Noah who? Documenting the church's failure

by Jason Byassee in the May 30, 2006 issue

At a family gathering I was teased for reading a recondite book titled *Theologians Under Hitler*. Who but a theological nerd would choose such a book for vacation reading? I could have replied: “I read the book, now you can see the movie.”

Directed by Steven D. Martin and produced by Vital Visuals, the one-hour documentary film of the same name follows Robert Ericksen’s 1987 book, which details the positive response to Nazism by three of the German church’s leading intellectuals. Ericksen, professor of history at Pacific Lutheran University, is one of the film’s primary interview subjects. The movie could serve as a useful start to a congregational discussion of war and the church’s response to it. (The film is available through amazon.com and vitalvisuals.com.)

Many discussions of “the good war” redound to America’s greatness in taking up the fight against Hitler. In my own preaching on the war, I have naturally gravitated toward those Christians who heroically opposed the Nazis: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Maximilian Kolbe, Corrie ten Boom, and the residents of the mountain village of Le Chambon in France, who hid several thousand Jews. From my preaching one might gather that World War II was a time of heroic Christian resistance to an obviously demonic enemy. Watching *Theologians Under Hitler* places the war in a more uncomfortable light. The church failed miserably to oppose Hitler and speak up for the Jews. How did this happen? The partial answer is that most of the church’s major theologians supported Hitler.

The book and the film detail the views of Gerhard Kittel, Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Althaus. These men were theological giants. Kittel’s multi-volume *Textual Notes on the New Testament* is still the standard reference work on the etymologies of biblical Greek. The Tübingen professor prepared for that masterwork with a career of befriending Jews and learning their literature, as his Hebrew-scholar father had before him. He later clarified (or changed his mind): his love was for *biblical* Judaism, from which secular contemporary Jews had long since fallen away.

Kittel thought Jews were a problem in Germany, one he addressed in a lecture titled “The Jewish Problem.” Why were Jews dominant in such crucial German institutions as the universities, the government and the press? Had this predominance weakened Germany, perhaps fatally? For Kittel the answer was yes, and something had to be done. He ruled out moving the Jews to the Middle East—the Arabs would never allow it. He ruled out annihilating them as “impractical.” He also ruled out their assimilation into Germany society—such intermingling was precisely the problem. Therefore the only solution to the Jewish question was to remove them from their employment and separate them from the rest of society. Kittel warned that the world would call Germany’s actions “brutal” but insisted that this was “no one else’s concern”—and that God did not call Germans to be weak.

Little wonder that the Nazis avidly reprinted the lecture. Kittel was later employed in the Nazis’ Research Section on the Jewish Question—which decided that one of his proposed alternatives was not so impractical.

Colleagues and students of Hirsch at Göttingen spoke with wide-eyed amazement about his brilliance, his linguistic proficiency and his prodigious memory. The linchpin of his own theology was the German *Volk*, or “people,” including the whole of Germany’s great history in literature, the arts and statecraft. Ericksen describes the concept of *Volk* as almost untranslatable: a “mystical, transcendent” link that bound Germans to one another and their tradition in a manner “almost beyond description.” The *Volk* was more important to Hirsch than democracy, especially in the wake of the ruining of Germany in World War I and in light of the need to rebuild the country’s greatness, which, he insisted, depended on the piety of the *Volk*.

Indeed, the *Volk* was for him as essential to God’s work as Israel was to any Jew or Christian. “There is absolutely no contradiction to make it difficult as a German to be a Christian or as a Christian to be a German,” Hirsch insisted. Little wonder that he greeted Hitler’s rise to Germany’s chancellorship in 1933 as “a sunrise of divine goodness.” While other ecclesial supporters of the Nazis expressed some remorse later in life, Hirsch never did.

