

# The Brave Sermon of Helmut Gollwitzer

- Bill Leadbetter

Courage is a difficult thing to define. We know it when we see it: but we also do not know just how much courage we ourselves have until circumstance compels us to bravery. When we look back over the history of Nazi Germany, it is tempting for many Christians to distance themselves from it and identify it as an expression of something alien to themselves. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is often held up as the quintessential response of Christian opposition to the Nazi regime. Yet Bonhoeffer's life and struggle was far from the norm. He had few colleagues, even in the Confessing Church, who saw as clearly as he did just what the implications of Nazism were.

Even before the Nazis had come to power, a powerful pressure group had begun to emerge within the life of the German Evangelical Church Confederation, the principal Protestant denomination. This group, which came to be known as the "German Christians" (*Deutsche Christen*) sought to locate their Christian faith within the ideological claims of Nazism. When Hitler took power in Germany in January 1933 he began a process of reorganising and, effectively, Nazifying, the major social institutions of Germany, the so-called *Gleichschaltung*. The church was included in this process, with its old federal structure being abandoned and replaced with a single, centralised administration. In July 1933 elections were held for the institutions of this newly constituted church structure and the list of candidates promoted by the German Christians took something like two-thirds of the vote.

It was this body that effectively split in 1934 when a group of Protestant pastors, led by the great theologian Karl Barth, produced the Barmen Declaration. This statement declares that the Church, as led by the German Christians, had spurned its own constitution and embraced teachings then denounced as foreign and not natural to Christian belief. Barth wrote in the Declaration:

*the theological basis, in which the German Evangelical Church is united, has been continually and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles, on the part of the leaders and spokesmen of the "German Christians" as well as on the part of the church administration...*

What is particularly interesting in our context this afternoon is that the Barmen Declaration makes no explicit mention of Nazi antisemitism, nor does it condemn the measure taken by the Nazi state to bar Jewish Christians from membership of their own Church, and Christian pastors defined as Jews from exercising their ministry. Karl Barth later said of this failure to address Nazi antisemitism:

*I have long felt guilty myself that I did not make this problem central, in any case not in public, for instance in the two Barmen Declarations which I had composed. Certainly, a text in which I inserted a word to that effect would not*

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*have found agreement in 1934 — neither in the Reformed Synod of January 1934, nor in the General Synod of May at Barmen...*

This is a really revealing reflection. His claim, put simply, that even in that Church most resolutely opposed to Hitlerism, the antisemitism that was the core of National Socialist ideology was alive and well in the Confessing Church. If we then fast-forward four years to the events of Kristallnacht, one of the sobering points to remember is that no institutional German church spoke up for the victims, or against the regime that had conducted this vast atrocity. The simple and sad reason for this was that there was no appetite to do so.

German pastors of the Confessing Church had spoken up about other things, and they had certainly paid a price. Most notably, Martin Niemöller, the pastor to a well-to-do congregation in the Berlin suburb of Dahlem, had spoken out consistently about a range of matters and been arrested and imprisoned. Others had simply left Germany. Karl Barth had taken a Chair in Theology in Switzerland; Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in self-imposed exile in London.

Some very important work has been done by the American scholar, William Skiles, in the course of his doctoral thesis, on the public attitudes of pastors of the Confessing Church to Nazi antisemitism.<sup>1</sup> Skiles read and analysed 910 published sermons and found that, in the twelve years of the Nazi regime, the specifically antisemitic comments in sermons were as many as the specifically philosemitic comments (40 each out of 910). At first glance, this does not seem too remarkable, but it does beg the question of why there are any antisemitic comments at all, particularly in the circumstances of increasing exclusion of Jews from civil life and the beginnings of active persecution.

One person, often seen as a hero of the Confessing Church's resistance to Nazi Germany was Martin Niemöller. He, however, is one of Skiles' worst offenders, clocking up seven specifically anti-Jewish comments, one as late as December 1944, in a sermon in Dachau when he repeated the old deicide accusations that "the Jews" killed Jesus. This is less surprising than it seems. Niemöller was never a Nazi, although he was, for a very long time, an old-fashioned Prussian conservative. He had been a U-Boat commander in World War I and held the Iron Cross First Class. His antisemitism was of the ancient kind, the kind that had bred and festered in the anti-Jewish rhetoric of Christian priests and kings for nigh on two millennia, the kind that was normative in military/bureaucratic elite of which Niemöller was a member. It was this antisemitism that made Karl Barth wary of mentioning Nazi anti-Jewish policies in the Barmen Declaration, an antisemitism that was very much a part of the thought and life of the pastors and people of the Confessing Church.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://escholarship.org/content/qt3zk2x6p6/qt3zk2x6p6\\_noSplash\\_5d987b66d1eb8efdb1d7bbb348d9104f.pdf](https://escholarship.org/content/qt3zk2x6p6/qt3zk2x6p6_noSplash_5d987b66d1eb8efdb1d7bbb348d9104f.pdf)

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In 1937, Niemoeller was arrested and spent the rest of the war in detention. His principal point of disagreement with the Nazi Government was quite simply the definition of who a Jew was as set out initially in the Aryan Paragraphs of 1933 and 1934, and then in the Nuremberg Laws of 1936. For Niemoeller, the answer was cultural and religious: conversion to Christianity extinguished Jewishness. For the Nazis, religion was irrelevant. It was descent, heredity, that mattered. That meant that, to the Nazis, Christians who were of Jewish descent were still Jewish; pastors who were of Jewish descent were deprived of their livings; spouses of Jewish descent were to be compulsorily divorced. It was these measures that Niemoeller most specifically opposed and that led to his arrest and imprisonment.

