religions

MDPI

Article

"As If Nothing Had Happened": Karl Barth's 'Responsible' Theology

Michael D. O'Neil

Morling College, Vose Campus—Affiliate Institution of the Australian College of Theology, Perth 6102, Australia; michaelo@morling.edu.au

Abstract: Adolf Hitler's rise to power in early 1933 precipitated an ecclesial and theological crisis in the life of the German churches. Karl Barth responded to the crisis in his treatise *Theological Existence Today*, calling the German church to steadfast faithfulness in the face of increasing pressure to compromise the central commitments of its faith. This essay provides an exposition of Barth's treatise, exploring his understanding of theological existence, and evaluating his rather infamous assertion that he would "carry on theology, and only theology, now as previously, and as if nothing had happened". It finds that Barth called his peers to 'responsible' theology, the practice of which required a particular ethos and specific methodological commitments. Such responsibility was critical if the church was to retain both its integrity as the people of God, and its ministry, during this crisis.

Keywords: Karl Barth; theological method; *Theological Existence Today*; the first commandment as an axiom of theology; political theology; German church crisis; responsible theology

check for updates

Citation: O'Neil, Michael D. 2022. "As If Nothing Had Happened": Karl Barth's 'Responsible' Theology. *Religions* 13: 266. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030266

Academic Editor: Mark R. Lindsay

Received: 17 February 2022
Accepted: 18 March 2022
Published: 21 March 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

1. Introduction

By the end of the 1920s, much of the German Protestant Church rested satisfied in its achievements. Men such as Otto Dibelius, author of the widely read and influential *Das Jahrhundert der Kirche* (*The Century of the Church*), argued that the church's task

> was to validate and defend the Christian norms in a state without norms. Because the new religionless state no longer acknowledged moral standards, while a community life without such standards was unthinkable, the Evangelical Church found itself involved with securing these standards. (Scholder 1987, pp. 34–35)

The churches had confronted the uncertainty of their place in the new era with signs of hope emerging for the future. During the decade of the Weimar Republic the provincial churches had gained constitutional independence, and yet special status within the civic sphere of German national life. Germany was seen as a Christian state with the church ready to play an integral role in the social and cultural life of the nation (Scholder 1987, pp. 27–37). Not even the rise of the National Socialists was any real cause for concern: as recently as the general elections of 1928, the Party had lost ground in the polls and were not considered a threat. However, by 1933 all this had changed. The stunning rapidity of political change caught the church not only off guard but unprepared for the challenge with which it was confronted. Hitler, a consummate tactician, out-flanked and out-maneuvered the church, penetrating its leadership, wooing its constituents, placating its concerns. Barth himself reports that on 23 March 1933—the same day on which the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act, giving the new Chancellor full dictatorial powers—Hitler had assured the churches that their rights and position within the state would not be altered (Barth 1933, p. 24). This assurance echoed the formal platform of the National Socialists, first published in February 1920, which appeared to guarantee the freedom of the churches:

> We demand freedom of religion for all religious denominations in the state so long as they do not endanger it and do not oppose the moral feelings of the

> German race. The Party as such stands for positive Christianity, without binding itself confessionally to any one denomination. It combats the Jewish materialistic spirit within and around us, and is convinced that a lasting recovery of our nation can only succeed from within on the principle: The general interest before self-interest. (Stackelberg and Winkle 2002, p. 65)[1]

Like the rest of the Party's platform, this article is carefully worded to appeal to as broad a constituency as possible, here amongst the religious population. The Party 'demands' (will allow) religious freedom without favouritism for each of the Christian denominations in Germany: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and United, covering most of the population across all geographical regions in the country. It will not bind itself to one or another of the Confessions, nor play them off against one another. Each will be free to maintain their own tradition and practice. The Party stands for 'positive Christianity', speaking against 'the materialistic spirit within and around us', and standing for an 'inner' (spiritual) renewal of the nation, the common interest rather than 'self-interest'. Christianity will have a legitimate and respected place within the society.

Yet it is also the case that 'positive Christianity' is a circumscribed entity, and that the promised freedom is freedom only within strictly defined limits. First, freedom of religion does not include freedom for the Jewish faith. The antisemitism of the document is explicit, even in this clause as it contrasts the inner spiritual dynamic of the Christian religions against the supposedly materialistic and self-interested character of the Jews. More significantly, positive Christianity is a Christianity that is assimilated to the aims of the state and culture, 'the moral feelings of the German race'. It is a racialised and nationalist form of Christianity, legitimate 'so long as' it does not endanger the state or oppose its aims and feelings. The Party clearly intends to co-opt the church to serve its nationalist, racist, and political vision; anything that does not conform to Nazi ideology will be deemed 'negative' (Stroud 2013, p. 7).

The problem here is not primarily political but theological. The challenge is not so much that the church was being manipulated to serve a racist and nationalist agenda, which is bad enough, and a betrayal of its calling. Rather, the political problem and its devastating consequences were a symptom of a deeper and more subtle malaise. The church was being placed within an overarching narrative that was alien to its true identity and being: the idea that the church's primary service is to the state and culture rather than to the kingdom of God. It was the idea that the values and priorities of the kingdom of God could be identified with those of the culture, and that the church's freedom derived from the permission of the state and that it was, therefore, a functionary or organ of the state. Freedom 'so long as', was no freedom at all, but servitude and betrayal, introducing an alien principle to determine the being and practice of the church. If the church would accept this circumscribed freedom, it would lose its true liberty in Christ. As such 'positive Christianity was a misnomer: it was not Christianity at all, but an aberration. "It was, one might deduce, Christianity with no God, no Christ, and no content. It was the 'politically correct' version of an empty gospel" (Stroud 2013, p. 8).

It is hardly surprising, then, that Hitler's assurance on 23 March would prove false. Within two weeks, the government had begun the process of *Gleichschaltung*[2] and commenced its action against the Jews, beginning on 1 April with a boycott of Jewish businesses, and continuing through 7 April with the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service. This latter instrument included the first iteration of the Aryan paragraph, which banned persons of Jewish faith or descent from serving in public roles, including the civil service, schools, and universities. Soon, many associations in the private sector voluntarily began to implement the Aryan paragraph, and by September 1933 the German Christians demanded the adoption of the Aryan paragraph in the church (Stackelberg and Winkle 2002, p. 124; Stroud 2013, p. 29). In these early months of the Third Reich, the issue of the relation of church and state proved more important for the churches than the so-called 'Jewish Question': "In the conflict between church politics and conscience, church politics

carried the day" (Scholder 1987, p. 305). The Protestant churches were determined to resist the process of *Gleichschaltung* and to retain their independence with respect to the state.

Their independence, however, was short-lived. On 25 April, Hitler appointed army chaplain Ludwig Müller as his 'authorised representative' in matters pertaining to the Protestant church, with "a particular responsibility for furthering all endeavours to create an Evangelical German Reich Church" (Matheson 1981, p. 12; Scholder 1987, p. 308). Faced with this clear indication of Hitler's intention, leading Protestant clergy pre-emptively set about the reform of the church, and in particular, the establishment of an office of a *Reichsbischof*, a symbol of the unity of the twenty-eight Protestant *Landeskirchen*. Although Müller likely assumed that he would be appointed to the role, in fact the church's leaders nominated Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, the widely respected Director of Bodelschwingh Institutes, a centre of Christian aid for the poor (Scholder 1987, p. 325). This decision, although taken to avoid the *Führer*'s direct influence in the affairs of the church, was ultimately unsuccessful: Hitler never acknowledged Bodelschwingh's appointment.

