist view of the Nazis.

Pietist "Father" Frederick von Bodelschwingh was the great builder of the Bethel Institution in the late 19th Century. His son, who succeeded his father as Director of Bethel, Frederich (Fritz) von Bodelschwingh was the first leader (Fuhrer) of the Protestant opposition to the Nazi Reich Church (predecessor of the Confessing Church), and sponsor of the through-going but little known theological rebuttal of Nazism, the Bethel Confession (written largely by Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

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The movement most often called Pietism developed in Germany in the late Reformation period. It was labeled a form of mysticism and as schismatic by the orthodox. Unlike most of the orthodox, Pietists were not as interested in the Lutheran or Reformed Confessions as in the Bible itself. But Pietism didn't argue about Biblical inerrancy or the proofs of God with Rationalists. To Pietists, the proof of God lay in changed lives. They emphasized a spiritual awakening – an emotional experience of conviction and redemption with life changing results. Some Pietists went so far as to claim an awakening was a necessary precursor to Conversion and Sanctification. Such a claim did not sit well with orthodox Lutheranism. Neither did another characteristic of Pietism, an emphasis on "works".

One of the earliest prominent Pietists was Johan Arndt whose popular 1605 work, *On True Christianity*, declared "*The proof that one is a true Christian does not consist in knowing and hearing God's Word, but in doing it*." (Crowner, p-8) That should hardly be controversial as it does not state that works are the basis of salvation, only the proof of it. Martin Luther had preached the same message as Arndt: "Y*our salvation does not depend on the fact that you believe Christ to the Saviour of the godly, but that he is a Saviour to you and has become your own.…Such a faith will work in you love for Christ and joy in*

him, and good works will naturally follow. If they do not, faith is surely not present; for where faith is, there the Holy Ghost is and must work love and good works." (Luther 2) But to many Lutherans, and the vast majority of German Protestants were Lutheran, such opinions smacked too much of a "works religion" like Roman Catholicism, where one could never 'rest in the finished work of salvation'. In fact, Luther was closer to Pietism than later "mainstream" Lutheranism, and one is left to wonder at the rift between the two that became so clear in the German Church War.

I am going to take what might seem like a little departure from our study of the German Church War here to consider the doctrine of salvation by grace. It is not however, a departure from the subject - the Church War is grounded in that subject. Sadly, the doctrine, I would say 'the reality' of salvation by grace through faith, is one of the most misunderstood and controversial subjects in mankind's long history. Infuriatingly, it is also one of the clearest and most simple principles of human experience. The Bible tells us that all there is to being saved is to say we believe in Jesus, and then maybe some simple rituals to perform. Right? No, no, no! That's not what the Holy Scriptures tell us at all, but pulpits and pews across the western world are filled with people who don't know any better. It is no wonder so many fall away from the church and scoffers have such a field day!

Jesus said "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have ever lasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God*." (John 3:16 ff, KJV)

Throughout the Bible, from beginning to end, we are told the same thing. In Genesis 15:6 we are told of Abram "*and he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness*."(KJV) Nowhere are we told salvation is by saying we believe; quite the contrary. There is all the difference in the world, the difference between life and death, in the difference between believing something and saying something. The difference Bonhoeffer would describe as between "cheap grace" and "costly grace", the difference that was to tear apart the German churches and allow an evil that had not been seen in centuries to stroll right into Germany.

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Church establishments that take it upon themselves to “dispense God’s grace” to those who offer up the proper declarations and undergo the proper rituals have two natural enemies – atheism, and pietism. Pietism is often an object of more opposition from “the church” than atheism because, at its most basic level, people of pietist convictions don’t need church ritual and dogma and those whose salvation, in their eyes, are based on ritual and dogma fear and loathe what they don’t understand.

Some Pietists gravitated into other communities of faith, notably the Moravians, with whom they had much in common including less emphasis on sacraments and doctrine. But most members of the Pietist persuasion remained in their Lutheran and Reformed Land Churches. Pietist groups began to coalesce into Bible and missionary societies however, and into what amounted to the service orders of the Catholic Church. Of the service orders, the most important were the Deacon and Deaconess movement. These were groups of men and women who set themselves apart for service to the sick and needy – very much in the fashion of a monastic service order. We have already been introduced to this movement at Bethel, but it extended far beyond Bethel.

Pietism had changed over time from a mystical relationship with God that isolated the believer from the world, to the Awakening experience that tended to send the believer out into the world to win it for Christ. But the world had changed also. The rural peasantry of the late Middle Ages had given way to the urban working class. New challenges and new opportunities had presented themselves. And, as if by a miracle, the powers of the Prussian state were, for three generations, on the side of the pious. Frederick the great atheist passed on the crown to his nephew, a dissolute young Frederick Wilhelm III, who seemed to have a religious conversion. Skeptical historians delight in pointing out mistresses and other inconsistencies in his spiritual journey, but there were certainly enough fiery trials in the person of Bonaparte to test his faith.

Frederick Wilhelm IV, much of the same cut as his father, declared (echoing the words of Joshua): “As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”. He was followed by his brother who became the first German Emperor, Wilhelm I. These pietist kings and emperors were largely responsible for the social welfare progress of Nineteenth Century Germany, including the 1839 child labor restrictions, freeing of the serfs, and their version of “social security”. These actions were seen by Pietists and Liberals alike as “practical Christianity”, a term much in play during the Nazi era Church War.

Not everything the Pietist Kings and Emperors did was appreciated by all the churched people of Germany. The formation, in 1817, of the Prussian Union Church by forcibly uniting Lutheran and Reformed Land Churches in Prussia was not universally popular. This action was not, ostensibly at least, to affect their church doctrines, only to make possible a more efficient administration. Lutheran congregations would remain Lutheran, Reformed would remain Reformed. In reality though, there was some mingling of doctrine and a considerable number of Lutheran purists left Germany for the United States where they established what they considered to be the true Lutheran Church.

