

A Lesson from History: Germany from 1933-1945

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The *National Socialist German Workers' Party* (we know it as the *Nazi Party*) had, like all political parties, a platform. This platform was produced in 1920, 13 years before the Nazi Party became the ruling political party in Germany when Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor and 25 years before the end of WW2. It's amazing to see how this platform conceived so many years earlier came to fruition. The Nazi platform had 25 points. It sounds a lot like any political platform in one respect. It addresses matters of law, economics, culture and governance.

One interesting fact about the Nazi platform is that it included a religious position. Many European countries did not have (and still do not have) the principle or belief in the separation of church and state like we do in America; instead, many foreign governments actually support a particular church with money and legislation. That's a little strange to us; we'd never dream of the government giving baptist churches, for example, a stipend to do their work, nor would we ever imagine the government requiring Christian education (that still happens in many part of our world). The Nazis had a religious position and it's spelled out in point 24 of the 25-point party platform. Listen to point 24.

We demand freedom of religion for all religious denominations within the state so long as they do not endanger its existence or oppose the moral senses of the Germanic race. The party as such advocates the standpoint of a positive Christianity without binding itself confessionally to any one denomination. It combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit within and around us, and is convinced that a lasting recovery of our nation can only succeed from within on the framework: the good of the state before the good of the individual.

Today, I want us to learn some lessons from history. The church in Germany was faced with some incredibly challenging circumstances related to the ruling government in their country in the 1930's and 40's. In many ways, they failed. What should have they done better? What warning signs did they miss? How can we learn from their mistakes? That's what I want to do today; I want to learn from the examples of history.

There's always a danger when you compare a leader to Adolf Hitler or a political party to the Nazis. I'm going trust that you understand that I'm not trying to make a one to one correlation; I'm not trying to compare any current politician or party to the devilish things done by the Nazis. What I do think is helpful, though, is examining the interaction between church and state. What were the mistakes of the church? What were the lies they were fooled by? And in doing so, I do think we learn some helpful information that should guide our thinking and action as followers of Jesus in a 21st century America.

Here's a very brief outline that will shape our time this morning. We are going to look at:

- Doctrine
- Humanity
- Religious Liberty

The church of Jesus Christ in Germany failed to uphold a biblical understanding in these three areas that significantly contributed to their ineffectiveness as the body of Christ in Nazi Germany.

The first area of focus I'd like to address is concerning doctrine. Notice in that 24th point how the Nazi party said it "advocates the standpoint of a positive Christianity." There was not a vibrant, confessional Christianity in Germany in the 1930's, but there was a very strong nominal and cultural Christianity. Or put another way: if you were to ask most Germans in 1930, "Are you Christian?" The answer would have an emphatic, "Of course I am!" even though they may not have obeyed God's word. So, the Nazi Party knew that to be received as an acceptable political power in Germany, Christians would need to see them as friendly. And the German people were hungry for a government that embraced a religious position as communists were threatening much of Europe.

Here's the problem: the positive Christianity proposed and advocated for by the Nazi Party had nothing to do with authentic and confessional Christianity. Probably one of the biggest misunderstandings about Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party is that they were Christians. The Nazis hated Christianity. Get this: they hated that Jesus was Jewish (in fact, they denied he was Jewish), they rejected humility (the very prerequisite for grace), they didn't believe that man was corrupted by sin, they believed progress was best achieved through violence, and they rejected the OT and the NT writings done by the Apostle Paul. The Nazis thought it was weak to ask for forgiveness or to give it. Does that sound like Christianity to you? A Jesus who is not Jewish, who did not come to the lost sheep of Israel, who doesn't promote or value forgiveness and grace, who doesn't count sin as man's greatest problem, who does not exalt humility and who is not highlighted in the OT or much of the NT? In fact, Adolf Hitler's hatred of Christianity was so great that he was barely tolerant of a group that was formed called the "German Christians." The German Christian movement was a nationally assembled group of Christians whose main goal was to promote the Nazi Party. Hitler didn't even like them because of their association with Christianity.

But, get this, most professing believers in Germany did not have much of a problem with Nazism, at least not at first. There was a very small band of pastors and churches who opposed Nazism from the start. Then, as time went on and as Christians, churches and pastors were terrorized more and more, only then did opposition grow. Finally, when the final solution (the extermination of Jews) became common knowledge in the country, that's when a more widespread opposition to the government became more apparent. But by that time, well in the 1940's, it was far too late. The German people were largely fooled into thinking that Nazism was friendly to Christianity. Why? Why did positive Christianity fool so many professing Christians for so long? Why did positive Christianity pass as true Christianity to so many? Here are a few reasons.

The lack of biblical and theological conviction. I use the word conviction here on purpose. I could have said “knowledge”; German Christians lacked biblical knowledge. If they had biblical knowledge they could have discerned the difference between the positive Christianity endorsed by Nazism and true, authentic Christianity. But you need more than knowledge to stand against false teaching. If you have the knowledge for the truth, but not the spine to stand up for it, your knowledge is worthless. You need conviction. Conviction is about caring; it’s having the guts to say, “The truth matters!” Not many had the conviction necessary to stand up to an oppressive and deceptive government twisting the truth of Christianity.