The crisis came to a head when at lunchtime on 24 June 1933, August Jäger was appointed Commissioner of all Protestant *Landeskirchen* in Prussia, resulting in the immediate resignation of Friedrich von Bodelschwingh who had been *Reichsbischof* for less than one month. Scholder notes that, "the long-feared event had taken place. The state had intervened directly in the church (Scholder 1987, p. 355)".[3] That evening Karl Barth responded to the fresh crisis confronting the church by writing a missive entitled *Theological Existence Today!*[4]

This essay analyses Barth's treatise not merely with respect to its historical significance—which should not be understated—but in view of its abiding relevance to the practice of theology in any age, not least in times of cultural change, challenge, dislocation, and crisis. The analysis provides an exploration of the theologian's craft and practice rather than an examination of a modern issue or crisis in light of Barth's theology. If the treatise does, in fact, have continuing relevance to theology today—some ninety years after it was first written—it is found in its depiction of the *way* of theology rather than any particular decision or position taken with respect to crises or specific issues. According to Eberhard Busch, "Barth made *one* question 'the key to all church controversies': the issue is not whether theology is capable of making political judgments but rather . . . whether these political judgments [have] been made in a theologically correct way" (Busch 2004, p. 32, original emphasis). As such, the treatise provides a touchstone for theologians reflecting in their own contexts about the events, issues, or crises they face. It provides the theologian an orienting vision, an ethos, a posture, and a framework with which to approach their work. The focus of this essay, therefore, is on this *way*. I begin with a brief overview of the main sections of the treatise before exploring in more depth what Barth intends when he speaks of theological existence. Because Barth also hints in this treatise that theology must be practised responsibly, I also consider what such responsibility might entail.

2. *Theological Existence Today!*

Barth's little essay was a clarion call arguing for the integrity of theology in the face of formidable cultural pressures. The *Today* (*heute*) in the title of the essay is to be understood very specifically as well as generically. Barth (1933, p. 17) responded explicitly to events that had unfolded that day, 24 June 1933.

> While I am writing this on the eve of June 25th, 1933, I will try to illustrate what I mean by taking as examples three of the problems that occupy us today. It happens quite fortunately that these problems, severally and collectively, deal pre-eminently with the decisions reached today.[5]

This focus is evident in the eight paragraphs that constitute the introduction of the essay where eight times Barth uses the word to refer to the necessity of "today, more than ever, we can neglect to affirm our life's calling" and other similar statements (Barth 1933, p. 14). The introduction details, in strikingly vivid language, what Barth considers to be

the theme of the church—namely, the Word of God. Theological existence as he defines it means abiding in this theme as one's primary calling. Barth is strident: those who do not adhere to this theme are no longer "in the church", having been seduced by other concerns to depart from this primary calling (Barth 1933, pp. 14–17). This ever-present temptation for theologians and pastors is especially acute "today":

> Today this seems to be pre-eminently the case. And therefore it is time to say, that under no circumstances should we, as theologians, forsake our theological existence and exchange our rights as 'first born' for a 'mess of pottage'. Or, said positively, that now, one and all, within the church as she has borne us by means of the Word, and within the incomparable sphere of our vocation we must *abide*, or (if we have left it) *turn back* into the church and into the sphere of our vocation, at all costs, by putting all regards and concerns behind. (Barth 1933, p. 17, original emphasis)

This, for Barth (1933, pp. 13–14, 17), is the central issue: what constitutes the church *as church*? On the one hand, the events of 24 June mark a decisive line in the sand; on the other, they simply bring into sharp clarity an issue that had been brewing in German Protestantism for more than a decade, and indeed, for much longer. Thus, Barth details three issues highlighted by this government intervention: the cry for reform in the church, the issue of a *Reichsbischof*, and the nature and status of the German Christians.

The 'cry for reform' refers to a great move for reform which swelled in German Protestantism after Hitler's seizure of power in January 1933. In his essay, Barth resists its legitimacy on various grounds. First, the move for reform did not arise from the Word of God, although it did arise from within the church. A new theological rule had arisen which read the purposes of God from movements in the socio-cultural environment such that Protestant leaders could assert that,

> A mighty National Movement has captured and exalted our German nation. . . . We give hearty assent to this turning-point of history. God has given us this: to Him be the glory. Bound unitedly in God's Word, we recognise in the great events of our day a new commission of our Lord to his churches. (Barth 1933, p. 23)[6]

Barth rejects this rule, arguing that only where the Bible is acknowledged as Master is genuine theological existence and true ecclesial reform possible. Where this is not the case, that is, where there is "no theological existence . . . reform can and will be stillborn" (Barth 1933, p. 30). The "real church" does not seek to be a power within the culture, arm in arm with cultural and legal authorities, but is rather the "church under the cross". Genuine renewal is the work of the Holy Spirit whose activity, in spite of all human foibles and frailties, still radiates "something profoundly gladdening and peaceful, something Sabbatical, reverential" (Barth 1933, pp. 20–21). As far as Barth is concerned, the light of the Spirit is not at all perceptible in the Protestant Church's movement for renewal, a fact confirmed by the decisions of 24 June. Second, behind this, according to Barth, is a fear simply to be the church, or perhaps, wanting to be the church in another way than that which is according to its true theme.

However, the great irony of the present situation is that now, through a confluence of human blunders and divine providence, actual reform has begun! The events of 24 June confront the church with the apparent need for genuine renewal, and so with a call to return to the Word of God and authentic theological existence.

With respect to the second matter, while the idea of a bishop was not new in German Protestantism (Scholder 1987, p. 33), the widespread call for a national monarchical bishop was. Barth contrasted the innocuous titular bishop who served as a functionary and representative of the church in social and ecumenical forums, and as a symbol of the church's unity, with the idea which arose in the spring of 1933 of an executive bishop, having governmental and magisterial powers, including authority to decide theological and doctrinal matters, and to decide who may or may not be admitted to the ministry. Barth likened the role envisaged for this bishop with the powers of the Roman Catholic

prelate, considering the entire business of creating and electing a *Reichsbischof* as a "colossal blunder" (Barth 1933, p. 45). He mocked the German Evangelical Church for its utter weakness and cultural capitulation, arguing that the establishment of an office could never establish the kind of episcopal leadership the church longed for. With biting rhetoric, he traced the desire for such a bishop to the cultural and political reality of having a Leader (*Führer*). Just as the nation had an inspirational and powerful leader, so it should have a church with just such a leader alongside and within it (Barth 1933, pp. 34–35).

> Mark the word!—they meant the principle of leadership as seen in the concrete form of Adolf Hitler and leaders under him. What other kind of 'leader' could one be thinking about, when, in the Germany of the spring of 1933, the word was on everyone's lips? (Barth 1933, p. 35, translation emended)

For Barth, there had been no theological reflection concerning the necessity or role for the episcopacy, except by the Reformed, nor any theological rationale for the move (Barth 1933, pp. 41–45). Rather, the German Christians had rejected its true Leader and were setting about establishing their own human leader, seemingly unable to trust their true Leader for sustenance, guidance, and fruitfulness (Barth 1933, p. 45). For Barth, there was no way out of this cul-de-sac except to go back by the road from which they had come (Barth 1933, p. 41). It was time for the church to become serious, to stop playing games, and to reclaim its true faith and true ministry.

