

Do you know a famous German pastor during the Hitler era whom in the estimation of a huge number of his peers, stood above every other Christian? No, I'm not talking about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I'm talking about Paul Schneider, a man who just wanted to faithfully pastor his appointed churches.

Paul Schneider's story is a story of amazing witness and then martyrdom in the midst of a country and many of its Christians going crazy over politics and supposed political solutions. It's the story of the manifested evil of and in bureaucracy allowing individuals to do unspeakable things. It's the story of one man with an iron will, making choices for Christ, living for Christ...and then dying for Christ. It's a sobering story. It's an exhilarating story. And let me warn you, if you are driving, you might want to pull to the side of the road as the details of a man who was unwilling to view Hitler as his savior and was tortured again and again for not betraying his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by signing an oath to Hitler instead.

Here's the poignant story of Schneider, a story told here at really key junctures, often using some revealing quotes. So, in the mid-1930s, Christian Protestants in Germany were a majority, numbering about 45 million out of 65 million German citizens. The huge stresses were somewhat brought about by unwise provisions of the Versailles Treaty after World War One—they largely worked to help bring the National Socialists...the Nazis...to power. That political power created sharp rifts among the German Protestants. And remember, a key part of the dynamic is that the European model of Christianity...Catholic and Protestant alike...was often about the entanglements of Church and State. Yes, Luther himself in Germany sought protection and alliances with the German princes against the Roman Pope and his political allies.

So, by the mid-1930s, there were about 18,000 Protestant pastors in Germany. Reportedly, of these, about 15% were so-called "Confessing Church" pastors who were alarmed about Naziism, about 70% were noncommittally in the muddled middle, and about 15% were "German Christian" pastors that aligned strongly with Naziism. Frankly, these "German Christians" were all about Hitler and the Nazi ideology.

Here's how Pastor Paul Schneider himself succinctly summarized it: "[the German Christians']...false teaching [is] that the foundation of the Church is not the Gospel, the joyful offer of Jesus Christ, the healer of sinners, and the Kingdom of God alone, but rather nationality and the Gospel. Whenever [the 'German Christians'] place blood and race and the history of the people as a source of revelation next to God's word, next to His will revealed to us in the words of Scripture alone, next to Jesus as the unique Mediator between God and man, then in truth they fall away from the living God and His Christ..."

Well, that kind of positioning that Schneider laid out surely did catch the attention of the Nazis and their Gestapo, Germany's Secret State Police. But that wasn't the only thing. Schneider's robust pastoral activities precipitated the ire of Nazi officials, so much so that they took him into so-called "preventative detention" under a vague charge that Schneider's conduct was "conducive to endangering the public security and order." That was a charge that was left lingering without an actual attempt to prove his guilt. Schneider's point was simple: he was following a word given by Paul von Hindenburg, the predecessor to Hitler as Germany's Chancellor—and that word was this: "Make sure that Christ is preached in Germany."

Now Schneider had written a direct communication to Hitler's Third Reich in Berlin. We're served well here to quote a couple of key thoughts from this amazing document...this was written by Schneider *expectantly*, just before he was sent to Buchenwald. That was one of Germany's most brutal concentration camps, where Schneider was routinely tortured and ultimately martyred for his witness for Christ.

"The threat of punishment, whether by fines or arrest or a new preventive detention, cannot frighten me. God can certainly rescue me from [the highest authorities of the German Reich] if he wants, by making government authorities come to their senses or in whatever way God desires. Even if the punishments are applied, I will know that God will establish justice for all who suffer injustice, and that he will also judge between me and my government on his Day of Judgment as to the obedience we owe according to God's Word...Acts 5:29 says 'We must obey God rather than men.'" Hey, isn't that a classic Biblically-based formulation for the past two millennia that's been necessary in very oppressive political circumstances?

Here's what Schneider's biographer Rudolf Wentorf said about this phase of Schneider's journey: "In his struggle of the truth of the gospel Paul Schneider stands alone in the concrete situation of fearlessly and wholeheartedly proclaiming what the Word of God ultimately demands in its conflict with the powers arrayed against God. [But] we do not know of any statement made by the leadership councils of [Schneider's own] Confessing Church from this time in which it wholeheartedly supports Paul Schneider and signal to the Gestapo that he and [the churches he pastored] have acted legally in terms of church law. This failure will remain an agonizing question addressed to the Confessing Church." A lack of unity.