Althaus, of Erlangen University, was the public archnemesis of one of the few resistance movements against Nazism in the churches, the Confessing Church, which was made up of pastors and theologians who resisted the Nazis’ intrusion into the church’s deliberation on doctrinal and moral matters. The Confessing Church studiously avoided direct advocacy for the Jews in its famous Barmen Declaration,

wanting to garner as much support for the document as possible. Barmen instead insisted that revelation could come only from Jesus Christ and not from any other source, such as German culture or political leadership.

Althaus responded vigorously, insisting that God can speak and has spoken in ways other than through Christ, including through nature and history and the German *Volk* , and that the Nazi-supporting German Christians were right not to be so "Christomonist." Compared to what was seen as Barmen's extremism, Althaus's "moderation" gained a wide public hearing.

Filmmaker Martin makes clear that these three figures were more representative of the church than the confessors and martyrs who opposed Hitler and are often invoked these days in sermons. A particularly telling remark comes from an interview with Hartmut Lehmann of Göttingen about the bishop of Hanover. After the *Kristallnacht* in 1938, the large synagogue in Hanover was still burning as the bishop arrived for work; the fire was within sight of his cathedral. The bishop's secretary expected him to express outrage, marshal resources to help—do something. Instead he sat down and began his administrative work for the day. What an image of the church during the Nazi horrors—doing nothing, oblivious to the flames. Often the church's behavior was even worse: it provided a rationale for those committing the horrors.

Lehmann, the liveliest individual interviewed in the film, makes another point that has application in our time. The church in Germany was eager to reacquire cultural prestige, and it was worried that it was perceived as overly effeminate. The Nazis offered an opportunity to be more tough and manly. The German Christians were thrilled when World War I navy hero Ludwig Muller was named *Reichsbischof*, the first head over a newly unified Protestant church in Germany. And they were delighted by the legions of Brownshirts who filled the churches to consecrate their marriages before altars draped with swastikas.

Debates over whether and how to be relevant to the broader culture and how to appeal to new generations are perennial in the church; often those debates seem academic or theologically neutral. But in Germany, the church's effort to be relevant was far from innocent.

Kittel, Hirsch and Althaus are haunting figures, both in Ericksen's book and in Martin's film. One wishes the filmmaker had had more resources with which to work,

for this film lacks the visual snappiness and wealth of archival material of, say, Martin Doblmeier's recent film *Bonhoeffer*. Voiceovers of the theologians are often accompanied by saccharine images of clouds or the German countryside.

The primary strength of the film over Ericksen's important book lies in its interviews. Ericksen, Lehmann, Susannah Heschel of Dartmouth and others provide lively commentary in a way that will prove easily accessible to laypeople.

Martin wisely avoids making analogies between Nazi Germany and contemporary political realities, though Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia are mentioned in passing. Iraq war hawks often compare Saddam Hussein to Hitler; opponents of the war liken the U.S. to the Third Reich. More useful will be the questions that parishioners ask after seeing images of bishops offering the Nazi salute and avidly shaking Hitler's hand. When is the church too cozy with the state? What sort of complicity with evil could we be blind to now? The questions wouldn't be interesting if the answers were obvious. What is obvious in the film is the power of nationalistic and religious mythology in Germany. Martin repeatedly pans graveyards of World War I soldiers as he explains the rise of the Nazis. One cemetery includes a large cross bearing the inscription, *Wir starben für euch*!—"We died for you!" Perhaps we should think of World War II as the climax of Christendom's shame, to paraphrase Baylor theologian Michael Hanby, rather than as—per Tom Brokaw—a triumph of America's "greatest generation."

As important as this film is for congregations, it may be even more important for universities and seminaries. For it was liberal, well-educated university people who provided the intellectual and theological impetus for Hitler's policies. Martin makes clear that a crucial precursor to removing Jews from Germany was the effort by theologians championing the Enlightenment to remove particular cultural baggage from the gospel, including the reality of Jesus' Jewishness. Ideas have consequences—something academics, of all people, sometimes forget.