Barth reserved his strongest language for the third matter, his criticism of the German Christians, whom he accuses of complete assimilation of the church to the programme and ideology of the totalitarian state, a thorough-going synthesis of the church with the culture (Barth 1933, p. 70). He bluntly identifies this movement as 'heresy', to which he can only "absolutely and without reserve say, *NO* (*nein*) to both the spirit and the letter" of the German Christians' doctrine (Barth 1933, pp. 50–51). Barth's implication is clear: the alternative offered by the German Christians is that of false prophets offering the worship of false gods. The German Evangelical Church is facing its own Mount Carmel moment (1 Kings 18) in which they are being called to decision between their true Lord and false gods (Barth 1933, pp. 45–46).

Though he reserved his strongest language for the German Christians, they were not his primary concern in this section of the treatise, and in fact, he preferred to avoid engagement with them given their violent proclivities and their inclination to 'de-platform' those with whom they disagreed (Barth 1933, pp. 54–55). Rather, he wanted to speak with the German Evangelical Church more broadly. He was dismayed that so many had either capitulated to the German Christians or had otherwise forged a compromise with them, whether under their spell, or for some philosophical or pragmatic reason (Barth 1933, pp. 55–56). Many had not joined the German Christians but remained "open" to all that seemed "new and honest" (Barth 1933, p. 57). In particular, Barth distinguishes between the German Christians and the New Reformation Movement,[7] which he cites as an example of a compromised position, for they accept the German Christians' fundamental presupposition while moderating some aspects of their programme, such as their antisemitism (Barth 1933, pp. 62–66). However, Barth rejected the German Christian movement root and branch, letter and spirit: there could be no compromise whatsoever. The theology of the German Christians was alien to the Gospel, and with reference to the Jews specifically, Barth insists that,

> The fellowship of those belonging to the Church is not determined by blood, therefore, not by race, but by the Holy Spirit and Baptism. If the German Evangelical Church excludes Jewish-Christians, or treats them as of a lower grade, she ceases to be a Christian Church. (Barth 1933, p. 52)[8]

Nevertheless, the greater problem is the New Reformation's lack of theological resistance. The fundamental issue at stake concerns the truthfulness of the Christian confession (Barth 1933, pp. 55–57). The lack of theological reflection and conviction in the upper echelons of the church led to vapid, non-theological, even anti-theological statements of

faith, so it was hardly surprising that many in the churches throughout the land took the side of the German Christians (Barth 1933, pp. 60–61).[9]

Barth concludes his essay with an appeal that the German Evangelical Church cease the attempt to be a church-political movement and become instead, *the church*, which he describes as that "Fellowship of the Called, the Hearers, the Obedient, the Awakened, the Pray-ers, the Hopers and Hasteners" (Barth 1933, p. 79).[10] Barth envisages the church as a "*spiritual* centre of resistance", whose task is to work and pray, to hold fast to and confess the Creed, becoming a community no longer tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine (Barth 1933, pp. 76, 78, 80). The church is that community gathered in the name of Jesus, gathered by the Word and for the service of the Word, even in the totalitarian state and irrespective of the cost. The battle is waged by prayer, proclamation, and the practice of theology, and is not against the German Christians but for them, because primarily, it is the battle for the Word of God.

> If God in Christ is utterly for us all, then the Church too, as being the 'place where His glory dwelleth', must be utterly for all, and therefore for the German people . . . not *against* the 'German Christians' but even implicitly with and exactly *for* them . . . But we are under obligation to be what *we* are, and true to the mission entrusted to *us*: to serve the Word of God within this nation. . . . We should be sinning not only against God, but also against this people, if we were to go *with* the people, instead of standing *for* them. (Barth 1933, pp. 74, 81–82, original emphasis, translation emended)

3. Karl Barth's 'Theological Existence'

When Karl Barth speaks of 'theological existence' he has something quite definite in mind. The idea had long been part of his vocabulary. As a newly minted graduate, Barth was somewhat aggrieved by a critical comment made by his father: "accusations and objections of the kind you are making to me hurt [me] quite *physically* . . . , because they '*come at me*' in my full theological existence, instead of sympathetically complementing and helping, for which I remain open" (Tietz 2021, p. 41, original emphasis).[11] In a programmatic address early in his professorial career, Barth again speaks of "our existence as theologians" while addressing the dilemma of theologians who "ought to speak of God but . . . cannot" (Barth 2011, p. 177). For Barth, the Word of God is the necessary though impossible task of theology, "the certain *defeat of all* theology and *of every* theologian" (Barth 2011, pp. 195–96, original emphasis). Again, at the conclusion of a distinguished professorial career in a course of lectures he identified as his 'swan song', Barth devoted four lectures to the idea of theological existence, arguing that to be a theologian is to be grasped in the event of the Word of God and faith by the Holy Spirit, as one astonished at the wonder and reality of divine grace, and claimed thereby for the service of the Word of God.

> Theological existence is exclusively the *personal* existence of the 'little' theologian. He exists not only in the world and not only in the community but also simply by himself. . . . What is implied by the relationship between God's covenant of grace and the human race is the theologian's election, justification, sanctification, and calling. His prayer and work are included, his joy and sorrow, himself in his relation to his neighbor, the unique opportunity of his short life, his stewardship with the capabilities and possibilities given to him, his relation to money and possessions, to the opposite sex (in marriage and in every encounter), to his parents and children, to the morality and immorality of his environment. In the last analysis, he is the one who is concerned, questioned, and accused by God's Word; judged and justified, comforted, and admonished, not only in his function and role among his fellow men, but also personally in his existence for himself. He himself is the one whom God makes an 'I' by addressing him as a 'Thou'. (Barth 1963, pp. 82–83, original emphasis)

In short, one's theological existence involves the entirety of one's life: "to think and live *von Gott aus* entails the acknowledgement that nothing exists in isolation from what the God who is God has done, is doing, and will do" (Hancock 2013, p. 1). There is, therefore, no sphere in which the theologian might proceed in his or her work without immediate and primary reference to this God, and therefore no division or separation of life, for example, into categories of sacred and secular, or religion and politics, or private and public, as though one could defer to God's revelation in the one sphere and appeal to another, presumably more relevant and immediate authority, in the other. Theological existence involves, therefore, definite and specific methodological commitments, particularly a commitment to the unity of theology centred around the person of Jesus Christ. While all the theological loci are given due respect, they are also set in relation to their common centre in Jesus Christ who is the origin, centre, and goal of all theological reflection. Additionally necessary is a commitment to the priority of Jesus above every cause or any other methodological approach. Although theology may use a variety of approaches or methods in its study, it cannot be determined by any of them, for theology is determined only by its Object, Jesus Christ (Barth 1963, pp. 87–92).

These commitments are evident in Barth's treatise in 1933 where he provides a definition of theological existence in the introduction of the work, and then again explicitly references it as he concludes his discussion of each of the three issues addressed. I noted earlier Barth's contention that genuine theological existence involves being bound both to the Word of God and to the sphere of the church (Barth 1933, p. 11). Now Barth identifies seven primary commitments about which, he claims, "there is unanimity within the Church". These include the conviction that the most urgent demand in the world is that the Word of God be preached and heard, that the Word of God triumphs over all opposition, upholds all things, and directs them to their truest end, that it is good to depend upon the Word of God with all one's heart and powers, and so forth. Two convictions are especially important in this context. The first identifies the content of the Word of God as "Jesus Christ [who] is never to be found on our behalf save each day afresh in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments" (Barth 1933, pp. 12–13). The second is the acknowledgement that alongside the 'first business' of the theologian's calling to serve the Word of God within the church and in the world, there can be no rival. One indeed may be incited by a "second or third thing", but these things are included in the labour of the theologian only to the degree that they are taken up into his or her primary work "and condemned or blessed thereby" (Barth 1933, pp. 13–14). Thus, Barth notes that despite the enthusiasm and sincerity with which reform of the church had been pursued in 1933,