The Prussian king, of the Reformed Church, with a Pietist bent, was not as keen on confessional purity as strictly orthodox Lutherans. That was a black mark against the Pietists in many Lutheran minds and when "uncorrupted" Lutheran churches came into the German Empire later on there was a bitterness and jealousy that was not fully revealed until the darkest years of the Church War.

There is a fear of sin in the Pietist that a complacent Lutheran, or Baptist, "resting in the finished work of the cross" does not feel. Recall how Will Durant had described the Catholic Church's somewhat strained patience and good humor with "mystics" and their claims to a closer walk with God, not to mention their "saintly denunciations of her (the church) human faults". That is somewhat the same situation in which the Lutheran Land Churches found themselves with the Pietists; yet, as we have seen, they were able to coexist in the peace of the late Victorian age.

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Father Bodelschwingh has been described as the last great figure of the German Awakening. I believe we will see, as our story progresses, that there were a few great "spiritually awakened" leaders still to come, but let's take a brief look at the beliefs, or experiences, that drove him. The following is a brief excerpt from his writings:

People experience in their hearts the kindness and openness of our God and Savior who appeared at Bethlehem, and these cause in them a drive, a pressure, an inclination, and a compulsion to show their thanks for the overabundant amount of love and mercy they have experienced. They would feel terribly deprived if they had no opportunity at all to show their genuine thanks. …

It is fundamentally false to think that the poor sick, naked, hungry and wretched are a bothersome burden for the rich and healthy. It is, of course, correct that poverty, illness; and need are a result, above all of sin, and are an evil. But the thistles and thorns of the field, the sweat of

the brow with which a man must earn his bread, and the pains of a woman are also, above all, results of sin and are an evil (Gen. 3:16-19). Yet at the same time they are a powerful antidote to sin because they keep alive the sighing for salvation and are laid on the scales as a heavy counterweight to the rampant proliferation of sin. Hence, all the needs, all the tears that appear before our eyes here on earth, all the sighs we hear are healing medicine for the primary sin in our hearts, for self-centeredness.

"Those who live for themselves" and "Those who no longer live for themselves", but for the One who died and rose for us – that is how Paul divides human beings into the unhappy and the happy (Rom 14:7-9). Those who live for themselves are the unhappy ones who actually have no truly joyful hours. Those who no longer live for themselves are the happy ones who lead a very cheerful, joyful, and comfort-filled life.

No, the life of the Christian does not consist of pursuing enjoyment but in practicing love, practicing a self-denying, serving love…
(Crowner, pages 343 - 345)

Most of us living in the materialistic modern world will find such beliefs as Bodelschwingh's difficult to understand, much less accept; scoffers will denounce it as disingenuous, others of us will envy it. Many people did (and do) live it, though. Bodelschwingh, himself, was the first to add that the power for such "living faith" was not of himself but the person of Christ, to whom all men have access. Let us place an asterisk in our memory that the Pietist's love of mankind derived from love of Jesus.

Globe trotting author, missionary and general "do-gooder" Julie Sutter visited Bethel near the close of the Nineteenth Century, wanting to take lessons learned there back to "Darkest England", as the Salvation Army founder, General Booth, had dubbed it. At that time she found a whole community unto itself that she described in idyllic terms, as idyllic as the charming lithographs that accompany her book *A Colony of Mercy*. These depict the people of Bethel at work and at play, and the Gothic church and tall, half-timbered buildings of Bethel proper encroaching into the great Teutoburg Forest, crowning a knoll where a low mountain range splits in two, with fields and farm houses spreading out in the valley between.

CENTRE OF THE COLONY—SAREPTA TO THE LEFT; BETHEL-HOUSE TO THE RIGHT.

A small album of more of these lithographs is attached to the end of Chapter 3, where we reluctantly depart Bethel.

There was Bethel House, under the care of Sister Louise, the original home for epileptics, with its sixteen “stations” or family groups comprising nearly two hundred women and girls, and their gardens and kitchens of course. Then there was Eben-Ezar home for bad off or unruly epileptic men. Bethany was a more comfortable home for epileptic ladies whose families could afford to pay for the regimen of discipline and work. Bethesda was a similar home for ladies of “weak nerves” who needed a little supervision and light chores. There was a companion home for men, who likewise needed a little looking after, but could hold down light responsibilities around the community. Then there was Magdala and Moriah, the female and male “lunatic asylums”. There was Siloam for “women idiots” and Zoar for “epileptic boy imbeciles”.

At the farms there were houses for the able epileptic men who worked the fields. Most houses were supervised by husband and wife teams, both trained in care giving and evangelism - he managing the farm, she managing the household. Usually, I suppose, the House Mother also played the melodeon as the “family” gathered around for the evening worship services.

And there were the great gothic houses, Sarepta and Nazareth, where the deaconesses and deacons lived upstairs and cared for the sick and dying on the first floor. Sarepta and Nazareth were training schools whose graduates went out to institutions and hospitals throughout the world. There were homes and hospitals (with more to come) for just about every kind and degree of unfortunate - along with churches,

chapels, homes for preachers, doctors, and other staff positions that weren't held by patients.

There were also workshops of every kind – for tinkers, tailors, shoemakers, bakers, workshops for every needful thing and for every needful soul who couldn't survive in the harsh outside world. Bethel had a large and diverse printing establishment manned mostly by the patients. Some patients with artistic talent found places in those endeavors producing calendars and Christmas cards, and income. Bethel might have been the leader in recycling.