So what were representative actions Schneider was taking that were considered "unacceptable" by the Gestapo? The following examples were written by the Gestapo almost two years after Schneider's being sent to Buchenwald...and started with alleging that his behavior was unworthy of a pastor ministering ever again, especially "since he has refused to make a declaration that he will refrain from making any statement or taking any action that is hostile to the state in the future." So, what were such infractions? One occurred when a Nazi official said at a young German's funeral that the youth had now entered the "storm of Horst Wessel"—that was a sort of makeshift "Nazi heaven." Schneider stood and responded that he didn't know about that, but that he did know that the young man "had gone home and entered eternity." Months later, another listed infraction—Schneider claimed that German youth did not belong to Adolf Hitler but solely to Christ. Also, in private conversations, Schneider called Germany's National Socialism "the work of the devil" and made disparaging remarks about Hitler's biography *Mein Kampf*.

The Nazi solution? Schneider was denied regular food and became terribly emaciated...continually beaten and tortured...sometimes chained and often kept in solitary confinement with just a wood plank for a bed. A fellow prisoner assigned to keep medical records for Buchenwald reported after the war: "[Schneider's] body was nothing but skin and bones, the arms were unshapely and swollen, on the wrists there were bluish-red, green, and bloody cuts. And the legs—there no longer human legs, but elephant legs."

And what were Schneider's consistent responses, according to his many campmates? Holding morning devotions for others, counseling prisoners to "love your neighbor as yourself, be helpful and good," sharing his reduced food rations, working to keep others from harsh punishment or death...wow! But here's a dimension that's very startling! Buchenwald had many thousand of prisoners, yet when a prisoner like Schneider was tortured—as he routinely was—pretty much everyone could hear the event. And when Schneider was tortured and put back into solitary confinement, he would shout the gospel of Christ from his window for everyone to hear! That's astounding! Yeah, here's one specific Schneider quote recorded by a prisoner: "Friends, listen to me. Pastor Paul Schneider is speaking here. They are torturing and murdering people here. For the sake of Christ, have mercy. Pray to God. Remain steadfast and true. God, the almighty Father, will take this evil from us." What can we possibly say to that type of extraordinary witness to Jews and Gentiles alike, coming from an unjustly tortured body...yet a soul so well-fed?

On July 18, 1939, the bureaucrats at Buchenwald injected poison into Paul Schneider that caused his heart to fail, dead at age 43, leaving behind his wife and six children and also an eternal impact on many. The Cambridge Dictionary translates the German "Heil" into the English word *salvation*...and that's apparently exactly how Schneider understood it. So, Paul Schneider never extended his arm and said, "Heil, Hitler"—he would not personally let the Nazi regime replace Christ with Hitler. Yes! Salvation is in Christ alone!

One of the crazy ironies of this story is that the German State issued a stamp honoring Schneider in 1989, fifty years after the bureaucratic machinery of the evil German State of 1939 had put him and so many others to death. Eberhard Bethge, a German theologian and pastor and contemporary to Schneider, said this: "Few dared to risk as much as Pastor Paul Schneider." But just what is "risk" for the serious believer? As we just heard from Schneider himself: "God will...judge between me and my government on his Day of Judgment as to the obedience we owe according to God's Word." Indeed, Schneider understood the Christian's true risk better than many millions of his Christian peers. So...likewise...each believer throughout history is confronted with this question: *am I defining risk well...and then acting accordingly?*

A&A: Application & Action

1. When Pastor Paul Schneider died, he left his wife Margarete and six children behind. Do you think Pastor Paul Schneider was too much a “radical for Christ?” For example, should he have been more mindful of his family, as a couple of fellow prisoners suggested to him at the time? Discuss.

2. As noted, Schneider’s biographer wrote this: “We do not know of any statement made by the leadership councils of [Schneider’s own, anti-Nazi] Confessing Church from this time in which it wholeheartedly supports Paul Schneider and signal to the Gestapo that he and [the churches he pastored] have acted legally in terms of church law.”

In the United States—in this era of strongly declining denominational ties that used to bind—do you see a severely weakened church overall? Discuss. And in the event of the essential absence of a strong church, can one individual’s witness inspire us all and resonate loudly all the way to heaven? Discuss.

3. Regardless of what country they are citizen of, do you think many who claim to profess Christ seem to conform to a compromised national patriotism rather than clearly being sold out to the Kingdom of God? What are the clear evidences that you work to secure for yourself in this regard? Be specific.