> The Holy Scriptures have not been allowed to be the Master in this work, and, therefore, the Word of God has not either. . . . Where the Bible is allowed to be Master, theological existence is present: and where theological existence lives, it is then possible for Church reform to issue from the Church's life. Where there is no theological existence, then, in our own day, as in every age of the Church in which she seeks selfishly to help herself, reform can and will be still-born. (Barth 1933, p. 30)

In a similar manner, Barth concludes his discussion of the question of the *Reichsbischof*, after he had excoriated those seeking a leader by insisting that "when it is recognised that *He*, and *He alone*, is the Leader, there is the possibility of theological existence" (Barth 1933, p. 46, original emphasis). Where there is no "theological life", all such crying out for a leader is as vain as the howling of the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. He contends that the cry for a leader is a symptom of a church that has lost its theological existence. The cry arises from those who ought to *be* leaders in their appointed ministries. Nor need one be a recognised theologian, an authorised bishop, or even a pastor at all: the lay person, too, may be a "genuine Bishop, if he only knows his Bible and his Catechism: a 'bishop' as foreseen in Holy Writ" (Barth 1933, p. 46).

Finally, at the end of his lengthy engagement with the New Reformation Movement, Barth returns once more to the nature of theological existence. Here he asserts that "Theo-

logical existence, in the situation created once more by the 'German Christians' today, even more than yesterday, would simply mean 'That we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine'" (Barth 1933, p. 80). His concern with the New Reformation Movement is that they have not been sufficiently serious in their engagement with the German Christians, but have approached their task as "thoughtlessly and secularly" as did the 'Committee of Three' (Barth 1933, pp. 65, 72). Their proposals are vague and undeveloped, lacking a "positive, confessional, theological content", and as such are a "Church-politics without substance" (Barth 1933, pp. 68–69). Apart from the New Reformers' commendable opposition to antisemitism, Barth finds that the only real difference between the two parties concerns the (not unimportant) formal independence of the church from the state; with respect to what the church is, however, both parties are agreed, though Barth himself is entirely unconvinced that their conception of the nature of the church is adequate (Barth 1933, pp. 64–65, 68, 79). The primary problem is that both the German Christians and the New Reformation Movement sprout "alike from the calamitous theology of the nineteenth century", so that even in the event of the New Reformation being victorious in the church struggle "it would only result in a new, perpetual adjustment and compromise (Creation *and* Redemption, Nature *and* Grace, Nationalism *and* Gospel)" (Barth 1933, pp. 69–70, original emphasis). In the end, the alternative provided by the New Reformation Movement to the German Christians is a "subtle snare; as bad, at least, as that of the 'German Christians'" (Barth 1933, p. 79).[12]

Barth's relentless critique of the New Reformation Movement provides additional insight into his concept of theological existence, especially understood in terms of his citation of Ephesians 4:14. Earlier in the treatise, as we have seen, he demands that the church "stop playing and be serious" (Barth 1933, p. 41)! But the essential aspect of the childishness he chides them for is a lack of steadfastness, their being 'tossed to and fro' (Barth 1933, p. 80). Such instability is inescapable, in Barth's mind, given the theological presuppositions of both the German Christians and the New Reformation in which the gospel is coordinated with other convictions, powers, or structures ('Nationalism *and* Gospel'). Such coordination is, in fact, a betrayal of the gospel, a refusal of the imperious claim of the Word of God, whether due to anxiety in the face of existing dangers, enthusiasm for new developments viewed as opportunities, or some other manifestation of a divided heart. In this condition, the minister or the theologian feels they must 'come to the aid' of the Word of God rather than put their whole trust in him (Barth 1933, p. 15). But this stance is 'irresponsible', a movement away from the mission of the church and the theologian's true responsibility within it. Barth does not blame individual church leaders for their convictions but asks rather,

> Who gave them the authority to express this opinion of theirs in the name of the Church? to establish the Church anew upon their political views? to 'assimilate' (*Gleichschaltung*) Church and State on the Fundamental Article, and by this 'assimilation' to exclude from the Church about-to-be-reformed those who do not agree with their opinions, and to bind the Church to one particular form of secular process in irresponsible fashion? (Barth 1933, p. 27)[13]

Barth finds a concrete illustration of this lack of responsibility in the deliberations of the 'Committee of Three' when they welcomed army chaplain Ludwig Müller "as a fourth member into their conclave" (Barth 1933, p. 59). Barth insists that had the German Evangelical Church been healthy, Herr Müller could not have been welcomed or have expected to have any contribution in their deliberations as a theologian (Barth 1933, pp. 59–60).

> Where in all this was the plain but critical question as to Christian *truth*: When could all this be possible? Or, is it that this question dare not be put at all in the present Evangelical Church? Has the quest for truth been totally suppressed in one jubilation or groaning by the shouts of Revolution, Reality, Life, Mastery of

> Destiny! and all those other bombastic slogans that stifle all Christian criticism? (Barth 1933, pp. 57–58, original emphasis)
>
> However it be, where, in this business, remains the Church's responsibility? Where, too, at this place, the inevitability of the inquiry as to Christian truth?—an inevitability which could not be affected by any 'brotherly love', so as to give scope and currency within the Church to this error. (Barth 1933, p. 61)

He is critical also of the approach taken by the New Reformation, which felt itself responsible for saving the church by raising a 'front' against the prospect of a state-church (Barth 1933, pp. 71–72).[14] Barth claims to understand this way of thinking, though he insists that "it is all wrong. It is not serious enough" (Barth 1933, p. 72). His concern is that they have substituted church politics for genuine ministry. The real battle has not to do with 'polls, placards, and protests', with mobilisations and 'fronts'. The theologian's battle is not about the church but in the church. It is not concerned with protecting the church but being the church through the practice of preaching and theology (Barth 1933, p. 74). It is in this context that we understand Barth's call for a "*spiritual* centre of resistance":

> *One that would, for the first time, give a meaning and a content to Church politics. The man who understands this will not 'gird himself for any fight', but will put on his programme, 'WORK AND PRAY'*. (Barth 1933, p. 76, original emphasis)[15]

Thus, Barth insists that theological existence involves the "obligation to be what *we* are, and true to the mission entrusted to *us*: to serve the Word of God within this nation" (Barth 1933, p. 82, original emphasis). To pursue other aims and ideals is to betray this calling—and those to whom we are called to minister the Word of God—and so to expose the church to its real and terrible danger: the possibility that the Word of God itself might be taken from it (Barth 1933, p. 73). Barth's rhetoric suggests that the contemporary church stands under the threat of divine judgement for its unfaithfulness, and that indeed, this judgement has, in the events transpiring 'today', already commenced (Barth 1933, p. 83).[16]

4. Responsible Theology?

Although we have noted in several instances the use of the language of obligation or responsibility, and although Barth clearly considers some theological practices irresponsible, it is not possible from this treatise to ascertain what responsible theology might entail, and whether Barth brings this idea to his discussion. However, it is possible to argue that he did, in fact, bring such a notion to this treatise. In March 1933, Barth gave two lectures in Denmark entitled "The First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology" in which he develops an understanding of what constitutes responsible theology (Barth 1986; Barth 2013, pp. 214–41).[17]

Barth begins the lecture by carefully delineating what he does and does not mean as he uses the term 'axiom'. Indeed, he somewhat humorously—but with all seriousness—notes,

> We assert that it is not through the concept 'axiom', but only by means of it (to be precise, in spite of it, only by trespassing on its customary usage, even reversing it, only by a misuse of this concept) can we designate the presupposition for theology and its significance for theological statements. (Barth 1986, pp. 63–64)

For Barth, the 'axiom' of theology is not an abstract, timeless, and self-evident truth universally accessible to all but the event of revelation; God's act of a self-revealing encounter with humanity in which God not only makes himself known to humanity, but saves and also commands them, and by so doing shows himself to be their lord and claims them as his people for covenant relation and obedience (Barth 1986, pp. 64–70).[18] By grounding theology in the first commandment, Barth not only interprets and applies the commandment as an axiom of theological epistemology, as George Hunsinger rightly notes, but also binds theology in its intent, ethos, and practice to the reality of God in such a way that to seek to loosen or remove this bond is to be in danger of 'worshipping other gods' (Barth 1986, p. 71; cf. Hunsinger 2015, p. 86).