Here’s another reason why positive Christianity didn’t raise too many red flags: semantics. Do you know what I mean when I say that? Try this on for size: Adolf Hitler, in the early years, frequently talked about Jesus and God. Nazism used Christian words and phrases that the populous could identify. The Nazis used Christian words like “Jesus” “Church” “Christianity” “Morals” in their political propaganda and speeches, but they were happy to redefine all of those words to suit their purposes and plans. They were masters at manipulating the masses. Take the phrase positive Christianity. Do you think there’s a reason why they called it positive instead of negative? Instead of boring? Instead of deceptive?

Friends, I could spend the rest of this sermon on application on these two points; doctrine and semantics. Satan is constantly looking to undermine the work of God by distorting and twisting the message of the gospel and it is happening rapidly in the American church. It’s why your pastors, your leaders are so very zealous to promote sound doctrine here in the life of FBC. It’s why we care so deeply about what’s preached behind the pulpit; it’s why we care so much about the curriculum for Sunday School classes, for Bible studies, Titus 2 groups and everything else. Doctrine matters. Paul said to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:16), “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by doing so you will save both yourself and your hearers.” The church of Jesus, you (men and women, boys and girls) don’t get saved apart from sound teaching. It’s an absolute must. And we shouldn’t pridefully and arrogantly claim some sort of immunity from the schemes of the Devil that infiltrate the church and lead us astray. Paul wouldn’t have said, “Keep a close watch” if it was easy to see and resist the cunning nature of the Evil One.

And this sound doctrine that we need helps us discern what we hear; the words, the sound bites of presidential hopefuls. So, let me be straight with you: that a candidate makes reference to Jesus Christ, the Bible, Christianity and any other religious words means almost nothing to me. So what! What do they mean by those words? Who’s this Jesus they speak of? The one who makes no demands? The one who does not require repentance? The one who’s just as good as Muhammad or Buddha? That’s not the only Son, begotten of the Father. That’s not the Jesus of the Bible. Friends, be wise. Look past the surface; don’t get too excited when a politician uses religious words that you use. Have some conviction about what you believe. Doctrine is key.

The Nazi's went off the rails when it came to an understanding of humanity, too. Did you see how anti-semitic Point 24 is? *We demand freedom of religion for all religious denominations within the state so long as they do not endanger its existence or oppose the moral senses of the Germanic race [not the human race]... [positive Christianity] combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit within and around us.* That wording is not subtle. As we know, the privilege and superiority of the so-called Aryan Race was foundational to Nazi thought. You can see it right in their governing documents. It was no secret. But there was an ambivalence to the care of others.

There was not a large Jewish population in Germany when the Nazi came into power. Less than 1% of the population was Jewish; about 500,000 people in a country of 67 million. So, it's fair to say many Germans had no contact or experience with Jewish people. The majority of the Jews killed in the Holocaust came from surrounding countries, in fact. For example: do you remember the first country invaded by the Nazis at the start of WW2? Poland on Sept. 1, 1939. 10% of the population in Poland were Jews; over 3 million.

When we are not guided by God's truth that every human being no matter their race, gender, age, disability or other distinguishing marks is created in the image of God, we tend to see them as objects and not as people. And objects are a lot easier to ignore than human beings. It wasn't so much that the German people hated Jews (some did); but they were very indifferent; they were apathetic to who they were and their needs. Apathy and indifference is a worse kind of hatred. It's the kind of hatred that says, "I won't even bother to acknowledge your existence." So, if it's going to my neck or someone I don't know, the answer is easy.

What does God's word say about humanity. Here are a couple of verses:

- Gen. 1:27 ~ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
- James 3:9 ~ With it [the tongue; our mouths] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.
 - Knowing people are made in God's likeness, with human dignity, that stops me from cursing them like obstacles in my way toward human happiness.
- The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a powerful story that tells us that God's demand on us to love whoever the Lord Jesus puts in our path; every person is potentially my neighbor. Everyone is potentially my neighbor by virtue that God might bring them in my path. The guy on facebook who I never met, but is interacting with my sermon material is my neighbor. The single parent I see at school when I pick up my kid who seems lonely friends is my neighbor.

There's a lot of good application here, friends, when it comes to the politics of the day. Think about *those* people. The people who think differently than you; the people on the other side of the political aisle. The people who are disadvantaged and struggling. The other people who run those big corporations that are so evil to so many. *Those* people looking for asylum. Friends, be careful not to label the *other* as objects. Let's not become indifferent and apathetic to the presence of human beings in our midst like so many did in Germany in the 1930's; our

fellow human beings are not objects or obstacles even when our disagreements with them might be significant; they are people who need Jesus. I don't say this to privilege any particular political agenda. We need laws addressing immigration, welfare, healthcare and so much more; there's going to be debate how best to address these issues from a political point of view. But may we never turn anyone into an object; may we never dehumanize a human being created in the image of God.

