

The Sin of Silence

A Defining Moment

Address given at Midwestern Seminary, Kansas City.

September 6, 2000

It is a joy to be with you here today in a place where God has done great things, in a place where, once again, you stand for the truth of God's Word, for the verbal inspiration of Scripture, for the inerrancy of that which God has written from the first chapter of the book of Genesis to the 22nd chapter of the book of Revelation, and I applaud you for that stand, and I stand with you in that faith.

And on the basis of that word, today we confront that which is happening in our culture. Now, I'm a Lutheran Christian, and that means that my historical and theological roots go back to Germany. And I find a context for what is happening in America today in that which took place in that great homeland of the Reformation in the 1930's and the 1940's.

Let me begin with a story about an incident that took place a few years ago as a prominent evangelical pastor was invited to a Christian university on the east coast to address the student body. Upon his arrival on the campus, he was greeted by the president of that institution, a distinguished looking older gentleman with upswept white hair who spoke with a decided German accent. As they walked to the chapel that day, the president requested permission to say a few words to the students before the service itself began, and of course, you don't say no to the president of his own campus, so that permission was granted.

After the student body had gathered, the old gentleman walked to the rostrum with a ramrod straightness that only a German has, and he looked out over the students assembled there, the picture of dignity and composure. Gazing intently into the eyes of the young people in front of him, he began. "For you," he said, "today is a day like any other day, but it is an extremely important and painful day for me." Silence fell over the room. The students noticed that as the old gentleman spoke, tears streamed down his face. This uncharacteristic display of emotion stunned the student body and riveted their attention. "Today is November the 9th," he continued, "the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the 'night of the broken glass.' On this day in 1938, Nazi thugs moved through the cities of Germany, smashing the windows of Jewish homes and shops, burning the synagogues. Innocent people--men, women and children--were beaten and killed simply because they were Jews.

I was there as a young man," he sobbed, "and I can still hear the sound of the shattering glass. There were many of us who were Christians then, and we did nothing. We looked the other way, and we did nothing. That was the beginning of the Holocaust, because the "Jew-haters" knew then that no one would stop them. No one would stand in their way."

The old man went on to quote the words now inscribed in the Auschwitz memorial in Poland, the place where so many died. "Never again!" he pleaded. "Christian young people we must never let

it happen again!”

My friends, it is happening again. It is happening again today in our beautiful America, so richly and abundantly blessed by a gracious God.

- It is happening today as the innocents are slaughtered in a 27-year holocaust that has seen nearly 40 million little boys and girls brutally done to death.
- It is happening again, as families are fractured and marriages are broken while self-obsessed people pursue the immediate gratification of their every desire.
- It is happening again as militant homosexuals pursue absolute approval, complete acceptance and preferential legal treatment for their perversion.
- It is happening again as our young people lose their way and often their lives in a maze of alcohol and drugs and the corridors and classrooms of our land are littered with the bodies of murdered teenagers.
- It is happening again as the nation’s leaders wallow in decadence and deceit while the people look on in apathetic indifference.

It is happening again.

For while the killing goes on, and the nation is led down the path of destruction, the Church and her pastors stand silent and afraid. This country that we love, our America, is fighting for her life--not against the military power of a foreign enemy, but against the principalities and powers of this dark age. You and I, as sons and daughters of the Lord Jesus Christ, but even more so, those of you here today who are pastors of the church of Jesus Christ, are being called upon to take a stand in this moment of crisis, and let there be no one among us who doubts the urgency of this hour.

To compare what is happening in America today to Nazi Germany is no mere flight of rhetorical exaggeration. This nation is heedlessly stumbling toward third millennium darkness. Look around you and read the signs of the times. Look beyond the walls of our beautiful sanctuaries and the comfort of our padded pews to see the chaos, the corruption and the confusion, that reigns throughout our culture. We live in a society where passions are riderless horses, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, in which there is a desolation of decency, in which love has become a jungle emotion, lust exalted to lordship, sin elevated to sovereignty, Satan adored as a saint, and man magnified above his Maker.

Americans have come to dwell in an Alice in Wonderland world of fantasy, of self-delusion. Everything has been turned upside down and inside out in our America. Right is wrong, and wrong is right. Good is bad and bad is good. Normal is abnormal, and abnormal is normal, true is false and false is true. We are fast degenerating into a decadent culture obsessed with selfishness and sin, death and destruction.