> I think and speak with theological responsibility (*theologisch verantwortlich*) when I know myself to be responsible to that commandment in what I think and speak as a theologian; when I perceive that responsibility (*Verantwortlichkeit*) as a responsibility to an authority above which there is no appeal, because it is itself the last and highest, the absolutely decisive authority. (Barth 1986, p. 71; cf. Barth 2013, p. 228)

Although Barth's rhetoric in this lecture is calm and measured, his meaning is clear and unequivocal: The axiom of theology cannot be separated from the sphere of Holy Scripture, nor from its soteriological—and thus Christological—context, and nor, indeed, from a devotional attachment to the God who makes this command and demands of the theologian "You shall have no other gods before me!" (Barth 1986, pp. 69, 71). To detach oneself from theology's epistemological criterion is to fall into theological idolatry because one elevates a second or third authority into the position of primacy that belongs only to God. God—the God of the first commandment—makes other gods into 'nothings' and so captures the heart that his people must fear, love, and trust him. "Even theology is continually asked where its heart, its concern and interest really lie, and whether its heart might not be divided secretly between this god and other gods" (Barth 1986, p. 71). Theology is pressed concerning its concept of the highest good, the sources from which its declarations derive and the standards of certainty it attributes to them, as well as its motives and intentions. Each of these must be measured to see in what direction it runs: along the lines of the fear and love of the God of the first commandment, and trust in him, or does it recognise and cling to some other source of knowledge, criterion of certainty, motive, or value (*axioma*) (Barth 1986, p. 71).

Barth is aware how offensive these claims are to modern theology:

> Should God not be greater and richer than that? Should God really be delineated by the walls of the church, a book, the events of the years 1 to 30, the revelation and faith of the old and New Israel? Poor theology which has so small a god! Poor theology which has to resemble a pyramid standing on its tip! . . . Who is to prevent us from searching for help? The word 'god' is as passive as all other words. When it comes to this word we are surely at liberty to think polytheistically about *everything* which might appear to us as true, noble and worthy of veneration. Then it might be open to us to promote a corresponding theology according to need and inclination; one oriented towards *this* value and feeding on *that* source, answering the question of certainty *this* way and motivated by *those* practical concerns. A free human being can do all of those things. (Barth 1986, p. 72, original emphasis)

This is precisely what the theology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has done, and continues to do, says Barth. Having found and become enamoured with all manner of interesting ideas, possibilities, and necessities, as well as pressing realities, concerns, and needs, theology has given its heart to these and acknowledged them as sources of revelation alongside God's revelation in Jesus Christ (Barth 1986, p. 72). By use of the little word 'and', theology domesticates or even eviscerates "*the* revelation of which the *first commandment* speaks", reducing it to something subordinate, "a mere shadow" (Barth 1986, p. 76, original emphasis).[19] In the citation above, we find that Barth traces this phenomenon to two related tendencies, both resting on a fundamental apprehension. The first is the tendency to speak of God in terms of theological idealism, as merely a 'passive word', malleable in accordance with the concerns of the theologian involved. 'God' becomes a cipher, a blank canvas upon which the theologian can present a fresh, 'relevant', or idiosyncratic portrayal of 'God' coloured by the particular concerns in view. The second is the sense of freedom that humans have vis-à-vis this god, a freedom that allows them—and perhaps even authorises or requires them: *sapere aude!*—to develop their theology 'according to need or inclination' or in accordance with '*this* value or *that* source or *those* practical concerns'. The underlying apprehension, Barth suggests, might be understood as a lack of confidence in the gospel

and God's ongoing and active work in the world, a realisation of how "really quite difficult" it is "to stand so completely alone with God and God's Word (in that narrow, exclusive sense of the word) before philosophy, the historical and natural sciences, and the many other accomplishments of the modern world" (Barth 1986, p. 72; cf. Barth 1933, pp. 14–17).

It is evident that Barth's entire lecture is a full-blooded assault on both of these presuppositions, which is in accordance with his lifelong theological project to ground theology in the event of the revelation of the living God who is never a cipher, never an extension or projection or discovery of human being, religion, rationality, feeling, desire, experience, or culture, but the God who meets us in the event of revelation as the Lord our Creator and Redeemer in judgement and grace, forgiving our sins and summoning us to responsible obedience, not least in our theology. He ends his lecture, therefore, by providing three guiding principles of a theology that is "aware of its responsibility" to the first commandment. In providing these guides, Barth is careful to note that these can only be raised as questions to modern theology, that *we* can never stand as the Lawgiver and Judge over another theologian's heart even if the questions are posed with acuity and sharpness (Barth 1986, p. 73). He seeks not the division of the church but is fighting for "right obedience in theology", a theology which corresponds to the first commandment and does not oppose it (Barth 1986, p. 77).

> Theology today . . . should take its leave of each and every natural theology and dare, in that narrow isolation, to cling solely to the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Why? Because that and only that has been commanded of it. Because everything else is arbitrariness which does not lead to, but leads away from, that God. (Barth 1986, p. 77)

First, when theologians find it necessary to relate revelation to some other criterion, they will not simply coordinate the two criteria (revelation *and* . . .), but, aware of their responsibility (*Verantwortlichkeit*), will emphasise revelation as primary and do so with a heightened seriousness, and the other criterion as secondary and for the sake of revelation. "In the obviously unequal distribution of its zeal and passion, theology will show plainly where its heart is and where it has its god" (Barth 1986, p. 73). Second, theology will interpret the other criterion in the light of revelation and not vice versa: it will not constrain what theology and revelation may or can say on the basis of this other concept. Barth's lecture is itself a case study of this principle: although he has adopted the concept of axiom from the fields of logic, mathematics, and physics, he elaborates at length on how he uses the term with respect to theology and the first commandment, and how and why he cannot use it as it is customarily used in those other fields. He finds it a suitable concept to use in theology so long as it is appropriately redefined; in its natural meaning it is wholly unsuitable for use in theology. Finally, responsible theology will allow no possibility of mixing, exchanging, or identifying revelation with the second concept. Theology will not be reduced to conditions set by the other criterion, nor be submerged within it (Barth 1986, pp. 73–76).

