

# Consensus

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Volume 23

Issue 2 *Essays by Younger Theologians*

Article 7

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11-1-1997

## Introduction

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### Recommended Citation

Kelly, Robert A. (1997) "Introduction," *Consensus*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol23/iss2/7>

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# Studies and Observations: Introduction

Robert A. Kelly

Editor

The Gospel is always communicated to people within the language and structures of human culture. Theologians in the past twenty years or so have used the term "contextualization" for the process whereby preachers and teachers of the Gospel learn to express it in culturally appropriate forms. "Contextualization" and "contextual" theologies have become so popular that we might conclude that there are no other alternatives and that the process is fairly straightforward. Such an attitude is simplistic at best. The process of contextualization is fraught with difficulty, and the results are always open to the potential for falsifying the Gospel message.

One of the best examples of the dangers inherent in contextual theologies is the German Church Struggle of the 1930s. Under the influence of German nationalism in general since the 1880s and National Socialism specifically after January 1933, a number of German theologians and church leaders developed what they called "German Christianity". Christian theology and practice were to be contextualized to the "German reality" and stripped of non-German elements. In particular, the German Christians found Jewish influence on Christianity to be problematic. St. Paul in particular was blamed for Judaizing what had been an essentially Aryan religion. The more radical German Christians argued that the Old Testament had no place in Christianity and that Jesus himself had been Aryan rather than Jewish.

A group of pastors and theologians under the leadership of Martin Niemöller and Karl Barth wrote and acted to stop what they saw as "the German Christian heresy". In spite of their activities the Faith Movement of German Christians partly won a

decisive victory in the July 1933 elections for provincial church synods. In September a number of synods, including the Prussian synod—referred to as the “Brown Synod” because of the number of delegates who were Nazi “Brown Shirts”—adopted the “Aryan Clause” which prohibited persons of Jewish descent or persons with spouses of Jewish descent from holding office in the church. Any pastor or other office-holder who was of Jewish descent, of which there were many, was to be deposed.

The regional synod of Electoral Hesse then requested a theological review of the Aryan Clause from the theological faculties of Marburg and Erlangen. Marburg, less influenced by the German Christians, responded first and denounced the Aryan Clause. Erlangen, under the leadership of Faith Movement of German Christian supporters Werner Elert and Paul Althaus, then replied in defence of the Clause. Our “Studies and Observations” for this issue consist of translations of those two responses prepared by Harold Remus.

It is amazing that such Lutheran stalwarts and men of integrity as Elert and Althaus—who, after World War Two, were responsible for educating a large proportion of the current senior generation of North American Lutheran theologians—could not see how making someone’s “ethnicity” a criterion for Gospel ministry, threatened the very heart of the Gospel itself. If we are not all one in the church, if following Jesus Christ does not replace national loyalty, race, or ethnicity in determining who is my sister or brother or pastor, then the Gospel is not truly *sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus*. Once membership in any group other than the community of those called by the Spirit to follow Christ becomes a criterion for serving that community, then grace is conditioned and the Gospel is refuted.

In an age when we are so tempted to build walls between ourselves and those we are taught to see as different, the experience of the German Church Struggle can be most instructive. On the one side we see the consequences of the temptation to qualify our singular allegiance to the Gospel. Just like Elert and Althaus, we too can betray our faith and side with the forces of racism and oppression. Unless we learn the art of Gospel resistance, we too can lend our support to efforts to exclude and forget that we have been called by Christ to a life of hospitality to strangers. On the other side we see both the

possibility of resisting and the cost of discipleship. Karl Barth was removed from office and deported. Martin Niemöller was arrested in 1937 and spent seven years in Sachsenhausen and Dachau. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed in 1945.

Our thanks to Harold Remus who has provided us with these translations of both the Marburg and the Erlangen responses to the Aryan Clause so that *Consensus* readers can see for themselves the necessity of making a stand for the Gospel even as we attempt to communicate it in the midst of our own culture.