

Martin Niemöller before the Nazis finally came for him

The German pastor opposed Hitler—eventually.

by [Matthew D. Hockenos](#) in the [September 26, 2018](#) issue



Martin Niemöller in 1937. Photo © bpk Bildagentur / Art Resource, NY.

On a wintry November day in 1945, a simply dressed, white-haired woman huddled beside a gaunt, somber man as they read a plaque affixed to a tree in southern Germany: “Here in the years 1933–1945, 238,756 people were cremated.” Overwhelmed, the woman leaned into her husband for support. He was the Protestant pastor Martin Niemöller, famous for defying Hitler, and she was Else Niemöller, his wife of 27 years. They were standing at the entry of the crematoria at Dachau concentration camp outside Munich, where he had been jailed from July 1941 to April 1945. His years in Dachau had been preceded by four years of imprisonment in Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Even more than the number of people murdered, Niemöller was taken aback by the plaque’s dates: 1933–1945. Dachau had commenced operations in March 1933, just one month after Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists had come to power. The camp’s first prisoners were the Nazis’ avowed enemies—communists, socialists, and Jews. Niemöller, like most Germans, was well aware that the Nazis were rounding up their adversaries as Hitler tightened his grip on power. But it was only in late 1945 that the famous pastor began to fully acknowledge his own culpability in the Nazis’ 12-year regime of terror. The Niemöllers were visiting Dachau so that Martin could show his wife the cell block where he had been held for four years. Unexpectedly the plaque outside the crematoria jarred his conscience.

Niemöller had been a prominent pastor of an influential parish in Berlin-Dahlem from 1931 until his arrest in July 1937. His incarceration first in Moabit prison, then in Sachsenhausen, and finally in Dachau had provided him with an alibi for the years 1937–1945. But the dates on the plaque did not read 1937–1945, they read 1933–1945, and for those first four years Niemöller had been silent about Hitler’s attack on Jews and the Left. This revelatory moment at Dachau, and the feelings of shame and guilt it surely prompted, gave rise to his famous confession:

First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

In the year following the Dachau visit, Niemöller recited versions of the confession to his German compatriots, an admonition of sorts to repent for their complacency toward and complicity in the Nazi era and its heinous crimes.

The popularity of what is known as the “Niemöller confession” spread in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the rise of the human rights movement. Today it is frequently invoked by a variety of activists and prominently displayed at Holocaust memorials in the U.S. and Europe.

Would Niemöller’s contemporary admirers in the American public embrace the confession so enthusiastically if they knew of the pastor’s wholehearted support for Hitler during his climb to power? Indeed, the Nazis’ stigmatization and persecution of minorities did not initially trouble the nationalist pastor. Born in 1892, Niemöller grew up during the German monarchy’s struggle for world recognition and served proudly as a submarine officer in Kaiser Wilhelm II’s Imperial Navy in World War I. After the war and the socialist revolution that overthrew the Hohenzollern monarchy, Niemöller entered the seminary. Ordained a Lutheran pastor in 1924, he remained an archconservative during Germany’s short-lived liberal republic, the so-called Weimar Republic, casting his ballot for the Nazis in 1924 and again in 1933. He uttered not a word when the Gestapo arrested communists, socialists, and Jews—and not because he possessed a timid demeanor. He was silent because he believed that these groups were disloyal to Germany and anti-Christian.

Niemöller was slow in comprehending that it was Hitler himself and the Nazi worldview that were the real threat to Christianity, and ultimately Germany. Throughout the course of 1933 it gradually became clearer that Hitler was not the advocate for a conservative Protestant Germany that Niemöller had hoped for. His growing opposition to Hitler’s church policy during the mid-1930s, however, did not include active opposition to the führer’s racial or foreign policies.

As the Great Depression swept through the industrialized world, nearly half the German workforce was either fully or partially out of work by late 1932. Bloody street fighting raged between Hitler’s supporters and the left as the Nazis sought to stake out their turf and project an image of invincibility. Germany’s conservative elite—landed estate owners, military officers, high-ranking civil servants, industrial barons, and church leaders—looked on with considerable admiration as the Nazis grew to become the most popular party in the German parliament.

It was in this environment of chaos, instability, and Nazi insurgency that Niemöller preached on New Year's Day 1933 in St. Anne's Church in Berlin-Dahlem. "What God's intentions may be with regard to our nation or to ourselves in the New Year, we do not and shall not know," he intoned. But he warned that, in these dark times, God's grace is not just a source of relief or comfort. That is "easy Christianity" and "artificial grace." Rather, God offers us his grace so that we will put our whole trust in him and his son. "We are not God's generals but his soldiers. Ours is not to make the plans but to carry out the orders." Niemöller's message was clear: it was not the responsibility of the individual or the church to meddle in the secular affairs of state and its law.