The last item I want to highlight in this sermon is the issue of religious liberty. Probably the biggest surprise in my research on the confessing church in Germany during this time was the insistence that some brave pastors and churches had for religious liberty. What I mean by religious liberty is this: the freedom to follow God's word according to one's own conscience. Or, the opposite of religious liberty is being forced by the state to worship and serve God the way the state permits.

I told you a couple of weeks ago about Pastor Paul Schneider (PIC). As soon as the Nazi's got into power in 1932, Pastor Schneider found himself opposing the Nazis and the government. His initial resistance and trouble didn't start over the ugly racism that the party had; it wasn't because Adolf Hitler was hungry for war; his problem with the government was that the state was trying to tell the church it's business.

For example, when Pastor Schneider and his church instituted church discipline on a man for refusing to send his son to catechism classes, the man appealed to the government. If you remember, the strong ties between church and state made for a messy relationship and the state put pressure on Pastor Schneider (we'd never dream of the government caring whether a church disciplined a man for not sending his son to catechism even if we didn't believe that was a good reason to practice church discipline). But Pastor Schneider wouldn't give in. Eventually, the Nazis put Pastor Schneider in prison for 8 weeks because he wouldn't listen to their demands. He insisted that the church of Jesus Christ must be free to obey the commands of the Lord.

God always demands 100% allegiance and loyalty. Sometimes (oftentimes?) our own sinful heart stands in the way of that devotion. But sometimes it might be a ruling power. Pharaoh was the ruling power in the Book of Exodus. He prevented the people of God of worshiping him as he commanded. So, we see this showdown. Moses would say, "The people must serve God;" Pharaoh would say, "No, they are going to serve me." He was an obstacle to their devotion and he payed the price.

One political issue (among many, I'm guessing) that's worth our fight is the freedom to worship God according to scripture. We Christians should be able to tolerate and live happily under the state's authority with a lot of variables. But one of the few things where we would have to practice civic disobedience is if our freedom to worship was violated. We must worship God. Now, God doesn't guarantee this. Nowhere in the scriptures does God promise such freedom; in fact, it seems he warns us regularly not to expect it. But the ability to coexist

peacefully alongside government is completely diminished if the state is a roadblock to our worship of God. And when that day comes, God gives an abundance of grace to obey him in the face of prison, persecution and death even by the hands of the government.

What was so remarkable about Pastor Schneider is that he understood the importance of religious liberty so early. It wasn't like the Nazis were acting like King Darius or Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel, demanding people to pray to a statue or idol; something really obvious. No, to Pastor Schneider the state said, "Stop practicing church discipline; make sure you salute Nazi flag after catechism (he refused to do that); allow patriotic songs to be sung at Christians funerals (he didn't allow that either)." When the state started treading on church grounds he drew a line in the sand before most would. He had incredible insight.

Sure, friends, I think there's an appropriate tax plan or immigration policy; I have my political opinions about energy or diplomacy. But if things don't work out the way I think is best, well, I can continue on my merry way for the most part preaching the good news of Jesus. But if the state starts telling us how to practice our faith, that's not something I can compromise on. And neither can you if you want to remain faithful to Jesus.

Do you have ears to hear, FBC? Doctrine. Humanity. Religious liberty. The church in Germany largely failed in these areas and by doing so, they were unprepared and ill-equipped to be a prophetic voice to the state and a compassionate arm to those struggling. I think we could learn some lessons from this. Thankfully, the stakes aren't that high (in my estimation); but how many more years can the church neglect sound doctrine, the dignity of every human being created in the image of God and the value of religious liberty before we have our own crisis? I'd rather not find out.

Key Verse: Genesis 1:27 ~ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Small Group Questions

Sermon series: In God We Trust

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1. Does God intend for us to learn examples from history? Turn to 1 Cor. 10:1-13, read together and answer the following questions.
 - a. In vs. 1-4 Paul explains the benefits and experiences of “our fathers”. What were those benefits? What did they experience as described in vs. 1-4?
 - b. But what do we learn about their behavior in vs. 5-6? *[ANS. they didn't please God; they desired evil]*
 - c. How does Paul want the Israelites bad example to serve the Corinthian church? *[ANS. to be an example to the Corinthians (vs. 6); to serve the church instructively (vs. 11)]*
 - d. What's the big idea / warning found in vs. 12? How might you summarize that in your own words? *[ANS. Be careful! Let's not make the same mistake!]*
2. How does 1 Corinthians 10 fit the content of the morning sermon? Is that an appropriate thing to do; to learn from the example of others like this?
3. Were you surprised that the official Nazi party platform had a religious point? Was there anything about Point 24 that stood out to you?
4. Doctrine: what stood out to you about the importance of having sound doctrine? Did the positive Christianity of the Nazis sound like good news to you and how does this relate to our current situation in this election year?
5. Where does conviction come from? Pastor Brian said you need more than knowledge to stand up to false teaching; you need conviction? Do you agree and where do you get that?
6. Humanity: how does our doctrine of humanity relate to our treatment of others? What was most impactful to you in this section?
7. Religious Liberty: do you think Christians will lose religious liberty anytime soon? How might that happen?
8. What's more important: the government granting religious liberty or Christian courage? Why?

9. What was the most important or challenging thing you heard today?