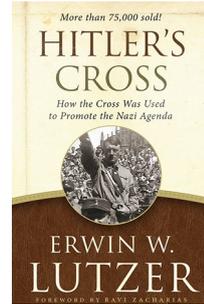


Book Review

Erwin W. Lutzer.
Hitler's Cross: How the Cross Was Used to Promote the Nazi Agenda
Chicago, Moody Publishers, 2016. 272 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-802-41327-7. \$14.99.



Reviewed by, Judith C. P. Lin.
Ph.D. Candidate in Church History, Fuller Theological Seminary

First published in 1995, *Hitler's Cross*—a non-scholarly work—explores how the church in Nazi Germany first negotiated and finally compromised its identity and role in society in the *Third Reich* from 1933 to 1945. By investigating the ways in which the church gradually abjured its responsibility in society with Adolf Hitler's high-handed rule, Erwin W. Lutzer, a retired pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, takes pains to draw lessons from history for his Christian counterparts in the United States.

The work is more than historical and theological. It is also pastoral. Thus other than accounting for historical events and context, Lutzer incorporates his own voice as he walks readers through the egregious history while interpreting its deeper meaning from a theological perspective as he understands it.

Lutzer believes that the *Third Reich* did not go wrong overnight, but was simply the final unfolding of a number of convoluted occurrences combined in previous decades. The first four chapters, therefore, trace the remote and immediate causes that contributed to the formation of the *Third Reich*. While Chapter One offers an overview of the plight of the church, and some of the philosophical, theological, political, and economic elements that were at work before the *Third Reich*, Chapter Two discusses how the elusive Adolf Hitler came to

believe that he had been called by the divine to fulfill a special assignment. Chapter Three and Four outline the religious background of Hitler and his associates, and how their beliefs were unduly translated into the political agenda of the *Third Reich*. Chapter Five to Seven—the heart of the book—examine how the church reacted and responded to Hitler's propaganda and intimidation, and how the church's identity was challenged and subsequently compromised under the state's pressure, despite lone voices in the wilderness. Chapter Eight and Nine document the voices of conscience during the *Third Reich*, whereas Chapter Ten reflects on the lessons drawn from Nazi Germany for the church in the present-day U.S.

For Lutzer, the most pressing question for this period of history is how the church in Germany came to condone Hitler's hideous agenda that blatantly contradicts not only the Bible's teaching but also natural law (146). Sharing the sentiments with the German masses of the need for survival and the need to see the glory of Germany restored (43, 192), the church lost its ability to challenge the wedding of nationalism and a Christianity that had been dulled by theological liberalism (128-38). When Hitler's nefarious agenda became known, the church overlooked warnings of figures like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller, and maintained the wishful thinking that diplomacy would fare better than bold confrontation

(174). Numerous pastors and Christians chose self-preservation over costly discipleship, thus remaining indifferent towards the Nazis' wicked treatment of Jews. A shameful period of church history notwithstanding, Lutzer contends that God has always been in control, even of the most devilish event of the Holocaust (60-8, 198-9).

While he is not satisfied with the spirituality that stresses personal devotion to Christ at the expense of political participation (140-1, 246, 260), Lutzer also warns against the tendency of making the gospel "secondary to a given political, philosophical, or cultural agenda" (247). He maintains that when pressed to choose between winning a "cultural war" and upholding a pure gospel, Christ's followers "must let the cultural battles take second place so that the Cross gets a hearing in the hearts of men and women" (258). Defining the church's place and defending the church's narrative power in society have become increasingly challenging in the U.S., as, according to Lutzer, the church "is expected to shrink into nothing" in the public sphere (254-5). Since one of the book's goals is to tease out the church's role in society, other than addressing the responsibility of individual Christians (261), I would like to have seen Lutzer furnish the church with more practical guidance by offering one or two concrete examples of how local churches could have better navigated between engaging in cultural skirmishes while proclaiming a pure gospel when the two appeared to be in conflict, in light of his pastoral experience. As the effort to be in the world but not of the world is far from clear-cut (258), the challenges for many churches in the U.S. and on the global scene in the present-day, I believe, lie not in the lack of understanding but in the shortage of credible

and effective examples. And the need for such practical wisdom seems to be all the more imperative in 2018 than two decades ago when *Hitler's Cross* was first released.

Even though Lutzer's work is not written for scholars, and hence, may not be rigorous enough to satisfy a scholar's mind, Christians who take their faith seriously will benefit from Pastor Lutzer's account, analysis, and insights in *Hitler's Cross*.