



Letter to the American Church

by Eric Metaxas

A little more than two months before Hitler took power in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer delivered a powerful Reformation Day sermon that thundered like an Old Testament prophet calling the people of God to boldly live out their faith in the face of this rising evil. At a time when the world desperately needed the light of the church, Bonhoeffer called Christians to a living faith, an active faith, a costly faith. He called them to wake up.

The German church failed to listen, and we know what happened. The question before the American church today is: Will we follow suit? Will we continue to practice the form of Christianity without the substance? Will we go through the motions, but not live in the power of the gospel? Will we remain silent as evil triumphs, or will we speak God's truth?

The answer remains to be seen.

Too many Christians today refuse to get involved in the issues. They say, "We don't want to be political. We don't want to offend. We don't want to push people away." The Germans said the same things. Every bad theological reason that German Christians gave for their silence in the face of evil is being used today by the American church. Many refuse to get involved in politics because they say it's not a gospel related issue. Do you not think that in America during the era of slavery, there were plenty of Christians saying the same thing? "We don't want to speak out against slavery because we don't want to offend, or divide, or distract." That is not a living faith. What kind of gospel are you preaching if you can't speak the truth about the wickedness of slavery? It's a pseudo gospel, an anemic gospel. It is not a living faith in the living Jesus.

The desire to make others feel welcome is admirable, but when that desire leads to remaining silent on issues God calls you to speak out against, it becomes disobedience. Sadly, many believers today have exchanged accountability to God for what amounts to fear of man.

Bonhoeffer saw this same downward spiral occur.

He too was told to shut up, to not get political. The situation was complicated, they said. "There're plenty of Nazis in every congregation in Germany. Some are bad, but some are good, so don't stir the pot." Don't offend. Don't disrupt. Don't be insensitive. One of the devil's greatest schemes is to weave just enough truth into a lie to make it seem justified. Bonhoeffer ultimately became profoundly disgusted by these supposedly theologically based excuses.

He said believers who did not answer the call to be a voice for the voiceless had no right to praise the God who issued that call to His church.

Make no mistake, the Lord calls us to take our faith into every single sphere imaginable, including politics, education, media, and anything else you can think of. Chuck Colson used to frequently quote Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian, who said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"



That is what reformation is all about—it's the leaven of the gospel working its way through the dough of society. The Lord doesn't make distinctions between private faith and public matters. If He did William Wilberforce would never have used his political position to bring an end to the evils of slavery in Great Britain. No, it's the devil who makes these public/private distinctions. God commands you to stand up for those who have no voice and speak the truth.

In Bonhoeffer's day, one of the heroes of the German people was Martin Niemöller. Niemöller was a heroic WWI military veteran who became an incredible pastor of a large, influential church. But despite this pedigree, Niemöller remained silent throughout the rise of Nazism in Germany. Then one day he realized he'd been deceived. He had a meeting with Hitler where the Fuhrer essentially instructed him to stick to his sermons and keep his nose out of public matters. As soon as he left the church building, Hitler made clear, he was expected to bow to the authority of the state. Martin Niemöller realized in that moment that he'd made a mistake. He woke up and began speaking out. But at that point in Germany, it was too late. The church had been silent too long. The train had already left the station.

If the church in America does not wake up, the same thing will happen here.

The culture will continue to neutralize our voice until we've lost it all together. They will threaten us, bribe us, persecute us, and ultimately sideline us into oblivion. I think of sleeping Gulliver in Swift's classic satire being tied down by the inhabitants of Lilliput. If Gulliver had only woken up as they slung their tiny ropes around him, he would've ripped up the stakes and crushed the little islanders. But the longer he slept, the more they bound him, until a thousand tiny ropes were strong enough to render him powerless.

That's exactly what the Nazis did to the church in Germany. They told them what they wanted to hear long enough to keep them silent, sleeping. They didn't need to win Christians to their side, they just needed the majority to stay quiet. And that's what happened. In Germany, there were 18,000 Protestant pastors. About 3,000 ultimately ended up supporting the Nazis. Another 3,000 stood firm, committed to the Barmen Declaration they'd signed in 1934 opposing Nazi ideology. But here's the key, and this is where I hold out hope for the American church. Between the 3,000 pastors who supported Hitler and the 3,000 who opposed him, there sat 12,000 pastors who did not take a side. Their silence paved the way for the Nazis to triumph.