While Barth's *Theological Existence Today* does not refer either explicitly or implicitly to this lecture or to these guiding principles, it is clear enough that he is employing them in his engagements with the leading clergy of German Protestantism, the German Christians and the New Reformation Movement.[20] He rejects the coordination of revelation with other criteria such as nationalism or race, the sublimation of faith into "a truly German Lutheran spirit and heroic piety", or the 'assimilation' of the church into the programme of the state.[21] He consistently argues for a theology bound to the Word of God, and to the sphere of the church, dependent only upon God for its validation and fruitfulness, and willing to bear the consequences of this identification as the church under the cross. In a later reflection he insists that,

> I did not have anything new to say in that first issue of *Theological Existence Today* apart from what I had always endeavoured to say: that we could have no other gods than God, that holy scripture was enough to guide the church into all truth,

> that the grace of Jesus Christ was enough to forgive our sins and to order our life. The only thing was that now I suddenly had to say this in a different situation. It was no longer just an academic theory. Without any conscious intention or endeavour on my part, it took on the character of an appeal, a challenge, a battle-cry, a confession. It was not I who had changed: the room in which I had to speak had changed dramatically, and so had its resonance. As I repeated this doctrine consistently in this new room, at the same time it took on a new depth and became a practical matter, for decision and action. (cited in Busch 1976, p. 227)[22]

5. 'As If Nothing Had Happened'

With this discussion of Barth's essay in view, we can now address the famous—or infamous—statement made at the beginning of his treatise:

> I must at once make clear that the essence of what I attempt to contribute today bearing upon these anxieties and problems cannot be made the theme of a particular manifesto, for the simple reason that at Bonn here, with my students in lectures and courses, I endeavour to carry on theology, and only theology, now as previously, and as if nothing had happened. (Barth 1933, p. 9)

He goes on to compare his work with that of the Benedictines in the nearby abbey *Maria Laach*, whose devotion to the hours continues "undoubtedly without break or interruption, pursuing the even tenor of its way even in the Third Reich" (Barth 1933, p. 9).[23]

Joshua Mauldin has recently noted that this statement has "for generations of theological critics smacked of a kind of apolitical quietism that is morally reprehensible" (Mauldin 2021, p. 113). However, this, surely, is to misinterpret and misunderstand what Barth was doing. He is not here advocating a focus on abstruse theological questions disconnected from the affairs of everyday life and politics. Nor did he intend a pietistic escape from the serious concerns that were then confronting German society and the church. Rather than address 'the situation' (*zur Lage reden*), he intended to speak 'to the matter' (*zur Sache*) (Barth 1933, p. 10; cf. Barth 2013, p. 282).[24] That is, Barth intends not a discussion of the political events as a crisis confronting the church from without, but of that confronting the church from within: the crisis of the church's own theological existence, or more precisely, its lack thereof. Thus, in accordance with his vocation as a theologian he will address the theological and ecclesial issues.

He had flagged this conviction in August the previous year in the preface to the inaugural volume of his new project, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*:

> Or shall I rather bemoan the constantly increasing confusion, tedium and irrelevance of modern Protestantism, which, probably along with the Trinity and the Virgin Birth, has lost an entire third dimension—the dimension of what for once, though not confusing it with religious and moral earnestness, we may describe as mystery—with the result that it has been punished with all kinds of worthless substitutes, that it has fallen the more readily victim to such uneasy cliques and sects as High Church, German Church, Christian Community and religious Socialism, and that many of its preachers and adherents have finally learned to discover deep religious significance in the intoxication of Nordic blood and their political *Führer*? . . . I am firmly convinced that, especially in the broad field of politics, we cannot reach the clarifications which are necessary to-day, and on which theology might have a word to say, as indeed it ought to have, without first reaching the comprehensive clarifications in and about theology which are our present concern. I believe that it is expected of the Church and its theology . . . that it should keep precisely to the rhythm of its own relevant concerns, and thus consider well what are the real needs of the day by which its own programme should be directed. (Barth 1975, pp. xiv, xvi)

This is precisely what Barth is arguing—and doing—in his 1933 treatise. He refutes the idea that his call to theological existence is "all too narrow, indeed too self-centred" in view of "the great task" now confronting the nation, replying that one need think both spiritually and "realistically". "Theological existence is certainly not an end in itself, as certainly God Himself was not content to be an end in Himself" (Barth 1933, p. 81). Theologians can only be for the people as they embrace the obligation to be "what *we* are, and true to the mission entrusted to *us*: to serve the Word of God within this nation" (Barth 1933, p. 82, original emphasis). This mission cannot be substituted, as has been suggested, to become the validation and defence of Christian norms in a state without norms, or the quest to become 'a power' within the culture, arm in arm with cultural and legal authorities, or for the church selfishly 'to help herself'. Whether the church in the Weimar Republic, the German Christians, or the New Reformers, each in their own way subverted the true mission of the church and its theology.

Again, this is not to suggest that the treatise did not also have political intent and impact. For example, Barth's insistence that the state's ecclesiastical representative should not have any determinative authority in the church's order of ministry, and his support for the Jews as full members of the church, and by implication the church's right to recognise them as ministers, have clear political implications. His rejection of the Nazi's 'positive Christianity' as heresy and of the state's programme of *Gleichschaltung* as applied to the church have similar, and in this treatise, overt significance. The church must not widen its creed to "include the National Socialists' 'worldview'", and while it must preach the gospel also in the Third Reich it must not do so "*under* it, nor in *its* spirit" (Barth 1933, p. 52, original emphasis). The church exists as the boundary of all things, even the totalitarian state. Thus, for theology and the church there can be "no moratorium and no 'assimilation'" (*Gleichschaltung*) within the 'Total State' (Barth 1933, p. 84). His analogical allusion, linking the German Christians with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel worshipping false gods—and calling to mind, no doubt, their association with Ahab and Jezebel—has clear rhetorical effect (Barth 1933, p. 46). Barth notes that should Müller and the German Christians prevail, "disobedience will have to be rendered" to their doctrines, announcements, the *Reichsbischof* and his prebendaries—and the consequences paid (Barth 1933, p. 67). That Barth sent a copy of the treatise to Hitler is also a signal of his intent. The treatise indeed "became a practical matter, for decision and action", as noted above.

However, Barth believed more fundamentally that the present political disorder had theological roots. Joshua Mauldin notes that in 1939, Barth attributes the rise of National Socialism to the German form of the 'evil dream' that all nations and peoples hold, aided especially by Luther's concept of Law and Gospel and his concomitant teaching on the two kingdoms. This 'evil dream' comprised a 'mystical paganism' fused with an imperialist nationalism deriving from Frederick the Great and Otto von Bismarck (Mauldin 2021, pp. 118–20).[25] Further, Barth suggests the political absolutism that came to expression in Frederick, Bismarck, and Hitler was grounded in the Enlightenment myth of self-sufficient humanity imposing its will onto nature, a concept which also found support in the lionising of religious individualism (Mauldin 2021, pp. 120–21). In both cases, theological issues contribute to the conditions that allowed the emergence of the totalitarian state. While the rise of Nazism cannot be solely blamed on Protestant Christianity, these and other theological ideas made Protestantism more vulnerable to this ideology. Ultimately, Barth traces this vulnerability to Protestant theology's affirmation of natural theology, especially in its early twentieth-century iteration, which focussed on the orders of creation and thus cleared a path "for the ideology of the *Volk* to be incorporated into Christian teaching" (Mauldin 2021, pp. 123–24). The theology of the two kingdoms made difficult the development of theological resources to resist a tyrannical regime, while natural theology allowed cultural and political forces to co-opt Christianity for their own purposes (Mauldin 2021, p. 140). Mauldin concludes his perceptive treatment of Barth's reflections on the rise of National Socialism by drawing attention to Carl Schmitt's claim that "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts". Without subscribing

to Schmitt's overall system, he concludes that if National Socialism were the product of theological error, then it can only be understood, critiqued, and resisted on theological terms (Mauldin 2021, p. 140).

