

A Witness Remembered

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Paul Schneider: The Witness of Buchenwald, by Rudolf Wentorf (Tucson: American Eagle Publications, 1993; Trans. Franklin Sanders, 114 pages, 2 appendices).

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“If thou holdest fast to me, so will I hold to thee, and thou shalt remain my preacher”

Jeremiah 15: 19-21

There are many streets in Hamburg bearing the names of brave men and women who fought the National Socialist regime. There is a Bonhoeffer Street, a Sophie Scholl Street, a Neimoller Street, but there is no Paul Schneider Street. Though he was the first pastor to die in the concentration camps, Schneider remains one of the lesser known of those who spoke against the dictatorship of the 1930s, when the majority remained silent.

Rudolf Wentorf's book, *Paul Schneider: The Witness of Buchenwald*, is beautifully and sensitively translated from the German by Franklin Sanders. Though the first part “may seem slow”—as Sanders puts it in the introduction—the book is well worth reading. By the end of the book it is clear why Schneider's Christian faith was so strong—it was refined like metal in the fire.

Schneider's faith was not the result of purely theoretical studies and intellectual reflection; he constantly put his faith to the test. After his first theological exam he voluntarily chose to work in a foundry, doing the hardest and most physically demanding work he could find, in order to relate to the people to whom he would preach.

It wasn't until Schneider was ordained as a minister that his religious beliefs solidified. He had postponed his final exams, constantly tortured by self-doubt and the burning question of whether or not he was worthy of proclaiming God's Word. He kept wondering if his faith was strong enough. As Schneider put it: “Still I cannot see God's will plainly, nor be certain of His power and help in the calling I have begun. I live in uncertainty... I am a plaything in the hands of men. I cannot pray or believe.” (p.30) Yet in 1926 his father's congregation chose Schneider to replace his father, and he looked into the future

with much confidence.

Schneider was basically apolitical, as were most German ministers. His confrontation with the Nazi regime began in 1933 when he rejected the state's demand for a proof of "Aryan descent". He argued that such a proof was an impossible demand in a Christian relationship (p.48). When he then attacked a speech by the head of the Sturmabteilung (SA), Ernest Rohm, he was immediately suspended. Only when Schneider publicly withdrew his remarks against Rohm was he allowed to resume preaching. From that point he was closely monitored by the party. And since he continued to speak out, Schneider was soon reprimanded again and then transferred to a new, much smaller and less prominent community near his birthplace.

Controversy followed him. In June 1934, at a funeral of a member of the Hitler Youth, a regional head of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei (NSDAP) gave a speech laced heavily with Nazi propaganda and ideology. When Schneider intervened and rebuked the speaker he was taken into protective custody.

From then on, Schneider's life followed a pattern of arrest, release, and then renewed imprisonment. Even small signs of Schneider's resistance were countered with Nazi arrest. The National Socialists, who had always aimed for a conformist church and eventually intended the abolition of the church as a whole, fought all such resistance by ministers.

The final confrontation occurred in 1937, when Schneider used the means of church discipline to excommunicate and expel members of the congregation who were active Nazis and who frequently interfered with the church. He was immediately arrested by the Gestapo. This proved to be the beginning of the end. Schneider was released one final time under the condition that he would not return to his church. But he could not desert his congregation and returned, only to be arrested again upon arrival.

This time Schneider was taken to Buchenwald, where he was a model to all prisoners. He helped where he could, and even when he was taken to an isolation cell where he was tortured, he still preached to the other prisoners from his cell window. He died in 1939 after a short treatment in the camp's sick bay. It is still unknown whether he just failed to bear the strain of imprisonment, or whether the doctor in charge gave him a lethal injection. Schneider was thus the first minister to die in a concentration camp.

What is so tragic about Schneider's fate is that he was essentially alone in his fight against the Nazi regime.

He could expect no help from the "German Christians", a group which was formed in the 1920s, but didn't become influential until 1932. The German Christians were in total conformity with the National Socialist ideology and opposed Schneider wherever they could.

It is doubtful that the German Christians realized that Hitler had no interest whatsoever in the church. His final aim was the total abolition of all churches. In a private conversation Hitler said:

There is really no difference among all these denominations; they are all the same; they have no future. Especially not for the Germans. Fascism can go ahead and make its peace with the churches, I will do the same. Why not? However, that will not keep me from eradicating Christianity root and branch here in Germany... One is either a German or a Christian. One cannot be both.¹

The church was for old people, and faithful followers of National Socialism knew this. One Nazi leader said:

Christianity and National Socialism mix like fire and water and cannot be united. We reject...every form of Christianity. By no means are you permitted to say anything about this publicly under any circumstances. That would mean too much unrest among the old. We must leave them in peace until they die.²