In the face of this relentless onslaught of evil, the church of Jesus Christ has grown timid and afraid. We have abandoned the truth of God’s word, compromised the stern demands of His law, tailored our message to meet the felt needs of sinful men (as if sinful men ever knew what they actually needed) and prostituted ourselves and the Gospel that we profess to proclaim, for

worldly popularity and success. We as Christian pastors seem to have forgotten that God did not call us to be popular or successful. God called us to be faithful.

Faithful preaching never comes in the form of safely vague pious platitudes. Faithful preaching must identify and denounce the false gods of this world that call upon our people to bow down before them every day. God did not call us to be successful CEO's protecting institutional peace and tranquillity, bringing in the bodies and the bucks by avoiding controversy and telling everybody what they wanted to hear. God called us to proclaim His word, to be vigilant watchmen standing high upon the walls of Zion, sounding forth the clear, clarion call of the trumpet, calling out God's people for war against the hosts of evil advancing all around us. We as the Christians of America, we as the pastors of America, have failed in this responsibility before God. And our country is paying a dire price for that failure. Make no mistake about it, brothers and sisters, we are responsible.

The great reformer Martin Luther once declared that "the preacher who does not rebuke the sins of the rulers through God's word spoken publicly, boldly, and honestly, strengthens the sins of the tyrants, and becomes a partaker in them and bears responsibility for them."

Now note carefully Luther's words. They ought to sear the conscience of every pastor in America today. The preacher who does not speak out becomes a participant in the wickedness of the tyrants and bears responsibility for it. We cannot shift that responsibility to anyone else today. We cannot blame the liberal media or the corrupt politicians or the apathetic public for that which has overtaken America. This is our fault, for we are the ones whom God placed here at this moment in our nation's history to be the stinging salt and the shining light.

We are responsible for what has happened to America. In the year of our Lord 2000, there is no Pontius Pilate's basin that can cleanse the hands of American pastors from the guilty stain of innocent blood.

When Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, he scornfully dismissed the Church and her pastors as an irrelevant force which posed no threat to the Nazi agenda for that great nation.

"I promise you," he boasted to his inner circle, "that if I wish to, I could destroy the Church in just a few years. It is hollow, it is rotten and false through and through. One push, and the whole structure would collapse. We should trap the preachers," he said, "by their notorious greed and self-indulgence. We shall thus be able to settle everything with them in perfect peace and harmony. I shall give them a few years' reprieve. Why should we quarrel? They will swallow anything in order to keep their material advantage. The parsons will be made to dig their own graves; they will betray their God for us. They will betray anything for the sake of their miserable jobs and incomes."

The dictator's words proved to be tragically accurate. The great majority of Christians in Germany looked the other way and minded their own business. They kept their religion and their politics strictly separate from one another and refused to vote on the basis of single issues which would have set them apart from the rest of the electorate. They blended in and they went along

and they followed the path of least resistance. They did that which was expedient and practical and safe, while their country was dragged down into a swirling maelstrom of barbarism and death. Only a few lonely voices were raised in protest.

In 1940 Nazi Germany was near her zenith, the nation's power, prestige, prosperity unparalleled in history, her armies invincible on every front. The Jews had been systematically excluded from the life of the nation, deprived of the protection of the law and citizenship, gradually disappearing into a spreading network of concentration camps. In that year 1940, at the height of Hitler's power and popularity, a courageous young pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer denounced the church's failure to speak out against the evil. In 1940 that lonely voice of truth proclaimed, "We the Church must confess that we have not proclaimed often or clearly enough the message of the one God, who has revealed Himself for all time in Christ Jesus and Who will tolerate no other gods beside Himself. She must confess her timidity, her cowardice, her evasiveness and her dangerous concessions. She was silent when she should have cried out, because the blood of the innocent was crying aloud to heaven. The Church must confess that she has witnessed the lawless application of brutal force, the physical and spiritual suffering of countless innocent people, oppression, hatred, and murder, and that she has not raised her voice on behalf of the victims and has not found ways to hasten to their aid. The Church is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenseless brothers of Jesus Christ. The Church must confess that she has desired security and peace, quiet, possessions and honor, to which she has no right. She has not borne witness to the truth of God. And by her silence, she has rendered herself guilty because of her unwillingness to suffer for what she knows to be right."