> Barth's approach to National Socialism is best understood in this light. Insofar as a certain kind of theology made Nazism possible, criticism of the ideology should itself be a form of theological criticism. As a theologian, Barth was prepared to provide just such a theological critique. And if the assumptions of Barth and of contemporary political theology are correct, an adequate critique of National Socialism was *necessarily* something like the critique Barth provided. (Mauldin 2021, p. 141, original emphasis)[26]

Hence Barth would "carry on theology, and only theology, now as previously, and as if nothing had happened".

6. Concluding Reflections

Barth's treatise generated an extraordinary response. The first print run of 3,000 copies sold out within days. By the time the booklet was officially banned a year later, some 37,000 copies had been printed (Barth 2013, p. 278). Barth's word 'to the situation' was timely; his word 'to the matter' even more so, having continuing significance. Barth wanted to address theological existence, the matter of the theologian's vocation, which he understood as their life within the church, and as preachers and teachers within the church (Barth 1933, p. 11). The great temptation facing that generation was the possibility of losing their theological existence by being diverted to some other cause from the ministry into which they had been summoned. The loss of theological existence is a tragedy as it presages the loss of the church's authentic existence. At the heart of Barth's *Theological Existence Today* was a struggle for the nature and mission of the Protestant church, a struggle that had been brewing for several years and had now burst fully into the open. Scholder (1987, pp. 123–26), writing about a dispute between Barth and Dibelius in 1931, noted that "two conceptions of the church confronted each other here, with absolutely no chance of coming to an agreement". On the one hand were those who conceived the proclamation of the gospel as a moral task, setting standards for the family, public life, *Volk*, and nation. For Barth, on the other hand, it was not the church's responsibility 'to put the gospel into effect', but to *be* the people of God. The battle was not for the place of the church with respect to its cultural or political status or role, but for its integrity as the people of God. If the church were to fulfil its role as the 'Fellowship of the Called', genuine theological existence was crucial. Only thus could the church be the boundary and frontier of the state, even if it were as the church 'under the cross' in the totalitarian state.

Barth makes clear what constitutes this kind of theological existence: one is bound to the Word of God, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the theme and orienting centre of one's calling, and to the primacy of the Scriptures in theological work as it is there that Jesus Christ may be sought afresh time and again; one is bound also to the church as the sphere of this calling; the quest of theological existence is for Christian truth; however, this sphere and this quest are not an end in themselves, for the impulse of theological existence corresponds to God's own self-giving movement into the world—its task is missional, to serve the Word of God in the world; theological existence is subject to an intensive and exclusive claim: there can be no coordination or assimilation of the theologian's theme with other themes, callings or claims in such a way that the primacy of this claim is attenuated, suspended, superseded, or surrendered; and finally, theological existence involves a particular responsibility, which is another way of expressing the imperious and exclusive claim made upon the theologian by the theme of their calling.

The abiding significance of Barth's treatise in our own day should be evident. The unedifying spectacle of large segments of American evangelicalism capitulating to Trumpian nationalism and violence signals a decisive failure of theological existence with devastating consequences for the churches.[27] However, the problem is not confined to one sector of

the church or one set of issues. Whether one leans more toward the conservative or the progressive end of the theological or political spectrums, or whether one is more centrist, one may indeed be moved by various issues or concerns which continually arise in both church and culture: every theologian faces the temptation of the little word *and*, which in some cases at least, may be more subtle precisely because some issues stand closer to the truth. Barth acknowledges the reality of the needs and concerns that move theologians, as well as the legitimacy of pursuing those needs and concerns so long as it is done responsibly in accordance with the priorities and principles detailed in both his treatise and the Copenhagen lecture. Barth's theological existence is not a 'free' activity in which the theologian may follow their own inclination and desire, but "a fight for right obedience in theology"—a joyful and resolute acknowledgement of and methodological commitment to the lordship of the God who meets people in the event of revelation (Barth 1986, p. 77).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 The 25-point programme, proclaimed at a public meeting of the German Workers' Party on 24 February 1920, was drawn up by Gottfried Feder (1883–1941). Hitler had joined the Party on 12 September 1919 and under his leadership later in 1920, the Party changed its name to the National Socialists German Workers' Party. He became chairman of the renamed Party on 29 July 1921. In January 1926, Hitler rejected any modification of the 25-point programme. See Stackelberg and Winkle (2002, pp. xvi, 63).

2 *Gleichschaltung* refers to the strategy employed by the Nazis to synchronise or coordinate all the various sectors and institutions of German society with Nazi ideology and its programme, legally, structurally, culturally, and even theologically. The *Gleichschaltung* of the Free Labour Unions was ordered on 21 April 1933. Later in the year the process was applied to the Arts and Culture and to the Press. On 25 April Hitler would make clear that the church, too, would in time be subject to this process (Stackelberg and Winkle 2002, pp. 153, 62–66; Solberg 2015, p. 20; Stroud 2013, pp. 26–27).

3 See the translator's note in Barth (1933, p. 11), for Barth's list of five events occurring 'today'.

4 Note that the subtitle of the English translation ("A Plea for Theological Freedom") does not appear on the cover of the German original (Busch 1976, p. 238; Solberg 2015, p. 83), and indeed misrepresents the content and purpose of the treatise. Barth is not pleading for the freedom to practise theology—from either the government or the German Christians—but argues rather for theological responsibility, as I will show.

5 Although, as we note later in the essay, the treatise was likely already being drafted at least by 15 June. No doubt Barth wrote parts of it on the evening of 24 June in response to the events of that day.

6 Barth is citing a slightly longer statement issued on April 25 by President of the Federal Organisation of the Protestant *Landeskirchen*, Herrmann Kapler and two associates, Lutheran Bishop of Hannover Dr August Marahrens, and Reformed Pastor in Elberfeld, Dr Hermann Albert Hesse. 25 April was, of course, the same day on which Hitler had anointed Ludwig Müller as his personal representative in Protestant church affairs, as well as the day of the first meeting between Hitler and Kapler to discuss the relation of the Protestant Churches to the new state. Finally, it was also the day of a special meeting of the Executive Committee of the Federal Organisation of Protestant *Landeskirchen* in which the Executive Committee empowered Kapler to 'take all measures necessary' to reform the Church, and appointed Marahrens and Hesse to assume responsibility with Kapler for this task. This statement, therefore, reflects the ethos of the highest levels of Protestant leadership at the end of April 1933. Barth will refer in his treatise to Kapler, Marahrens, and Hesse as 'the Committee of Three'. For further detail on these developments, and a longer version of the statement Barth cites, see Scholder (1987, pp. 302–5).

7 At times also called the Young Reformers Movement or other abbreviated titles. The group emerged in early May in direct response to a German Christian assertion of leadership within German Protestantism. Although they shared features in common with the German Christians (e.g., affirmation of the new German state, a desire for swift and comprehensive renewal of the church, including the appointment of a *Reichsbishof*), they were distinguished from the German Christians in their decisive repudiation of the Aryan clause in the church, and in their insistence that any ecclesial renewal must be in accordance with the 'nature of the church'. That the new Movement resonated with many German Protestants was evident in the number of supporters the Movement gained in a few short weeks—over 3000 signatures in the first week after the group's first press conference on 9 May. See Scholder's (1987, pp. 320–22) discussion.

8 The German Christians' antisemitism was evident in "The Original Guidelines of the German Christian Faith Movement" published by Joachim Hossenfelder in 1932. The Guidelines are committed to an explicitly racialized and nationalist form of Christianity (points 4–7). The ninth point reads, "In the mission to the Jews we see great danger to our people. It is the point at which foreign blood enters the body of our people. There is no justification for its existing alongside the foreign mission. We reject

the mission to the Jews as long as Jews have citizenship, which brings with it the danger of race-blurring and race-bastardizing. . . . It is especially important to prohibit marriages between Germans and Jews". See Solberg (2015, pp. 48–52, cf. pp. 165–76).

