

A NEW VIGILANCE

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The 1930's-era photo of church leaders saluting Adolf Hitler against the backdrop of swastika-emblazoned flags is a most haunting image in this movie. Surely German church officials then had no clue about what we now know. Had they known, we speculate, they would never have identified the church with the National Socialist Workers Party. Had they known what we now know, we surmise, they would have at all costs fought to preserve a clear separation of church and state.

But what *did* these lovers of God and the church know? What did they hope to accomplish by associating with the Nazis? Why, in the early days of Hitler's rise to power, did it seem right to bless this movement as a vehicle for national restoration and church renewal? Implicit in these questions—and their answers—is warning and wisdom for American communities of faith that have today closely aligned with political ideologies of the left and right.

BONHOEFFER goes a long way toward answering these questions. In helping us understand the post-World War I influences on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the movie reveals a church eager to regain prominence and reassert “traditional values” in the society. Compared with the possibility of the Christian God being given credit for the renewal of their beleaguered people, it considered the risk of political co-optation low. Taking the bait, church leaders rode the coattails of Hitler into an ideological blind alley. In time, the church would realize it had become a mere baptizer of a strongman's personal crusade.

But while the German church is unwittingly selling its soul, Bonhoeffer is yearning for, discovering and exploring what his native church never offered him—a Biblical sense of community. While his church is trying to find its place in the Aryan sun, Bonhoeffer is finding hope in theologian Karl Barth's sense of Christian witness. While his church is coolly making governmental alliances, Bonhoeffer's heart is being warmed by the witness of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City. While his church is aligning its future with Hitler, Bonhoeffer is discovering the way of creative nonviolence. Juxtaposed to the deformation of his church, Bonhoeffer's spiritual formation equips him to be a prophetic voice to his politically beholden church.

Reflecting on the way the movie sheds light on the church's demise and Bonhoeffer's witness to it, I draw the following observations for consideration by contemporary congregations and church leaders. **BONHOEFFER** calls us to a new vigilance:

1. In light of the church's central message and mission, examine associations and alliances with cultural or political interests very carefully. What is the church being asked to represent? In whose interest or for what convenience is the cooperation being offered? Who needs whom—and why? With “costly grace” in mind, explore thoroughly the downside possibilities of a working relationship with a government agency, cultural institution, or corporation. I am convinced that public funding for numerous “faith-based” initiatives places churches and church-based organizations in perilous waters for mission drift and co-optation.

2. Explore the extent to which the interests and values of a cultural, political, or marketing entity is different than the mission and manner of the church. My post mail and e-mail boxes get jammed with apparently church-friendly, “look-alike,” affinity, and para-church materials promising to make my job easier and the church healthier. My theological training doesn’t permit me to take any of these organizations or their skillfully-crafted programs at face value. Simply put: their mission, margin, and manner is not the same as that of the God and church I am called to serve.

3. Develop a posture of proactive vigilance and early intervention regarding the relationship of the church to the state, culture, and corporation. It is not just the relationship of church and state that is critical; the congregation’s alignment with a subculture, a class of the larger society, or a generous corporation can effectively co-opt Biblical mission and limit witness. Local congregations would do well to have an extended and vigorous conversation, leading to often-examined principles for decision-making in these regards. It is not beyond the capacity of a local congregation to attend to and creatively address underlying principles and projections of where misshapen public policies or statements lead.

4. Give attention to the ways the church is encouraging community within and outside its circle of fellowship. *BONHOEFFER* demonstrates what happens when the church fails to express community within itself. Counterfeit community emerges when authentic community - which Bonhoeffer insists forms within the church - is neither acknowledged nor encouraged. If community begins with grace and within the church, let us give ourselves to it fully. American theologian Stanley Hauerwas recently said “Creative peacemaking begins with tough honesty and confrontation within the church regarding its own inconsistencies and idolatrous tendencies. Thus, it will be able to show the world creative counters to evil and violence.”

5. Actively cultivate intentional relationships of solidarity with persons and groups who are suffering at the hands of government, culture, or corporation. The movie shows how Bonhoeffer, a German Protestant, began to identify with - and put his own reputation on the line for - the Jewish community in their oppression. Does not the Gospel call us to pay close attention to how our culture is addressing minorities and the oppressed? Does it not challenge the church to examine how a majority formulates its rationales, reasons and understandings of local, national, and international issues and crises? And does it not call us to stand with victims of bigotry and unjust treatment as with Christ himself?

We are more than 60 years removed from the devastation of Hitler’s Nazi nightmare. The lessons of the German church have been absorbed into the community psyche of most communions. Still, haunting images emerge today. Who would have thought that a significant number of American church associations would be marching in lock-step with a Presidential candidate promising to restore “traditional values?” That Americans living in poverty would be blamed for their plight by church leaders? That congregations would silently acquiesce to a mammon spirit that has enveloped the land? *BONHOEFFER* calls us some of us to a new social vigilance, and to a search for Biblical community for which he lived and died.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In what ways might the interests and values of a cultural, political or marketing organization differ from those of a church?
2. What threats might there be to a church in relationship with the state, culture or corporation?
3. To what degree do you accept that “creative peacemaking begins with tough honesty”?
4. In what way does the Gospel call us to pay attention to how our culture addresses minorities and the oppressed?
5. Toward the end of his life, Bonhoeffer said “The will of God may lie deeply concealed beneath a great number of possibilities.” Have you ever felt that way?

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