His successor at the Dahlem church was a young pastor, fresh out of the seminary, called Helmut Gollwitzer. Gollwitzer was a Bavarian from the town of Pappenheim. Born in 1908, he had studied theology at Erlangen, Jena and Bonn before undertaking doctoral studies with Karl Barth at Basel, in Switzerland. Upon his graduation, he returned to Germany and joined the Confessing Church. His first appointment was to Dahlem where he worked alongside Niemoeller as junior colleague until Niemoeller's arrest. In June 1937 and when it became apparent that Niemoeller's detention was going to be indefinite, Gollwitzer, then aged 29, was appointed to the leadership of the Dahlem church.

This remarkable and forthright young man was a Protestant from Catholic Bavaria and, in an age when it was dangerous even to be a Social Democrat, very much on the left of the political spectrum. The Dahlem church itself was a centre of opposition to the regime. Church members were active in hiding and protecting those targeted by the Hitler state, including numbers of Jews. It represented the progressive, anti-Nazi wing of the Confessing church. In 1935, soon after its formation, the Church had held a Synod at Dahlem, where it effectively divided into two factions: one which sought accommodation with the state; and one that remained resolutely opposed to its policies. The Dahlem church was firmly identified with the latter.

When, on the evening of November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1938, the violent pogrom that we call Kristallnacht occurred, the Confessing Church made a considered response to remain silent. The following Wednesday, November 16<sup>th</sup>, however was *Buss und Bettag*, the German National Day of Repentance and Prayer. This was a traditional public holiday that had been held in Germany for five hundred years. Since 1878, the second-last Wednesday before Advent Sunday had been set aside for its observance.

Even though the Confessing Church had decided to remain silent, on this day, Helmut Gollwitzer climbed into the pulpit of his packed church in Dahlem on the 16<sup>th</sup> and delivered the most extraordinary sermon. He took as his text Luke 3:3–14, Luke's account of the ministry of John the Baptist. He begins with the simple question: "Who still has the right to preach today?" He wonders how repentance can be preached at all by complicit preachers

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to a complicit nation, and how — even after all the sermons that have ever been preached — the nation had come to this point.

Then he gets to John the Baptist, pointing both to the centrality of repentance in the message of John, and the offensiveness of any notion of repentance in Hitler's Germany. "Ours is a time," he says "that cannot tolerate this word; the most vital thing linking people to one another lies broken and shattered...". Yet, he goes on, "where repentance stops, inhumanity begins". But repentance is essential if we are to recognise the life that is real, a life limited by the facts of mortality, and bound by the requirements of morality. These are limitations that Nazi ideology refused to accept, and if John the Baptist had come to Germany in 1938, he would have been swiftly condemned by the churches as "a shameful enemy of the people".

Gollwitzer makes much of John the Baptist's expression "You brood of vipers". Gollwitzer does not apply this to the Nazi state but to the many Christians of institutional churches and others who either stood by and did nothing or were actively complicit in the crimes of the Nazi state and then come forward on this day to feign repentance and demand reconciliation with God. Gollwitzer then links the call to repentance with the sacrament of baptism — the symbolic death and rebirth into a new life to ask the question, italicised in his own text "What should we then do?"

His answer is that of John the Baptist: look after your neighbour; deal justly with your neighbour; do no violence to your neighbour. He tells his audience that post-baptismal life is new life, and Christ waits for us there in the poverty of the neighbour. Go, he says, and share with them what you have, or all the talk of repentance is meaningless. He concludes with an unambiguous challenge: "Now, just outside this church our neighbour is waiting for us — waiting for us in his need and lack of protection, disgraced, hungry, hunted and driven by fear for his very existence. That is the one who is waiting to see if today this Christian congregation has really observed this national day of penance. Jesus Christ himself is waiting to see."

This is a remarkable sermon. In casting Jews as neighbours, he was seeking not merely to subvert the Nazi image of Jews as inhuman conspirators, but, and more so, the classical Christian antisemitism of the Jews which cast them as eternally other. It was this image that had so deeply penetrated even the Confessing Church that Gollwitzer set now himself firmly in the minority of the minority of the minority. Gollwitzer sought to restore to his congregation that fundamental Christian claim that all people — Jew and Gentile alike — are made in the image of God and deserve that dignity.

William Skiles, who has done us the service of reading so many of the sermons of Confessing Church pastors in the Hitler years, says of this sermon:

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Though Gollwitzer does not say specifically how Germans should involve themselves or invite Germans to insurrection, this is the closest I have found to a pastor walking the fine line between opposition to Nazi policies and outright resistance in calling congregants to wake up and stand together. (William Skiles, *Preaching to Nazi Germany: The Confessing Church on National Socialism, the Jews, and the Question of Opposition*, p. 358)

Perhaps if there had been more like him, this act of profound courage would have not been so singular, and too many lights would have pierced that darkness for that darkness to have persisted. So let us remember at least the great courage of this man, whose predecessor was in a gaol cell for speaking far less obnoxious truth to power, and whose teachers had chosen exile over danger. And let us hope that we might share in his courage when the time calls for it, and not be found wanting.