On the very same morning, some of Niemöller's parishioners most likely encountered an equally imposing demand for their trust: the Nazi Party newspaper. Hitler, leader of the most popular party in the country, had been demanding for months that the president, Paul von Hindenburg, appoint him chancellor—the most powerful position in the German government. Now, emblazoned on the front page of the party's mouthpiece, *Völkischer Beobachter* (National observer), was Hitler's "New Year's Message of 1933." Article after article underscored the threat of the Judeo-Bolshevik menace and called on Hitler's rank and file to reject power-sharing with the conservative parties by putting their entire undiluted faith in *him*. "Any compromise," Hitler warned, "bears the seeds of destruction of the [Nazi] party and therefore of Germany's future." Niemöller's parishioners, at least the more conservative and nationalistic ones, must have suffered a conflict of conscience after reading this propaganda, wondering whether it was possible to trust both their God and the Nazi leader.

If the parishioners looked to Pastor Niemöller for direction on this question, the answer was clear. Niemöller made no secret of his support for the Nazis, although he never campaigned from the pulpit for Hitler. Niemöller initially saw no contradiction in calling on his flock to follow a merciful God while at the same time backing the Nazi leader who demanded absolute political loyalty to his racist worldview. German Protestants, Niemöller believed, could and should do both. After all, during the centuries of monarchy, they had long revered the alliance of throne and altar. It wasn't a great leap from there to the alliance of the Nazi Party and the Protestant Church.

When Hindenburg, bowing to pressure, appointed Hitler chancellor on January 30, 1933, Niemöller responded enthusiastically. The new chancellor spoke frequently

about the vital role that the churches would play in the reborn Germany. The Nazi program committed the party to “positive Christianity” and to battling “the Jewish materialistic spirit.” Hitler reassured the nation that the government would protect Christianity “as the basis of our entire morality” and “fill our culture again with the Christian spirit.” The Nazis claimed to stand for the freedom of all religious denominations, “provided that they do not endanger the existence of the state or offend the concepts of decency and morality of the Germanic race.”

This platform was most welcome to conservative Protestants. Hitler’s appointment, they convinced themselves, would usher in the hour of the church—God’s hour. They anticipated that churches, which had been gradually losing attendance for a century, would soon fill again. In the first half of 1933, some 20 percent of the 550 pastors in Berlin joined the Nazi Party, eager to participate in the movement for “one nation, one people, one church.” Although Niemöller never signed up as a Nazi Party member, his sermons during this period were rife with references to the dual awakenings of nation and church. Under the Weimar Republic, Niemöller believed, the nation had lost its way and the churches had lost their public significance. The Nazi revolution would restore Christianity to its rightful place in the public life of the nation. Hopeful Protestants looked to Hitler to complete Luther’s Reformation by replacing the 28 regional Protestant churches with one “Reich Church.”

In a sermon at St. Anne’s a month after Hitler took power, Niemöller took up the question of the proper role of Christians in the public life of the nation. “The fact is,” he preached, “it is simply impossible for us today to accept the comfortable formula that politics have no place in the church.” Political events, he maintained, were of great importance “to our fate and to that of our nation,” and he encouraged his parishioners to “take a conscientious stand . . . this very day.” The date of the sermon, March 5, 1933, is significant: that day saw the first and only election in Nazi Germany. Niemöller took his “conscientious stand” by voting for the Nazis.

The Nazis’ program of positive Christianity was vague. For some Nazis, it meant a form of Christianity that emphasized Germany’s special role in God’s plan for establishing his kingdom on earth—something Niemöller welcomed. Others attacked traditional Christianity for its allegedly weak, crucified God and advocated in its place an Aryan Christianity that worshiped a powerful, thoroughly masculine Jesus. Still other Nazis, who identified as pagans, worshiped nature. This wide range of religious beliefs, as well as the Nazi desire to relegate religious faith to the private sphere and subordinate it to the nation, increasingly concerned Niemöller.

