

GERHARD KITTEL AND THE QUEST FOR NEW PARADIGMS ON CHRISTIAN ANTISEMITISM

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In 1977, I “outed” an internationally prominent theologian with my first academic paper, “Theologian in the Third Reich: The Case of Gerhard Kittel.” In 1985 Kittel joined Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch, three pro-Nazi but widely renowned scholars, in my *Theologians under Hitler* (Yale, 1985). A reviewer in FAZ praised the German edition of the book, but regretted that it had taken forty years and an American for the story to be told. It can seem complicated. Kittel, son of a famous Old Testament theologian, began his career as a New Testament scholar making the claim that Jesus is better understood if Christians consider the Jewish theological world in which he lived and from which he borrowed. This required showing a good deal of respect for Jewish sources, so much so that Kittel had admirers among Jewish scholars. From 1933 to 1945, however, Kittel gave complete and enthusiastic support to Nazi goals, even describing Hitler as late as 1943 and 1944 as a “twin bulwark” with the Christian church in the effort to save Germany from Jews. Kittel’s modest venture into philosemitism in the mid-1920s became entirely overwhelmed in 1933, perhaps by his ambition, but certainly by his intense and rightwing German nationalism. Recent work on Kittel includes a book edited by Manfred Gailus and Clemens Vollnhals to appear in 2020, as well as Mattias Morgenstern and Alon Segev’s 2019 book on Kittel’s “Meine Verteidigung.” My early work on Kittel left me criticizing the “useful” distinction often made between “anti-Judaism” and “antisemitism.” In this paper I will explore a more widespread and complex set of connections between racism, nationalism and Christianity, in which not only antisemitism but variations on other racial and cultural prejudices produce Christian voters fully willing to ignore Jesus’ command to love your neighbor as yourself.