Father Bodelschwingh didn't let any opportunity slip by for bringing in a little income and providing a work opportunity. Letters went out from Bethel and mountains of donations came in – from rubbish to treasures. The Post Office Department had a special rate for the purpose (just like the railroad had a special discounted rate for patients to travel to Bethel). Used bottle corks were collected and sold to a flooring manufacturer, and old shoes were either repaired or recycled into some other leather good; just about everything (and everyone) had some use.

A dissolute nobleman who happened to be a stamp expert wandered into Bethel. Having no other work skill, Bethel founded a stamp exchange for him. People from all over the world began sending in old letters with stamps, or prized collections for Bethel. Soon a half dozen men were working at Bethel's stamp exchange appraising, selling, and brokering exchanges. Unfortunately, the ignoble philatelist betrayed his position and was sent to prison. Neither in Eden nor Bethel could lawbreaking be tolerated.

All this activity was just at Bethel proper; satellite institutions sprang up in big cities and small, in German communities in other countries, and in the African colonies, wherever there was a need. And there seemed to be no end of need. In the early days of Bethel, Germany was awash with vagabonds – chronically unemployed and homeless. Some were displaced by war, or by urbanization, or by the economic bust that inevitably followed the bubble that arose after victory in the Franco-Prussian War, or the timeless problems of alcoholism and mental illness. A moving description of a German vagabond by a "well known", but otherwise unidentified, German writer is presented in Julie Sutter's book:

The vagabond's face is a study – a mixture of sadness, of hopelessness, of peevish discontent, with a glare of hatred sometimes and of bitter sarcasm about his mouth. Of whom his hatred, - of himself, or his neighbour who has a home? Is it regret eating away at his heart,

repentance? Is it good intentions – those never kept intentions with which he is paving his way to hell? Yet I pity the man – he is so wretched, so forlorn. I would like to say a word to him, comfort him, whisper a word of advice. I scarcely dare. "Poor fellow, are you unwell" I might venture at last; "can I help you in any way?" He fails to comprehend; he stares at me; there is wonder, there is distrust in his gaze – why should I want to help him? I meet his gaze, hoping for a chance of reading this riddle of a soul, of understanding something of this walking misery. But no! The man has sunk too deep even for sympathy! It is beyond his comprehension that another human being might want to enter into his feelings, beyond his comprehension that he might ease his own heart by understanding it. One thing he does comprehend. Rising heavily from the stone seat on which I found him, he lifts his tattered hat, and his wretched lips utter the well-worn sentence: "Sir, have you a copper to spare?" In other words, "The only relationship between you and me," he says, "is the penny you may give me for a dram, and I will forget that I am a hungry and homeless wretch." (Sutter, p-182)

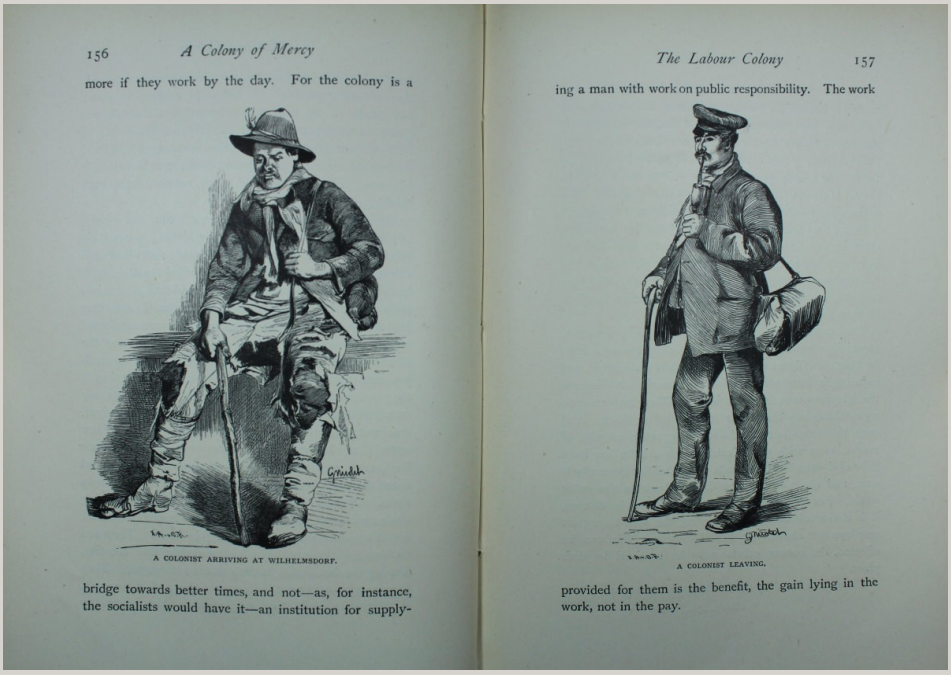
Embellished with Victorian romanticism as this picture may have been, these people were a genuine social problem; and the glare of hatred was real enough in many of them too, making them a major crime problem. Vagabonds passing by were always fed at Bethel - until it became apparent they were collecting there and sponging off the institution. Father Bodelschwingh would not tolerate that, declaring with Paul: "… if a man will not work, he shall not eat (i.e. 2 Thes. 3:10) – or rather, if we feed them, let them do some work." Some work was found for the willing, building a retaining wall - and the crowd of beggars thinned out a great deal. Some of the men begged to stay and work for their keep however. So, in characteristic manner, a new mission was added to Bethel's work, and the Labor Colonies were founded.

First came Wilhelmsdorf, named for the Emperor who sponsored it; although Bodelschwingh had to sell the idea to the provincial officials. In return for the loan to get it started, he promised to rid the province of its beggars. Wilhelmsdorf (below) was a camp where homeless men, hundreds at a time, with picks, shovels, wheelbarrows and hard labor made farmland out of a barren wasteland.