There were Christian organizations, though, which did not succumb to National Socialism as easily. When a law was passed in September 1933 decreeing that the church recognize the government as the sole authority in all matters, and furthermore, that people of Jewish descent could not become church officials, opposition formed under the leadership of Martin Niemöller. He founded the Emergency Association of Ministers which issued the following statement:

The Bible is the only foundation and highest authority of our beliefs. I know that I am responsible for whoever is persecuted contrary to our beliefs. The Aryan Regulation is a violation of our beliefs.³

But even though 4,000 ministers joined this association, the group remained a purely religious organization which did not exercise any political opposition. Still, Niemöller was arrested in 1937 and eventually taken to Dachau where he remained until 1945. Unlike Schneider, Niemöller survived the Nazi regime.

Another group which formed in opposition to the German Christians was the Confessing Church. Their main declaration stated that Jesus Christ was the only source of authority for the church. This clearly referred to those, like the German Christians, who saw Hitler as someone sent from God to impart divine revelations. But even though the Confessing Church helped many Jews in Germany to escape by supplying them with visas and passports, the organization was also largely apolitical. This apoliticism was the major

1 Hermann Rauschning, *Talks with Hitler*, (Zurich: Zucher Verlag, 1940).

2 Ibid., pp. 87-88.

3 Peter Winzeler, ed. *1982 Years of Christians and Politics*, (Berlin: Elefanten Press, 1982).

criticism which Dietrich Bonhoeffer (one of the group's founders) leveled against the Confessing Church.

Bonhoeffer is probably the most well-known minister to oppose the Hitler regime, and he seems at first very different than Schneider. While Bonhoeffer came from a fairly wealthy family which belonged to the intellectual elite of Germany, Schneider was from a lower middle-class family. Bonhoeffer was able to spend many of his university years abroad, in Spain and New York, but Schneider spent most of his life in the same area in Germany. (When he worked temporarily as a minister in Essen, a midsize industrial town in Germany, he was amazed by life in the “big city”.) Bonhoeffer was the intellectual who lectured at universities and whose essays were beautiful pieces of theological writing. Schneider was more down to earth, and he could never express himself as Bonhoeffer did.

But there are also similarities between the two. They both tried to relate to real people - Bonhoeffer in the slums of New York and the ghettos of Berlin, Schneider by working in a foundry. They both opposed National Socialism openly and bravely. And they both lost their lives in concentration camps.

Bonhoeffer advocated a political church and believed that it was wrong for the church in Germany to remain so apolitical. According to Bonhoeffer it was the church's responsibility to care for the concerns of the people, and this responsibility could sometimes lead to collisions with the government.

There has always been a special form of coexistence between the Protestant church (the Lutheran Church in particular) and the government in Germany. Beginning with the Luther, Lutheran theology heavily promoted loyalty to the state. Lutheranism, therefore, included absolute Christian submission to the government. If a Christian feels that he must oppose the authorities because they are acting against the will of God, he can only do so in a passive and suffering way. The opposition could never be active.⁴

Consequently, the Protestant church in 1933 was not in a position to oppose the Nazi reign. Four hundred years of loyalty to the State had made the church “tired and forgetful”.⁵ The political passivity and absolute loyalty to state authority encouraged by Lutheranism at least partly explains the disappointing reaction of the vast majority of church leaders in the 1930s.

(It is still difficult for the German Lutheran Church to take a stand against the government, since the church in Germany is supported by tax money. I often feel that the German Church has become lethargic and comfortable with its situation. Why try to be a church for the people when salaries, and everything else, are provided for with money

4 Gunther van Norden, *Church in Distress*, (Dusseldorf: Press Association of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, 1963).

5 Frederic Spotts, *The Churches and Politics in Germany*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973)

from the state? The German Lutheran Church could use improvement in this area.)

A couple of weeks ago a gang of extremists forced their way into the former concentration camp of Buchenwald, the very site of Schneider's suffering. They defiled a large number of the monuments and buildings that are left at Buchenwald as reminders of the Holocaust.

It has always been very painful for me as a German to study those fateful years between 1933 and 1945. On the one hand, learning about the events in Germany during that time has always left me feeling utterly ashamed. On the other hand, it has left me with the disquieting certainty that I would have behaved just like the vast majority of Germans: I would have closed my eyes to what was going on in Germany for fear of endangering my own life. Though I proudly call myself a Christian, I fear I would never have been a Bonhoeffer, a Niemoller, or a Schneider.

There are more and more voices in Germany now, demanding that we should finally put our history behind us. But as long as there are still young radicals who claim that the Holocaust never happened, we cannot be reminded enough of our past. And we cannot recall often enough the fate of brave men like Paul Schneider.