Bonhoeffer's warning went unheeded. He was dismissed by most of his colleagues as a single-issue fanatic. In less than 5 years, he was dead, hung naked from a piano-wire noose in Flossenberg concentration camp. Germany lay in ruins, her great cities bombed out of existence, cathedrals that had stood for a thousand years reduced to piles of broken brick and rubble.

In the face of monstrous evil, he who keeps silent fails in his responsibility before God and shares in the guilt. The moral meltdown that has overtaken America has been met with a deafening silence from the pulpits of America and the people-pleasing preachers who presume to stand in them. This desolation of decency could not have occurred if the pulpits of this land were once again aflame with righteousness, to use Alexis de Tocqueville's famous words. By our apathy, by our acquiescence and by our ignorance, the church of Jesus Christ has consigned itself to irrelevance and impotence in the ongoing struggle for the soul of America.

Our political leaders deal in trivialities and superficial nonsense, practicing the feel-good politics of deliberate ambiguity, while the destruction of our families, the perversion of our most basic moral principles, and the murder of innocent unborn children goes on and on and on. Those candidates in the Presidential primaries who denounced the evils of abortion and stood unequivocally for moral values against the corruption of our times never rose out of single digits in the polls and therefore they were never considered serious contenders in this election cycle, and the moral issues for which they stood were pushed aside in favor of more practical considerations. We have come to this sorry state because Christian voters were more concerned about electability than about integrity. The result, to use the words of former president Gerald

Ford, is “we have an election in which candidates without ideas hire consultants without convictions to carry out campaigns without content.”

Throughout the mind-boggling series of scandals that has gushed out of Washington like filth from a sewer in recent years, the endless refrain of the beltway establishment and the media elite has been, “We’ve got to get on with the nation’s business.” Well, folks, there was a time not too long ago when righteousness and decency and justice were the nation’s business. And unless that time comes again soon, this nation will not endure.

John Adams once warned that the problem with democracy is that you get the leaders you deserve. This sad spectacle ought to remind us that a people who cannot control themselves cannot govern themselves. It’s not the economy, stupid. It’s the morality, stupid.

The issue before us as Christians and as Christian pastors is faithfulness to the word of God and submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. To speak to the great moral issues of our day is an integral and essential part of that God-given responsibility. To fail to do so is nothing less than a denial of the Lordship of Jesus.

Pastor Martin Niemöller was yet another of that lonely band of Christian heroes that stood against the tide of evil in Nazi Germany. He was arrested by the Gestapo for faithfully preaching the word of God. Now Niemöller was what we would today call a celebrity; he was a national hero. He had been a U-boat commander highly decorated in the First World War, and only then after the war did he enter the ministry. His congregation in the Berlin suburb of Dahlem was one of the wealthiest and most influential evangelical churches in the land, its membership made up of high government officials, generals, and so on. And the arrest of this pastor from that church was highly controversial. The judge before whom he was arraigned on charges of sedition seemed genuinely puzzled why a patriot like Martin Niemöller would criticize Adolf Hitler, the man whom the German people hailed as their Fuhrer, an absolute leader, to whom unquestioned obedience was owed. The magistrate pleaded with the minister to end his attacks upon the Nazi regime and upon the Fuhrer. He promised Niemöller immediate release and the opportunity to return to his pulpit "today," if only he would agree to do so. Niemöller’s reply was steadfast: “I cannot and I will not be silent, because God is my Fuhrer.”

Our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ must take precedence over any other loyalty in every part of our lives. If the Lord Jesus is truly our Lord, then we must serve Him. If the Lord Jesus is truly our Lord, then He cannot be safely compartmentalized to one place, one time, one day of the week, with one group of people, while we live like the heathen the rest of the time. If the Lord Jesus Christ is truly our Lord, He cannot be left outside the ballot box like an unneeded umbrella when we go in to vote. We must serve Him in all that we do. We must participate in this democracy that He has given us, not as “rock-ribbed Republicans” or “yellow-dog Democrats,” not as liberals or conservatives, not as men or women, not as labor or management, not as senior citizens who want to protect Social Security or as wage-earners who want their taxes lower, not as whites or blacks or Asians or Hispanics, but as sons and daughters of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must participate in this democracy as Christians, for only then will America turn from the path of destruction.