COLONISTS RECLAIMING THE SOIL.

For this they were paid a meager wage in addition to their room and board, and the cost of their new clothes. Each new “colonist” was given a set of new clothes; but not as charity, as they had to work out the cost. There was dignity in this arrangement. The men traded in their rags for new clothes, not someone’s cast offs, and they labored for room, board and pay for the useful purpose of turning the wasteland Bethel had bought for next to nothing into productive farmland the institution badly needed. With the true Bodelschwingh touch of getting the fullest measure out of everything he did, also benefiting from the deal were the poor women of the community who sewed the clothes in their homes.

An oddity, to American ways of thinking, was that the clothes issued to these… bums... to work side by side in the fields reflected their previous station in life – rural peasant, urban middleclass, upper class. Bodelschwingh believed everyone would be more “comfortable” that way. And that may well have been true in the majority of cases, but by no means in all. Lack of understanding the desire for social equality was a dangerous blind spot among Bodelschwingh’s class. Although it was obvious that the good pastor loved people of all classes and conditions, and races, there was always an awareness of class and race, a sort of *noblese oblige* attitude along with the Christian brotherhood – a cultural artifact of which he was hardly even aware I’m sure.



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more if they work by the day. For the colony is a

A COLONIST ARRIVING AT WILHELMSDORF.

bridge towards better times, and not—as, for instance, the socialists would have it—an institution for supply-

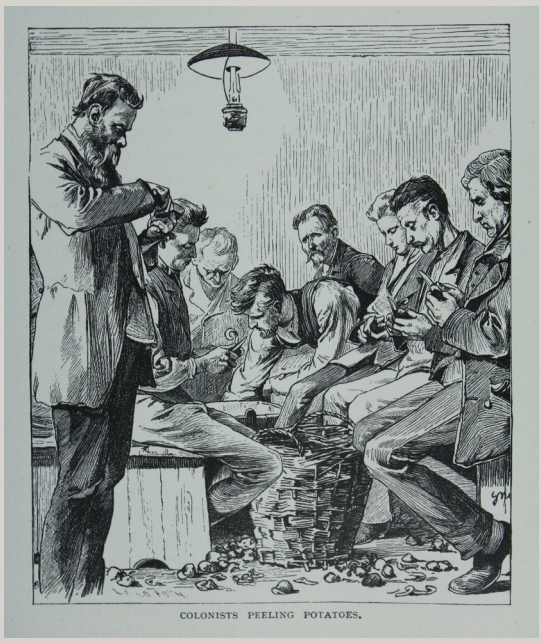
The Labour Colony 157

ing a man with work on public responsibility. The work

A COLONIST LEAVING.

provided for them is the benefit, the gain lying in the work, not in the pay.

Ancillary benefits aside, the primary beneficiary was still the labor colonist himself. As with the epileptics, the work regimen was seen as therapeutic. Julie Sutter noted, *"…the colony is a bridge toward better times, and not – as, for instance, the socialist would have it – an institution for supplying a man with work on public responsibility. The work provided them is the benefit, the gain lying in the work, not in the pay."* (Sutter P-156) That's a good synopsis of a clash of philosophies that plays an important part in our story.



COLONISTS PEELING POTATOES.

There was nothing utopian about the labor colony effort; it was only a chance for men to redeem a degraded life. Yes, such Victorian judgmental concepts as "degraded" were used, along with "slave of intemperance", "incorrigible", and "ill considered charity". Wilhelmsdorf was tough and realistic about its charges; work was not optional, nor was respectable behavior. Anyone who felt it too tough and left without working off the price of his new clothes went to jail. That served as a good enough incentive for most colonists to stay – and they were given background checks in advance of admittance to exclude "incorrigibles" as much as possible. As a further check on temptation, the colonists were not given their wages immediately, or even at the end of their allotted stay for fear of

encouraging undesirable industries around the camps. The wages were mailed ahead to a forwarding address. Often this forwarding address was at the job found by the organization for the, hopefully, redeemed colonist.

Despite its rigor, or more likely because of it, Wilhelmsdorf seemed to be changing lives for the better and redeeming Bodelschwingh's pledge of ridding the province of a troublesome and shameful problem. Soon new labor colonies were springing up, even a few for women. Some were dedicated to agriculture, others to industrial or commercial pursuits. By the time of Julie Sutter's visit in 1893 there were twenty-five colonies. Catholic labor colonies began springing up here and there also. Not coincidently, the state began a work-centered program of its own. This program consisted of a series of around 2000 "relief stations" located along Germany's major roads about a half-day's hike apart.

Bodelschwingh believed that unemployed men were going to walk - to hunt work, to get away, to walk out frustration and anger. So the relief stations were placed a half day's walk apart – a half a day to walk, leaving half a day working to earn dinner, a night's lodging, and breakfast. Work consisted of chopping wood, breaking rock, and other local labor jobs. But there was more to it. Each station was also an employment agency where a wanderer could apply for work. He was given a card to be stamped at each station along his route. No deviations for a "lost weekend" were allowed. This was not a system to subsidize vagrancy but to encourage employment. If no employment was found on the first transit, the "client" could re-up for another. But if it began to appear that no serious attempt to find work was being made, the "client's" next stop could be a Labor Colony, or a "house of correction".

These stations were mandated and financed by the state. There was no overtly Christian character to them. Many relief stations, however, were connected to "home inns" operated from Bethel or other Home Mission institutions. These inns, of which there were over 400 by 1893, provided inexpensive, clean overnight accommodations for travelers. Also, the "home inns" provided house parents, and Christian services and programs for their paying clientèle, and those of the relief stations.