As the Nazis grew in popularity, a group of fervent Protestant supporters emerged, calling themselves the German Christian movement. The German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*, or DC) believed that Nazism and Christianity were mutually reinforcing. As Nazi enthusiasts, the DC were anti-Semitic, but in a uniquely religious way: they denied the Jewish ancestry of Jesus and wanted to purge German Protestantism of everything associated with Judaism, including the Old Testament. Their goal was a racially pure church that excluded anyone with Jewish ancestry, even baptized Christians. As far as the DC were concerned, converts from Judaism to Christianity remained biologically non-Aryan and therefore were not welcome in the church. One particularly offensive DC slogan—"Baptism can't straighten out a hooked nose"—conveys the priority of race over grace. "If Christ were alive today," a DC leader declared, "he would have been an SA man." These self-proclaimed "storm troopers of Christ" subscribed to a *völkisch* (racial) theology that viewed Jews and Judaism as alien to the German people's norms, laws, and spirituality.

Niemöller had strong reservations about the idea of Aryan Christianity and drew a thick line between his conservative-nationalist Protestantism and the DC's *völkisch* version. Although the two groups shared a commitment to conservatism, nationalism, anticommunism, and anti-Semitism, there were significant differences between them. Traditional Protestants rejected a racial litmus test for church membership. They defended the Old Testament and the Jewish origins of Jesus. And they took offense at the blatant politicizing of Christianity. By twisting the cross to resemble a swastika, the DC won over many Nazis to the church but also alienated many conservatives, Niemöller among them.

Many Protestants thought that the Nazis would enhance the standing of the church.

Niemöller's disapproval of the German Christians was the starting point for his eventual opposition to Hitler's church policy, which favored the German Christians over the traditionalists. In reaction to the DC's boisterous rallies and politicized church services, Niemöller preached that Christ "wants no frenzied enthusiasm." And in contradiction to the DC portrayal of Christ as an Aryan-Nordic warrior, Niemöller insisted that Jesus "treads the path that leads to suffering and to the cross." Bemoaning the DC's "large-scale propaganda scheme for Christianity" and the "sugary Christian confection" they concocted to entice the masses, Niemöller advocated the "unaffected message of Christ's word and work, of his life and suffering, of his death and resurrection—and nothing more."

As the struggle for control of the churches intensified in the spring and summer of 1933, SA attacks on Jews rose steeply. Hermann Göring, the head of the Prussian police, declared that he was “unwilling to accept the notion that the police are a protection squad for Jewish shops.” The literary scholar Victor Klemperer, a Christian of Jewish descent, described the atmosphere in Dresden as resembling the “mood as before a pogrom in the depths of the Middle Ages or in deepest Czarist Russia.”

In April, storm troopers participating in the Nazi-led boycott of Jewish-owned businesses marched through hundreds of towns and cities singing anti-Semitic songs, blocking shoppers, and smashing windows. The German Protestant Church was silent. Indeed, some clergy defended the boycott as a natural response to disproportionate Jewish influence in German society. The Nazis soon after passed the first major piece of anti-Jewish legislation, the April 7, 1933, Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service. Its notorious “Aryan paragraph” banned Jews and Christians of Jewish descent from state employment. Although pastors and church officials were part of the civil service and paid by the state, the Nazi government did not include the churches in the April 7 legislation.

The German Christians, however, wanted to pass a parallel law that would ban “Jewish blood” from the pulpit and the pews. “Anyone of non-Aryan descent or married to a person of non-Aryan descent,” the proposed law read, “may not be called as a minister or official in the church.” At their national convention in Berlin, the DC reiterated their call for the coordination of church and state, and the creation of a united Evangelical Reich Church led by an all-powerful Reich bishop, similar to Hitler’s role as head of state.

The sudden ascendancy of the German Christians, with the help of the Nazi state, alarmed traditional churchmen as well as a younger generation of pastors and theologians, who felt closed out of the church’s governing bodies. Wanting to have a voice, they organized the Young Reformation movement with the aim of blocking the DC and infusing the church leadership with new blood. At age 41, Niemöller was among the 3,000 pastors who joined the Young Reformers.

As impressive as the Young Reformation movement appeared to be, there was an incongruity at its core—the same that characterized Niemöller. Their “joyful affirmation” of the Nazi state and simultaneous demands for independence in church affairs and condemnation of the Aryan paragraph were incompatible. The Nazis weren’t about to allow churches any more independence than they allowed

political parties, trade unions, or courts. And could the Nazis really countenance a church that worshiped a Jew? The contradictory position weakened the Young Reformers' ability to oppose the regime and earned the derision of the eminent Swiss theologian Karl Barth, who was teaching in Bonn at the time.

