

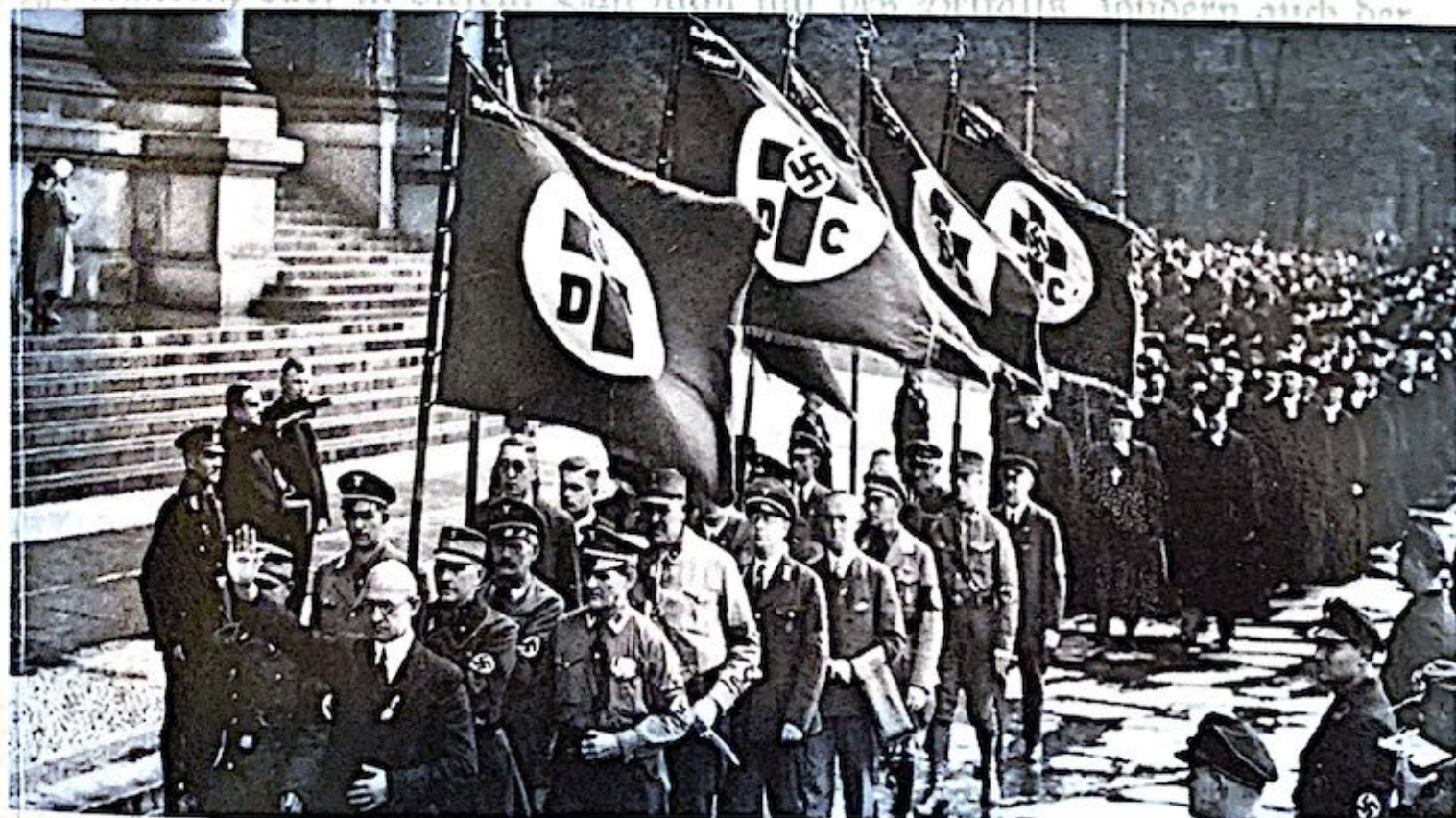
# Theologians Under Hitler

Das Ja der Kirche zur deutschen Wende.

Unsere evangelischen Kirchen haben die deutsche Wende von 1933 als ein Geschenk und Wunder Gottes begrüßt. In dem Aufruf der zur Vorbereitung der neuen Kirchenverfassung berufenen Männer vom 28. April heißt es: „Zu dieser Wende der Geschichte sprechen wir ein dankbares Ja.“

A film by Steven D. Martin  
based upon the groundbreaking book

by Robert P. Ericksen



Sind die Kirchen mit solchem Ja zu dem vaterländischen Geschehen

## Study Guide



Bushman

# A Question of Power

Study guide accompanying the film

## **Theologians Under Hitler**

Produced by Vital Visuals, Inc.  
based on the book by Robert P. Ericksen, Ph.D.

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## Preserving a Prophetic Voice

by L. Thomas Smith, Jr.