Let us pause here and make a note of one of the prime, and last examples, of state and Christian charity (or, we could fudge a little and say 'state and church') working hand in hand towards a common goal, even if for somewhat different motives. The state wanted to rid itself of the plague of vagabond unemployed. The Emperor (Wilhelm I, who

often asked Bodelschwingh to write him about the men “saved” at Wilhelmsdorf) and many others of his government no doubt genuinely wanted to see the lives redeemed at least almost as much as the Bethel workers, but the state purpose was social, not spiritual. On the other hand, Bodelschwingh’s main goal was spiritual. Social betterment was a worthwhile purpose in itself, but secondary to the ultimate purpose. It was his experience that men could fall so low, like the vagabond of the stone seat, that reaching them with the Gospel was almost out of the question. The labor colonies were to pull men up to a level where they could receive the Gospel, and the relief stations and home inns were to keep others from going down that path of alienation and self-destruction.

Whether they were ultimately successful in the spiritual arena is not for us to know, but they served the state’s purpose well. With a system in place to care for the “deserving poor”, the state could crack down on the others. Whether into productive lives, or into prisons, or out of the country in search of a more lenient attitude, the vagabond problem was greatly reduced for a time. Whether in the long run this association of church and state was a good thing is a question we will have to address later on, but in the Victorian Age, it seemed a good thing. As Bethel grew, it outgrew the revenues of the penny crusades and what its own activities could bring in, and began to rely more and more on the generosity of the state. As always, more dependence leads to more control. Father Bodelschwingh perhaps did not live to rue that development, but Fritz did.

Bethel became a city unto itself, and its Director became a giant of his day with a reach far beyond Bethel and its satellite institutions. Both his great reach and the limits of his grasp can be seen in one of his most ambitious but less successful projects – the German Workers’ Home Association. Like fictional George Bailey’s building and loan (*It’s a Wonderful Life*), Bodelschwingh’s ambition was to enable decent housing and family life for the working class. He believed that all social misery, and attendant social unrest, stemmed from the falling away from Christian life experienced by so much of the working class – where families were crowded into tenements, mothers forced to work, and children left to their own devices.

Father Bodelschwingh’s vision seems perhaps somewhat less democratic than George Bailey’s however, as this comment to the Emperor reveals, “Should it succeed that in thirty or forty years each industrious factory worker can eat his evening bread in front of his own hut, then Social Democracy shall be dead, and the throne of the Hohenzollern is secured for centuries”. For better or worse, it seems

much of German Pietism was bound to Empire and Emperor and to the traditional class system.

Bodelschwingh used the term “hut” (at least the translation did) but the smallest of the standard models Bethel’s architect provided was a decent home for the day – with three small bedrooms, a bath, kitchen/living room combo, cellar and attic room. Naturally, at least a half-acre garden plot was also required. It was a dream fit for a Pietist, but it was certainly not the American ideal, and probably not entirely realistic even in Imperial Germany given the changing world. But his understanding of the importance of home and family life for the Church and for the stability of the nation was spot-on correct. Unfortunately, the project never made a significant dent in Germany’s housing needs.

The nature of this book makes it impossible for me to chronicle all that the human dynamo, “Father” Bodelschwingh, accomplished, including stints as an army chaplain in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and ’71. It is amazing what God can do with one man who is willing. But one more project needs to be mentioned – The Central Africa Society. In the later 19th Century, Germany developed a very modest colonial empire. Under the prevailing economic models of the day, building a foreign empire seemed the thing to do. No nation could be truly “great” without an extensive foreign empire; only by then, all the really good colonial prospects were taken. Nevertheless, Imperial Germany acquired, by various means, a small territory in east central Africa.

Germany, being a Christian nation, banned slavery, but their new colony was on the ancient route of Arab slavers. Whenever the Germans caught slavers, they hanged them, and turned the slaves loose. But the freed slaves, from who knew where, in lands often inaccessible to Europeans, were left to fend for themselves; until, that is, Father Bodelschwingh stepped in. So Bethel had yet another new calling – build and staff missions, schools and orphanages for these beneficiaries of Germany’s hopelessly contradictory colonial policy that finally descended into brutal tyranny. The mission to remote, disease ridden central Africa was costly to Bethel, both financially, and in lost lives, including one of the Bodelschwingh sons, but they persevered even when the world changed and the German Empire ceased to exist.

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Now we skip over years into the midst of the German Church War of the Nazi era into the little known, but central issue destroying Christianity in Germany.

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Chapter 21: Brother Against Brother.

The U-boat commander turned pastor, Martin Niemoeller, was a natural leader for the Confessing Church and his imprisonment sorely hurt the Protestant opposition to Nazism. But it was already dissolving. Bodelschwingh, as we know, had already fallen into disfavor. Professor Barth, also, had already exited the scene as a leader by the time of Niemoeller's arrest. As a university professor, he had been required to swear an oath of loyalty to Hitler. It was a complicated issue, many academics found loopholes in the wording of the oath, and in the fact that it was made under duress and therefore not binding. Fritz von Bodelschwingh found it necessary to swear alliegence. He probably had no idea at the time of doing anything that could be reasonably considered treasonous, and he had a great burden of responsibility to carry.