Twenty-seven-year-old Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, living in Berlin at the time, was one of the scant few who agreed with Barth's critique. Bonhoeffer first met Niemöller in early summer 1933. Although they agreed about the need to fight the German Christian threat, they did not see eye to eye on much else. In a letter to a friend, Bonhoeffer referred to Niemöller and his type as "naive, starry-eyed idealists" who thought that they were "the real National Socialists" because of their dual devotion to National Socialism and national Protestantism. This was nothing less than delusional, as far as Bonhoeffer was concerned. Nazism and Protestantism were inimical because the Nazis openly derided Christ's message of love and mercy. Simply put: a good Christian, Bonhoeffer believed, could not be a good Nazi.

In the coming months, Nazi church policy would prove Bonhoeffer right. Indeed, by that May even Niemöller was beginning to express concerns. While he did not explicitly critique Nazi attacks on Jews and leftists—of which there had already been many—he did respond to the increasing political and racial tensions in a May 21 sermon when he exhorted all Christians to follow the gospel's call to "love our enemies" and "pray for all men." Only by exercising love toward all men and women—"toward Christians and infidels and Jews"—could Christians move toward God.

On June 24, 1933, in an effort to break the power of the establishment church, Hitler installed Nazi jurist August Jäger as commissar of church affairs in Prussia—Germany's largest state and a Protestant stronghold. Jäger immediately suspended Prussia's established church leaders and appointed German Christians in their stead. Niemöller and his colleagues condemned this incursion into church affairs and accused the German Christians of falsifying the Gospel for political purposes. Hitler then made his ambitions even clearer by ordering new church leadership elections for July 23, with an eye to securing DC majorities. Young Reformers and traditional church leaders would square off against the German Christians for the entire range of offices from parish councils to the most senior governance positions.

Niemöller was instrumental in the Young Reformers' campaign, writing evocative brochures urging an independent, "confessing church"—one that based its proclamation on scripture and the Reformation confessions, such as the Augsburg Confession from 1530, not the prerogatives of the Nazi state. "We struggle for a confessing church against false teaching in the church like that expressed daily by the leaders of German Christians," according to one such pamphlet.

The night before the election, Hitler took to the airwaves to promote the German Christian movement, which has "consciously taken its stand on the ground of the National Socialist state." The German Christians won by a landslide and soon moved to install the Aryan paragraph. Niemöller could no longer sustain the belief that he was involved in merely a struggle between rival church factions. In the aftermath of the election, he openly criticized the state's intervention. Though the election was lost and it was obvious there would be none to contest in years to come, Niemöller refused to stand down. He called on the Young Reformers to continue preaching the theology of the gospel and to confront German Christian blasphemy.

In the fall of 1933 Niemöller and Bonhoeffer founded the Pastors' Emergency League, which in 1934 became the Confessing Church. For the next three and one-half years Niemöller and his followers in the Confessing Church defied Hitler's attempts to Nazify the Protestant Church. His sermons became increasingly defiant—openly questioning the führer's trustworthiness—until Hitler had had enough and ordered Niemöller's arrest in July 1937 on charges of misusing the pulpit for political reasons.

After the war, Niemöller encouraged people to speak out when other human beings were being attacked, whatever their race, religion, or political beliefs. His name became linked with anti-Nazi resistance and the moral imperative to come to the defense of persecuted minorities.

Yet, before his defiance of Hitler's church policy, he was an influential pastor who voted for the Nazis, welcomed Hitler's rise, and showed contempt for groups he deemed anti-Christian and anti-German. In this respect, it is legitimate to group him with Hitler's early enablers. And his dissent during the Nazi era was no more than a defense of the German Protestant Church.

It is tempting for admirers to rationalize Niemöller's earlier years by speaking in terms of a clean break between a young, imprudent man, on the one hand, and a

mature, wiser man, on the other. But Niemöller was a 41-year-old father of six with two decades of professional experience when he applauded Hitler's ascension to power. He was a middle-aged man who had read *Mein Kampf* and knew very well what Hitler stood for. And even after he watched Hitler abolish the national parliament, ban political parties and trade unions, and persecute his opponents, Niemöller refused to distance himself from radical nationalism and anti-Semitism—even on occasion after 1945.

Once the legend is stripped away, Niemöller necessarily disappoints us. But the imperfection of his moral compass makes him all the more relevant today. This middle-class, conservative Protestant, who harbored ingrained prejudices against those not like him, did something excruciatingly difficult and uncommon for someone of his background: he changed his mind.

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