Jesus Christ established the fundamental relationship of his followers (the Christian community, the Church) to the broader human society in his Sermon on the Mount with two vivid metaphors: salt and light. Understanding and implementing these metaphors serves as an essential foundation upon which the community of faith builds its prophetic voice in society. One purpose of this community is to "speak for God" – to bring God's perspective (God's "Word") to human experience. The primary use of salt in the ancient context was as a preservative. In this sense, the church seeks to safeguard God's character, message, and mission in the world and assumes a "defensive" posture. For example, the Old Testament prophets saw their primary function as defining and enforcing – preserving – the covenant between God and Israel. The metaphor of light projects a more positive, "offensive" approach: the church is to actively bring God's truth to the midst of the human condition, speaking clearly to the conduct of individual lives and communities. Preaching the Gospel, serving the needy, striving for justice for the poor and oppressed, or carefully instructing those in need of wise counsel are examples of how this prophetic role might be fulfilled. One key issue, therefore, that is raised by Theologians Under Hitler is the church's prophetic voice in society. How does the community of faith maintain this voice? How do Christ's followers "resist the temptation to follow uncritically the popular and the powerful" (see Advisory Group Goals)? How do they best fulfill their mission to preserve (salt) and to proclaim (light)?

The theologians discussed in this film (Paul Althaus, Gerhard Kittel, and Emanuel Hirsch) made three crucial mistakes that led to a loss of their prophetic voice as Christian leaders in German society. In order for the contemporary community of faith to avoid a similar outcome – which, in their case, led to support of the atrocities of the Nazi regime in the name of Christianity – these mistakes must be exposed. First, they adopted a liberal theology



that uncritically accepted higher criticism as the primary method of biblical interpretation. It is significant that Germany was the center of liberal scholarship and that all three theologians were a product of this academic environment. According to the philosophical assumptions of this hermeneutic, the Bible is "from below," a human record of faith rather than the inspired, authoritative word of God. By rejecting the infallible authority of scripture, they abandoned a transcendent source that could have informed and corrected certain views that made them susceptible to Hitler's agenda. If one feels free to shape the scriptures to fit one's own religious or political agenda, no standard for truth or justice can be maintained. A strong commitment to biblical authority is the indispensable first step in establishing the Church's prophetic voice in society.

Secondly, these theologians failed to maintain appropriate distance between church and society, between God and government. They confused the goals of the Kingdom of God with those of a human kingdom. To understand their perspective, one must consider the context of the long history of the union of church and state in Germany (and in the Christian Church in general since the Constantinian revolution of the fourth century). Althaus, Kittel, and Hirsch could not envision a separation of German nationalism from Christianity. When state goals are "baptized" and often equal (or supercede) Kingdom goals, the followers of Christ can be easily deceived into doing what is identified as God's work, when in fact the nature of the activity supports a nationalistic agenda that may abandon God's will and way. This was certainly the case in Hitler's Germany. This context requires one to conceive of a political structure in which an appropriate distance between church and state can be established. Democratic values such as freedom of religion from state interference established in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America actually support Christian values in this case. A study of the religious, philosophical, and political background of the initial conception and adoption of the First Amendment reveals two divergent groups coming together for the central purpose of keeping the government at this appropriate distance. Rationalists, such as Thomas Jefferson, argued that the state should be kept out of private



judgment: religious convictions should rest on personal, rational reflection and not be imposed by the state. Evangelicals, such as frontier Baptists and Methodists, insisted that the church be left alone by the state to freely pursue its God-given agenda, not one set by the state. A strong commitment to these values of personal and corporate freedom – which should lead to an appropriate separation of the church from the state – helps the community of faith preserve its prophetic voice in human society.

Finally, these theologians abandoned evangelism as the primary purpose of the Church. Their understanding of the mission of the church seemed to be more “this-worldly” in the sense that the work of the church was to support economic prosperity, social equality (ironically restricted to a particular “superior” class), and the restoration of national pride. These are not bad goals (except when social equality is inappropriately limited) but none are adequate as a “first thing,” a primary purpose for God’s people. This abandonment of the primary mission of the church is related to the first two issues. In most cases, those who abandoned biblical authority replaced evangelism with social ministry, best seen in the “Social Gospel” movement of the early twentieth century. The confusion of Kingdom and state goals sidetracked the church from this primary purpose as well. Those faith communities that maintain a strong commitment to evangelism as the primary purpose of the church are better equipped to resist the temptation to follow the “powerful and popular” and are more protected against manipulation and exploitation of those powers who want to commandeer the influence of the church for their own ungodly purposes.

How does the church preserve its prophetic voice in society? How does it avoid uncritically accepting the values of the dominant culture which may, as we see in this film, result in support of that which is morally reprehensible? A strong commitment to biblical authority, appropriate separation of church and state and advocacy of democratic values, and evangelism as its primary purpose are key elements in the church’s role as salt and light in human society. These commitments do not guarantee success. The church may still



se its way and must always be open to the voice of the Spirit in its midst, but they are foundational principles upon which a community of faith may conduct their work.

**Dr. Tom Smith** is professor of History and Theology at Johnson Bible College and seeks to create a challenging learning environment for its students. Tom is a native East Tennessean who received his Ph.D from the University of Tennessee. He has also served as a full-time pastor in the Christian Church. He is a speaker and author of a book on the history of Johnson Bible College.