In a very public repudiation however, Barth refused the oath and left Germany for his native Switzerland. Barth gave a concise, if oversimplified, description of his decision to leave Germany to an English newspaper: *"I was a professor of Theology in 1921 in Gottingen", says Barth, "and in Westphalia in 1925; then for ten years I was at Bonn University on the Rhine, until I refused to open my lectures on God each day by raising my arm and saying, 'Heil Hitler!' I could not do that; it would have been blasphemy. And so I was compelled to come to Basel University."*

(Manchester Guardian, April 23, 1937. quoted in Lichtenberger, p-201)

It was not Barth's absence from Germany alone, or even his public squabbles with Niemoeller and Bonhoeffer over Confessional front strategy, that reduced his standing as a leader however. Barth was, as Herman Sasse gleefully pointed out, '*not a German*'. The time was rapidly approaching when that would become an issue. When Germany, now having annexed the Rhineland and Austria, set its sites on Czechoslovakia and the world held its breath on the brink of war, Barth pubicly called for the Czechs to take up arms and oppose the Nazis for the sake of their country, their freedom, and for God.

Britain, France, and Russia, allies all of Czechoslovakia, backed down at Munich, however, and the hopelessly outgunned Czechs surrendered quietly. Barth's call for armed opposition to what the Nazi press had built up as a rescue of an oppressed German minority and restoration of territory lost by Austria after World War I did not go over well with most Germans, even opponents of the Nazi Reich. Barth spent the next few years with rifle in hand helping guard the Swiss border against the people among whom he had lived so long and who had exalted him so highly. There was more to his actions than that he was "not a German" – issues which perhaps did take longer for true Germans to absorb.

Another leader to have departed Germany even earlier was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Disaffected after the Bethel Confession debacle, the young theologian, still in his twenties, decided to leave the Church War behind. He wrote to Barth about his disillusionment and confusion, and about his decision to take a pastorate among Germans in London. Barth's response may have had the most extreme effect upon Bonhoeffer's future. Barth, his old mentor, reproached Bonhoeffer in hard words and martial images, "*What is all this about "going away", 'the quietness of pastoral work', etc., at a moment you are just wanted in Germany. You, who know as well as I do that the opposition in Berlin and the opposition of the church in Germany as a whole stand on such weak feet! That every honest man must have his hands full making it sharp and clear and firm! That now perhaps everything is going down the drain not because of the great power and deceit of the German Christians, but because of the pig-headedness and stupidity, of the desperate shallowness of, of all people, the anti-German Christians…No, to all the reasons and excuses that you might perhaps still be able to put in front of me, I will give you only one answer: 'And the German church? And the German churches?' – until you are back again in Berlin to attend faithfully and truly to the machine-gun which you have left behind there…*"

(Scholder, p-535)

Bonhoeffer did take that pastorate in London, and another in America a little later; but he could not long ignore that call back to the church in Germany. He returned to

Germany quietly though, not as a high profile opposition leader, but to open an underground seminary, and when that was discovered and shut down, to immerse himself in espionage and assassination plots; activities we shall briefly examine later on.

We come now to another early Confessing Church leader, Herman Sasse, who became its mortal enemy. This story ranks among the great tragedies of the Church War - not only in itself, but because it was repeated throughout the Church War by many others in less public ways, causing great chunks of the Confessing Church to crumble away into paving stones for the Nazis' trail of destruction. I think Sasse turned against the Confessing Church out of a deep-seated fear - not fear of the Nazis though, he seemed to have little or no fear of them, as if he saw them as only a passing shadow. Sasse's fears were far deeper and far older; fears that had fractured the church from the beginning, fears that Martin Luther had, and overcame. For all those centuries the German Protestant church had stood, block upon block, held together more by inertia than by the mortar of a common faith. But now the ground upon which the church was built had begun to quiver, and the strains had become unbearable.

Dr. Herman Sasse was a Lutheran. He was a Theologian, born into a long line of prominent Lutheran scholars and opponents of Unionism. He was relatively young at the time, older than Bohoeffer, neared the age of Niemoeller. I emphasize Lutheran, for he was a super-Lutheran. When the Prussian King Wilhelm formed the Prussian Union, some Lutherans emigrated to America and other places, rather than have their "pure" Lutheranism tainted by Calvinism. Sasse, although ordained by a church of the Old Prussian Union, spent time in America with those Lutheran purists, and returned to Germany with a purist's hatred of Calvinism and Unionism, and all things that smacked of them.

Sasse and Bonhoeffer had experienced the "happy collaboration" on the Bethel Draft, becoming friends, and even dreaming of opening a community-like seminary together. They both departed Bethel angry and discouraged, but to turn in entirely different ways. As I look at their time together in Bethel in the light of later

events, I am astonished that they could work together at all, even though the Bonhoeffer/Sasse Draft of the Bethel Confession was a very Lutheran document. Perhaps it was the atmosphere of Bethel that eased their spirits. Bonhoeffer, at least, wrote that he was deeply moved by his experience at the "house of God".

If Sasse was moved, it was apparently in another direction. It is unfair to both men, who labored long and hard on the subjects of their faith, to reduce their struggles to axioms; nevertheless, for the sake of clarity I shall do so. As I see them, Sasse was driven more by faith in the dogma of Lutheranism, while Bonhoeffer was driven more by the reality of Christ. Neither wavered in their faith regardless of the consequences. Sasse ridiculed those who believed that "living" piety was better than "dead" dogma. (Sasse 1, p-22) He looked down upon the Pietist movement as being as ignorant and superstitious as medieval Catholicism – with "*…miraculous responses to prayer and equally miraculous conversions which either never happened or in which the kernel of historical truth was no longer discernable*" (Sasse 2, p-267)

Pietism, Sasse believed, with its emphasis on good works undermined the Lutheran doctrine of *Sola Fide*, Faith Alone. It led down the primrose path toward Calvinism, and ultimately to the pit of Catholic "works religion". Sasse's theology seems almost to be saying that to do a good work is to reject the grace of God. He applies that theology to the Christian's public as well as his private life, and went so far as to criticize the founding of the Inner Mission, and other "Social Gospel" good works. To Sasse, the church did not consist of "believers" and "obeyers", as in the Reformed view. There was no visible and invisible church – "*The distinction between a visible and an invisible church has no meaning whatsoever for this Lutheran faith…The Gospel and the Sacraments are the marks by which a Christian can ascertain the presence of the church. There are no marks other than these.*" (Sasse 1, p-135) What Sasse seems to be saying is that a Christian need only hold to the correct doctrine and rituals, and… and there is nothing else.