9 Eberhard Busch (2010, p. 2) gives a sense of the ecclesial tumult of the time when he reports that some seventy-five confessions were issued during 1933 alone by various German religious groups.

10 The editors of the *Gesamtausgabe* (Barth 2013, p. 280) note that the title Barth gave his essay had been corrected to "Theological Existence Today": "The heading is in the Manuscript corrected: "From church-politics to the church!" Note, however, Mark Lindsay's contention that Barth considered this work as a "fatally compromised document", based on an account from Helmut Gollwitzer in which Barth condemned the present manuscript as a "'politically coordinated" (*gleichgeschaltete*) theological existence" (Lindsay 2001, p. 248; Gollwitzer 1976, p. 113). Busch (1976, p. 226) reports that Barth had written an earlier draft that he later abandoned, though his report makes no mention of Gollwitzer's claim.

11 The letter to Fritz Barth was dated 30 September 1909.

12 Note Scholder's comment that Barth's harsh criticism of the New Reformation Movement was "not correct" (1987, p. 321). Scholder acknowledges the common ground shared by the New Reformation and the German Christians, but sees their distinctives (see footnote 6 above) as decisive. Barth's analysis, however, is concerned with the affinity between the two groups with respect to their theological presuppositions; that is, both groups acknowledge another authority which conditions what theology may or can say.

13 The 'Fundamental Article' is a reference to Hitler's declaration on 23 March that "the rights of the Churches will not be diminished, nor their position as regards the State be altered" (see Barth 1933, p. 24). With this statement Barth rejects the presupposition that the state grants freedom to the church and the corollary that the church must therefore support the state.

14 Hoyle's translation perhaps overstates this sense of responsibility by awarding it a double emphasis: "The liability is therefore laid upon us: we are responsible for the church and have to ward off this peril". The German reads more simply, "Also sind wir es der Kirche schuldig, diese Gefahr abzuwehren"—"So we owe it to the church to ward off this danger" (Barth 2013, p. 352).

15 Indeed, Barth's own order of the programme is "*Pray and work!*" (Barth 2013, p. 356).

16 Here Barth notes the loss of "temporal, material, earthly goods" though he includes also "Liberty, Justice, Spirit" as things that had been enjoyed—irresponsibly (*unverantwortlich*)—by the people. These things "had to be taken away to-day". His suggestion seems to be that the removal of these blessings is a warning of the possible loss of the Word of God, the far more dire concern mentioned earlier.

17 The lecture was originally published in *Zwischen den Zeiten*, 11 (1933), 297–14.

18 A full exposition of this lecture is not possible within the parameters of this essay. See George Hunsinger (2015) for an exposition of the lecture though he addresses it with a quite different focus.

19 Barth provides a list of examples, from theologians of the Enlightenment in eighteenth century ("revelation *and* reason") to Emil Brunner in the twentieth ("the commandments *and* the orders of creation")—see pp. 72–73.

20 Note, however, that in a letter to his mother (Anna Barth) dated 15 June 1933, Charlotte von Kirschbaum indicates that the Copenhagen lecture and the work now in preparation (i.e., *Theological Existence Today*) are indeed linked in Barth's mind as his 'word to the situation' (Barth 2013, pp. 272–73). This also suggests that Barth did not actually begin composing his treatise on the evening of June 24.

21 The phrase is taken from the fourth point of "The Original Guidelines of the German Christian Faith Movement (1932)" (Solberg 2015, p. 49). The statement also includes a clear indication of alignment of the German Christian Faith Movement with the so-called 'Positive Christianity' that formed part of the National Socialists' policy platform (Stackelberg and Winkle 2002, p. 65). See also Barth (1933, pp. 50–53) for a point-by-point repudiation of the German Christian "Guidelines".

22 See also Busch (1976, p. 223): On 30 January 1933, Barth recollected knowing immediately "where I stood and what I could not do. In the last resort, this was simply because I saw my dear German people beginning to worship a false God". Cf. Barth (1977, p. 39).

23 It should be noted that Barth's confidence in the Abbey may have been misplaced. See Ruff (2006).

24 Hoyle's introduction of the Latin *ad rem* in the translation is unhelpful and not used by Barth in the original.

25 Although Barth's comments come several years after his 1933 treatise it is possible, perhaps, to see an earlier expression of the same idea in the citation from the preface to the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, where Barth laments Protestant Christianity's loss of a third dimension—mystery—which results in many falling prey to other alien myths such as those attributing religious significance to Nordic blood.

26 Mauldin cites Schmitt (2005).

27 See, for example, the comments by Elizabeth Neumann, herself an evangelical Christian in Stanton (2021).

References

Barth, Karl. 1933. *Theological Existence Today: A Plea for Theological Freedom*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
Barth, Karl. 1963. *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Barth, Karl. 1975. *Church Dogmatics I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Barth, Karl. 1977. *Final Testimonies*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Barth, Karl. 1986. The First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology. In *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*. Edited by H. Martin Rumscheidt. Allison Park: Pickwick.
Barth, Karl. 2011. *The Word of God and Theology*. London: T&T Clark.
Barth, Karl. 2013. *Vorträge und Kleinere Arbeiten 1930–1933*. Edited by Michael Beintker, Michael Hüttenhoff and Peter Zocher. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag.
Busch, Eberhard. 1976. *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
Busch, Eberhard. 2004. *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Busch, Eberhard. 2010. *The Barmen Theses Then and Now*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Gollwitzer, Helmut. 1976. Kingdom of God and Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth. In *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*. Translated and Edited by George Hunsinger. Philadelphia: Westminster.
Hancock, Angela Dienhart. 2013. *Karl Barth's Emergency Homiletic 1932–1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Hunsinger, George. 2015. The Yes Hidden in Karl Barth's No to Brunner: The First Commandment as a Theological Axiom. In *Evangelical, Catholic and Reformed: Doctrinal Essays on Barth and Related Themes*. Edited by George Hunsinger. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Lindsay, Mark R. 2001. *Covenanted Solidarity: The Theological Basis of Karl Barth's Opposition to Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust*. New York: Peter Lang.
Matheson, Peter, ed. 1981. *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches: A Documentary Account of Christian Resistance and Complicity during the Nazi Era*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
Mauldin, Joshua. 2021. *Barth, Bonhoeffer, & Modern Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Ruff, Mark Edward. 2006. Review: Marcel Albert, Die Benediktinerabtei Maria Laach und der Nationalsozialismus. *Contemporary Church History Quarterly* 7: 6. Available online: https://contemporarychurchhistory.org/2006/06/june-2006-newsletter/ (accessed on 2 May 2021).
Schmitt, Carl. 2005. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Translated by George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 36.
Scholder, Klaus. 1987. *The Churches and the Third Reich Volume One: Preliminary History and the Time of Illusions 1918–1934*. London: SCM.
Solberg, Mary M., ed. 2015. *A Church Undone: Documents from the German Christian Faith Movement 1932–1940*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
Stackelberg, Roderick, and Sally A. Winkle, eds. 2002. *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook: An Anthology of Texts*. London: Routledge.
Stanton, Zack. 2021. It's Time to Talk about Violent Christian Extremism. Available online: https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/04/qanon-christian-extremism-nationalism-violence-466034 (accessed on 12 March 2021).
Stroud, Dean G. 2013. *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Tietz, Christiane. 2021. *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.