

It's 1933, and Franklin Graham is German theologian Paul Althaus

## A limited but troubling historical analogy

by [Björn Krondorfer](#) in the [November 4, 2020](#) issue



Franklin Graham (foreground) and theologian Paul Althaus (Graham photo by Cornstalker via Creative Commons license)

German Protestant theologian Paul Althaus was a strong advocate for the existence of a “unique spiritual vitality” among the German people. As a young military chaplain during World War I, Althaus had become convinced of the special calling of the German *Volk* (people/nation). He saw the Treaty of Versailles as a deep national humiliation, and he had nothing but scorn for the Weimar Republic, the first democracy in Germany.

“Our *Volk* have had to endure the deepest questions of humanity more painfully and more profoundly than any other people,” Althaus wrote in 1927. “Our people have testified to God throughout history, in which God has entrusted it with something unique.” Althaus was construing Germans as an ethnically distinct group endowed with a divine mission. It is no surprise that he would soon embrace Hitler’s rise to power.

“Our country is facing trouble. Anger and despair have floated to the streets. We ask that you unite our hearts, to be one nation under God, for you are our only hope.” This might read like a quote from Althaus sometime after he endorsed Hitler’s election to the chancellorship in 1933. These are actually the words of Franklin Graham at the 2020 Republican National Convention.

“Our Protestant churches have greeted the turning point of 1933 as a gift and miracle of God.” Omit the date and that sentence could have been penned by Graham. In fact it is the opening of Althaus’s 1933 book *Die deutsche Stunde der Kirche* (*The German Hour of the Church*). To see the hand of God in the election of nationalist leaders is a rhetoric not lost on a contemporary audience. A day after the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, Graham posted these words on Facebook: “I believe that God’s hand intervened Tuesday night to stop the godless, atheistic progressive agenda from taking control of our country . . . God showed up.”

The ideological fears expressed by Graham eerily echo those of Althaus and other nationalist German theologians in the 1920s and 1930s: secularism, socialism, liberalism, pluralism, and urbanization. Althaus was particularly afraid of *Überfremdung*, the encroachment of foreign people onto German soil, an anxiety which mirrors the resentments of many Americans today against non-White immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

Historical analogies can take us only so far; and yet, if history is any guide, then the parallels between 1933 and 2020 are deeply troubling. What is at stake is the demise of democracy, actively pursued by some and supported by many more.

In 1933, German voters could not have known what nationalist ideology would ultimately lead to. Though warning signs abounded as Germany transformed into a dictatorial one-party state, the eventual world war and the expulsion and mass murder of Jews could not have been foretold. Once we give up on democratic governance, the long-term consequences are unpredictable.

President Trump’s authoritarian attempts to remake the US government—his erratic approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, his deliberate delegitimation of the upcoming election—have enjoyed his usual strong support among evangelicals. Of the many explanations offered for this political alliance, I think four are particularly helpful. First, the marriage of Trumpian-style governance with Christianity cannot be understood outside American religious fundamentalism, which gained visibility in the

1920s and then reemerged as a political force in the 1980s. Second, Trump's self-proclaimed financial success echoes the prosperity gospel, the assertion that faith in God will be rewarded with material wealth and physical health. Third, evangelicals who believe in biblical prophecy and divine providence can see in Trump Cyrus the Great, who liberated God's chosen people from Babylonian captivity: a secular leader who can turn a nation back to God without upholding biblical values in his personal life. Fourth, support for Trump is a manifestation of hard-nosed politics among religious leaders who share an agenda to reverse abortion rights, gay rights, and affirmative action and to undo the separation of church and state.

Paul Althaus was not a radical Nazi, but his theology was thoroughly infected by *völkisch* ideology: the belief in the purity and unity of a peoplehood. Althaus defined this imagined peoplehood not by blood (as Nazi racial laws did) but by a shared history, soul-spirit, customs, values, and ethnicity—similar to the way some Americans speak today of Whiteness as a heritage of pride. Althaus fervently spoke in favor of God's mission for a German nation in which Jews had no place. He did not argue for the elimination of Jews. Rather, he wanted them to live in isolated enclaves in Germany, separate from ethnic Germans.

Because of his ambiguous position toward Nazism and Jews, many scholars place Althaus's legacy in the middle of the German *Kirchenkampf*, the Protestant church struggle between Christians largely identified with Nazism (*Deutsche Christen* /German Christians) and those opposed to the Nazi regime (*Bekennende Kirche* /Confessing Church). Althaus himself claimed this middle position, which he used after 1945 to successfully rehabilitate his reputation.

From today's perspective, however, Althaus's complicity with the regime is evidenced in a theology that not only supported a nationalist ideology but also understood political events as an expression of God's will. For Althaus, God's work revealed itself in human history, and Adolf Hitler, although an imperfect human being, was a vessel to make Germany again a great Christian nation.

Graham's theology is rooted in a different tradition from that of Althaus. But their pursuit of a theology that regards chosen nations or people endowed with a specific divine calling suggests similarities that cannot be ignored. Theologians like Althaus had little in common with the stormtroopers terrorizing German streets in the 1930s, just as Graham has little in common with the Proud Boys who show up fully armed on American streets today. But Althaus and Graham alike envision a strong nation

under God. Althaus wrote in 1930 that “no people can ever achieve greatness and freedom without spilling blood.” Graham has painted Joe Biden as an enemy to the nation, calling him a Trojan horse for socialism that would turn the United States into a country like Venezuela or Cuba. Both men called for unity while simultaneously making it quite clear which political leader they hoped people would unify around.

Germany in 1933 is not the only comparison point for the current climate. In recent decades, religious endorsements for nationalist parties or state leaders have gained strength in many places. Around the world we see religious fundamentalists flexing their political muscle and fusing ethno-religious identities with nationalist agendas. Buddhist Myanmar has conducted ethnic cleansing against its Rohingya Muslim population. Xenophobic and homophobic circles in the Polish Catholic church support the nationalist political leadership. Vladimir Putin relies on the patriotism of the Russian Orthodox Church. A Hindu fundamentalist party is currently governing India, stoking the fires of fear by curtailing the rights of India’s Muslims. The First Amendment to the US Constitution, of course, tries to prevent just these scenarios.

Althaus was not a *genocidaire*. He would not have participated in or justified the physical annihilation of Jews. Yet he welcomed Hitler as godsent. He knew that Hitler had his flaws as a secular strongman, but he was willing to accept those flaws for the benefits of a *völkisch* unity.

Graham, a prominent leader of the evangelical faithful in America, also sees providence at work in the election of the president. “We ask that you would unite our hearts,” he prayed at the 2020 Republican National Convention, “to be one nation under God. For you are our only hope. We declare today our total dependence upon you and our need of repentance as a people. I thank you tonight for our president, Donald J. Trump.” Graham believes God is making Christian America great again through an imperfect human vessel.

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