His extreme position on the separation of church and state has no role for Christianity in society at large. Long after

the War, in an essay on abortion, Sasse wrote "*What has the church to learn from those centuries when it was thrown into a sex obsessed world full of adultery and the murder of the unborn? The church of that time did not try to make the world a better place to live in. How could she have been able to do it? This is never the task of the church."* (Sasse 2, P-352)

The church's goal in the Church War according to Sasse, and many like-minded thinkers, should be merely to safeguard its doctrines and rituals from contamination. This was a view of the church seemingly compatible with the Nazis' – confine Christianity to the inner sanctum of the individual, at least inside the church walls, not out in the real world - that belonged to the Nazis. The Nazis would not be content even with that triumph over Christianity, of course; as a few Christian leaders understood.

As Sasse saw it, the Barthians and the Dahlem gang were hijacking the Confessing Church and he spared no feelings and made no concessions to unity in attacking those "i*rresponsible fanatics*" and the "*evil*" work of Barth at Barmen. (Sasse 2, p-347)

More importantly, Sasse points out the widespread disaffection with the Barthian/Calvinistic/Pietistic drift of the Confessing Church. "*Within the so-called 'Confessional Front'*", he railed, "*there is a very strong unionistic wing, the leadership of which is in the hands of the Barthian school, and which is working for an imperial church with a new Union Confession. Increasing numbers of Lutherans (some of them in Union churches…and led by the Lutheran bishops of Bavaria, Wurtemberg, and Hanover) are fighting for the establishment in Germany of a Lutheran Church which is faithful to its confession."*

So here we see evidence of yet another schism in German Protestantism (taking for granted the long established breach between Lutheran and Reformed) – first the neo-pagans of the German Faith Movement, then the German Christians typified by Mueller and Hirsch, then the most devastating of all. Not what is stated – the fight for establishment of a true Lutheran Church – but what goes unstated. What we see here is the opening up of an old

fissure dating from the blows struck at the church by Rationalism. Some Lutherans, like the Pietists, chose to respond to Rationalism by deepening their faith. Others chose the path of Liberalism, to effectively deny God and the authority of Scripture, and yet retain the ethical premises of Christianity as "man's highest achievement". Still others adopted church dogma and ritual as their god. Faith in these is more tangible, more "reasonable", less risky than faith in an unseen God; and can be "purchased more cheaply".

As one far, and safely, removed from the German Church War, it is unseemly for me to criticize those who were not so blessed. I will, therefore, gladly yield here to one who was most intimate with the real battle, perhaps the root battle of the German Church War, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his ***Cost of Discipleship***, Bonhoeffer details at length the long struggle in the Christian church between what he dubs the "*costly grace*" understood by the early church, and the "*cheap grace*" that came to be accepted by the church in the "Christian era". He is merciless in his denunciation of this "cheap grace" and the church that accepts it:

> *It is a fatal misunderstanding of Luther's action to suppose that his rediscovery of the gospel of pure grace offered a general dispensation from obedience to the command of Jesus, or that it was the great discovery of the Reformation that God's forgiving grace automatically conferred upon the world both righteousness and holiness. On the contrary, the Christian's worldly calling is sanctified only in so far as that calling registers the final, radical protest against the world. Only in so far as the Christian's secular calling is exercised in the following of Jesus does it receive from the gospel new sanction and justification. It was not justification of sin, but the justification of the sinner that drove Luther from the cloister back into the world. The grace he had received was costly grace. It was grace, for it was like water on parched ground, comfort in tribulation, freedom from the bondage of a self-chosen way, and*

forgiveness of all his sins. And it was costly, for, so far from dispensing him from good works; it meant that he must take the call to discipleship more seriously than ever before. It was grace because it cost so much, and it cost so much because it was grace. That was the secret of the Reformation – the justification of the sinner.

Yet the outcome of the Reformation was the victory, not of Luther's perception of grace in all its purity and costliness, but of the vigilant religious instinct of man for the place where grace is to be obtained at the cheapest price. All that was needed was a subtle and almost imperceptible shift of emphasis, and the damage was done. Luther had taught that man cannot stand before God, however religious his works and ways may be, because at bottom he is always seeking his own interests. In the depth of his misery, Luther had grasped by faith the free and unconditional forgiveness of all his sins. That experience taught him that this grace had cost him his very life, and must continue to cost him the same price day by day. So far from dispensing him from discipleship, this grace only made him a more earnest disciple. When he spoke of grace, Luther always implied as a corollary that it cost him his own life, the life which was now for the first time subjected to the absolute obedience of Christ. Only so could he speak of grace. Luther had said that grace alone can save; his followers took up his doctrine and repeated it word for word. But they left out its invariable corollary, the obligation of discipleship. There was no need for Luther always to mention that corollary explicitly for he always spoke as one who had been led by grace to the strictest following of Christ. Judged by the standard of Luther's doctrine, that of his followers was unassailable, and yet their orthodoxy spelt the end and destruction of the Reformation as the

revelation on earth of costly grace of God. The justification of the sinner in the world degenerated into the justification of sin and the world. Costly grace was turned into cheap grace without discipleship.

Cheap Grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian "conception" of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins. The Church which holds the correct doctrine of grace has, it is supposed, ipso facto a part in that grace. In such a Church the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any desire to be delivered from sin. Cheap grace therefore amounts to a denial of the living Word of God, in fact, a denial of the Incarnation of the Word of God.