Most American Christians today likely think they would have stood with Wilberforce in the battle against slavery, or with Bonhoeffer in defiance of Nazi Germany. But those same individuals are silent right now in the face of cultural evil. They'll say...

I don't want to talk about transgender issues... someone might call it hate speech.

I don't want to discuss how critical race theory devastates communities... someone might call me a bigot.

I don't want to call out radical Marxist atheism... that fight gets heated fast.

I don't want to speak up for the life of the unborn... it's just not my place.

If you love the people for whom Jesus died, and if you trust that He defeated death on the cross, you will speak about these issues and all others ravaging our society because you bring the grace and truth of Christ into the brokenness of our world.



The Lord is looking to His church to stand against the evil lies of our time. He is looking to His people because His people are the ones who claim we believe He defeated death on the cross. We believe He rose from the grave. We believe we are free in Christ. Well, God is waiting to see us live out our beliefs. You can't just direct people to a church website to read a statement of faith. That's called a fig leaf, and it doesn't fool anyone. Either our beliefs are evident in our actions or they're not. And the Lord knows the truth.

You may be familiar with the story of the talented high-wire performer who strung a line across Niagara Falls and successfully made it across. He did it dozens of times, back and forth, until it looked like a walk in the park. Eventually he pulled out a wheelbarrow and asked the crowd if they believed he could successfully push a heavy load across the water. They clapped and shouted enthusiastically believing he could. That is, until he invited them to prove their belief by hopping in for the ride. The crowd grew silent. No one volunteered.

Real faith produces real actions, and the Lord is inviting us to get in the wheelbarrow and live out a vibrant faith today. God says I want you to trust me enough that you'll stand for my truth even if you don't know what will happen when you do. Or maybe you do know, and you're afraid. God says trust and obey anyway. I've got you. I'll carry you where you need to go. I love you.

This is especially critical today for pastors. If you're worried about losing your congregation, ask yourself: Who called you to that pulpit in the first place? Who put the people in the pew to hear what God has to say through you? Was that you and your wisdom, or did the Lord do that? God did. He called you to speak his truth, and His opinion of you is the only one that matters.

What if I lose my job? What if my reputation suffers? What if someone takes legal action against me? Increasingly, these are becoming real possibilities for speaking up for God's truth in today's culture. And the day may come when even our lives are in jeopardy. Do you know how you'll respond then? By God's grace, I will shout out, "You can't kill me. My Savior defeated death on the cross!" This may seem extreme to Americans who have been so blessed for so long and kept from harsh persecution, but God wants us to live with real hope in the promise of eternal life... because it fuels real faith today.

That is the heroic call to which you and I must respond.

Make no mistake, we're dealing with evil in our culture. We're locked in a spiritual war. The times are dark, but God has shown throughout history that this is when He often moves in power. The ground is fertile for revival. So open your mouth on the hot topics and deliver the heart of God to a world hungry for hope. Some may curse you. Some may ignore you. But some will cling to God's truth and say, "Finally, where has this been?"

God is looking for His children to take risks for His name's sake. Like in the Parable of the Talents in Luke 19, He wants to see us step out in faith to grow His Kingdom. We can't do that by living in fear and burying our opportunity. We serve a bold, mighty, wild God who loves us immeasurably and He's calling us into battle. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead to enable you to live out your faith utterly for such a time as this.

If a holy remnant can only wake up and answer God's call, then revival is possible.

Take Your Study Further



For biblical passages calling Christians to be a voice for the voiceless: See Isaiah 1:17, Deuteronomy 10:18, Proverbs 31:8-9, Psalm 82:3, Psalm 37:27-39

For passages emphasizing the role good works play in expressing real faith: See James 2:14-15, 22, Ephesians 2:10, Matthew 17:21-23, 1 John 5:3

For understanding the appropriate Christian response to civil authority: See Acts 4:19-20, 5:27-29, 1 Peter 2:13-17, 1 Timothy 2:1-2, Exodus 1:17, 1 Samuel 14:45

For inspiring Christians to seize this cultural moment for Christ: Luke 19:11-27, Galatians 6:10, Ephesians 5:16

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