Cheap grace means the justification of the sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so all can remain as it was before. "All for sin could not atone." The world goes on in the same old way, and we are still sinners "even in the best life" as Luther said. Well then, let the Christian live like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world's standards in every sphere of life, and not presumptuously aspire to live a different life under grace from his old life under sin. That was the heresy of the enthusiasts, the Anabaptists and their kind. Let the Christian beware of rebelling against the free and boundless grace of God and desecrating it. Let him not attempt to erect a new religion of the letter by endeavoring to live a life of obedience to the commandments of Jesus Christ!

(Bonhoeffer [2], pp – 52, 53)

To whom is Bonhoeffer speaking such biting and sarcastic words? Let me rephrase that question - for he is speaking to me and millions more like me today who have allowed a blind secular world to mistake evil for good and good for evil. To whom were his jibes aimed at the time? Bonhoeffer left no uncertainty on that score:

> *We Lutherans have gathered like eagles round the carcass of cheap grace, and have there drunk the poison which has killed the life of following Christ. It is true of course, that we have paid the doctrine of pure grace divine honors unparalleled in Christendom, in fact we have exalted that doctrine to the position of God himself. Everywhere Luther's formula has been repeated, but its truth perverted into self deception. So long as our church holds the correct doctrine of justification, there is no doubt whatever that she is a justified Church! So they said, thinking that we must vindicate our Lutheran heritage by making this grace available on the cheapest and easiest terms. To be "Lutheran" must mean that we leave the following of Christ to legalists, Calvinists, and enthusiasts – all for the sake of grace. We justified the world and condemned as heretics those who tried to follow Christ. The result was that a nation became Christian and Lutheran, but at the cost of true discipleship. The price it was called upon to pay was all too cheap. Cheap grace had won the day.*
>
> *But do we also realize that this cheap grace has turned back upon us like a boomerang? The price we are having to pay today in the shape of the collapse of the organized church is only the inevitable consequence of our policy of making grace available to all at too low a cost. We gave away the word and sacraments wholesale, we baptized, confirmed, and absolved a whole nation unasked and without condition. Our humanitarian sentiment made us give that which was holy to the scornful and*

unbelieving. We poured forth unending streams of grace. But the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way was hardly ever heard. … Cheap grace has turned out to be utterly merciless to our Evangelical Church.

This cheap grace has been no less disastrous to our spiritual lives. Instead of opening up the way to Christ it has closed it. Instead of calling us to follow Christ it has hardened us in our disobedience. …

In our subsequent chapters we shall try to find a message for those who are troubled by this problem…
(Bonhoeffer [2] pp – 57, 58, 59)

Alas, it not the purpose of this book to indulge in spiritual ministration, or to inquire into what might have been if only more had followed Bonhoeffer's way of "costly grace". But for the sake of clarity, let us dwell on Bonhoeffer just a bit longer. We have heard much of "discipleship" and the pros and cons of doing of "good works". What, exactly did Bonhoeffer mean in the context of the times? From further on in the same compilation of Bonhoeffer's works one comes to his teaching on "The Saints" where he states:

"Not the hearers, but the doers of the law shall be justified (Romans 2:13). Christ himself said that only they who do the will of His Heavenly Father will enter into his kingdom.

We shall be judged according to our works – this is why we are exhorted to do good works. The Bible assuredly knows nothing of those qualms about good works, by which we only try to excuse ourselves and justify our evil works. The Bible never draws the antithesis between faith and good works so sharply as to undermine faith. No, it is evil works which

> *hinder and destroy faith. Grace and active obedience are complimentary. There is no faith without good works and no good works without faith.*

(Bonhoeffer [2], p-333)

Ah, one might say; our interest is specifically the relationship of church and state in the Nazi era, not in arcane theological controversies over the doctrines of Justification and Sanctification. And one might add that to do good works is not the same as entering into the sphere of the state's responsibility, the "political sphere" as Hitler and Goring would say. That may be true in some places and at some times, but not in Nazi Germany. Consider the law threatening six months incarceration for showing kindness to Jews. Yes, one may cross to the other side of the street and avoid such a conflict. But how about the state's more affirmative demands – swear loyalty to Hitler, send your children off to von Shirach's care (Hitler Youth), fire all Jewish employees, fill out forms on your patients that you know will be their death warrants, and on and on down to ushering people into the gas chambers. How does one compose the conflicting spheres of responsibility – state and church; and what price is one to place on grace?

So, what is to be said of the Confessing Church? That it was a fiction from the beginning, a mirage rising from naiveté and wishful thinking lost in the desert? Surely it was more than that. But one thing is certain; the Confessing Church was never a threat to the Third Reich. It bravely waved its banner, but few flocked to the banner.
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Only a brief excerpt further, in respect to Fritz von Bodelschwingh, known lovingly in Bethel as "Uncle Fritz", for his courageous opposition to the Nazi euthanasia program (T-4):

A curious tale came out of the meeting with Brandt, one which seems improbable in a way, yet I keep running across vague references to it. *The New York Times* picked up the story in its obituary of Rev. Bodelschwingh:

In 1940, Adolf Hitler's personal physician and a high ranking Nazi official appeared in Dr. von Bodelschwingh's

office and told him that all unfit patients in hospitals of his district would be killed. Dr. von Bodelschwingh replied he would resist openly all such attempts and ask for open revolt if such orders were carried out. (*The New York Times*, Jan. 12, 1946)

After the War, the United States held the T-4 doctors responsible for their notorious evil deeds – The United States vs. Karl Brandt, et. al. At his trial, Brandt stated "*Pastor von Bodelschwingh was the only person whom I am personally aware of who gave serious warning.*"