But as we participate, we must be careful to maintain our theological and moral integrity. God has not called us to be social agitators or reformers. He has called us to be faithful spokesmen for His word. Politics is the art of the possible. Christianity is the art of the impossible. The politician always has his eye on the next election. The Christian pastor must always have his eye on eternity. There is only one Savior, and His name will not be appearing on any election ballot in this particular cycle or any other. We dare never labor under the illusion that the Kingdom of God is about to arrive aboard Air Force One. Nor may we ever allow the church of Jesus Christ to be reduced to the status of a sanctimonious shill for a political candidate, party or philosopher.

The Roman statesman/historian Pliny the Younger once observed,
“The common people find all religions to be true.
The philosophers find all religions to be false.
The politicians find all religions to be useful.”

When we as Christian pastors participate in this democracy, our participation must be prophetic, not political. We must summon this nation and its leaders to repentance as we relentlessly proclaim the truth of God. What America needs, essentially, is not merely a change of administration. What America needs is a spiritual re-birth.... Where God’s will does speak, on the fundamental issues of life, morality and family, there God’s pastors must address the issues, on the basis of Scripture, without equivocation and without hesitation.

God may not have endorsed a particular method for Tax Reform, but of this one thing we can be absolutely certain: The Lord God Almighty hates the murder of innocent unborn children. God is not the mascot of the Republican or the Democratic parties. But let there be no doubt whatsoever about this: The Creator instituted holy marriage as the life-long union of a man and a woman. Any other combination, no matter how modern, innovative or politically correct is a perversion of the divine intent. That prophetic witness will not be welcomed by those politicians on either side of the aisle who seek only to preserve their own position and power. We who profess to speak for God must proclaim the truth in a political world of diplomatic double-talk and deliberate evasion. Once again, that won’t make us popular, but God did not call us to be popular. He called us to be faithful, and we as His spokesmen must be willing to pay the high personal price that that faithfulness requires.

The morning after Pastor Martin Niemöller was arrested, the Lutheran chaplain was making his rounds in the city jail and as he was making his rounds, he was astounded and dismayed to find his fellow clergyman sitting there under arrest.
“My brother!” he exclaimed. “What did you do? Why are you here?”
Niemöller, never at a loss for words, immediately reacted. “My brother, given what’s happened in our country, why aren't you here?”

Those days have not yet come in America, but they are coming soon. We have already seen the ominous beginnings of attempts to muzzle Christian witness on radio and television, to label Christian objections to abortion and homosexuality as “hate speech.” In Europe and Canada significant steps have already been taken in that direction, and if present trends continue, America will not be far behind. Gentlemen and ladies, it is only a short step from prohibiting that

which is politically incorrect as "hate speech" in the media to prohibiting it in the pulpits of every church in America. My brothers, given what is happening in our country, why aren't you here?

The saddest and most tragic feature of the Christian experience in Germany was the bitter expression of regret that came from so many afterwards, who realized their failure only too late.

One such man was a university professor and diplomat named Albrecht Haushoefter. He was a quiet, gentle man who wrote poetry in his spare time. As gradually he came to recognize the enormity of the evil of Nazism, he was drawn into the resistance and arrested in 1944 after the failure of the Stauffenberg plot to assassinate Hitler.

In the final days of the war, as the Russian tanks moved through the outskirts of the city of Berlin and the dictator hid in the Fuhrer bunker like a rat trapped in his hole, the SS guards at the city prison were given a list of those who were not to be allowed to survive the downfall of Nazism because they knew too much. Albrecht Haushoefter's name was included on that death list. A group of 7 or 8 prisoners was taken out of their cells that morning. They were told they were about to be released. Each of the prisoners was assigned an SS guard. They were led out of the jail into the nearby Tiergarten, the great park in the center of the city of Berlin. And as they came to the center of that park, out of sight from anyone else, each guard stepped up behind the prisoner assigned to him and shot him in the back of the head. The bodies were abandoned there in the snow and the mud of the ruined city.

Some time later Albrecht's brother heard rumors of what had happened, and he hurried into the park to search for his brother's body. When he found it, there clutched in his hand was a bloodstained sheaf of paper. Written on that paper was a poem that Haushoefter had composed just a few hours before his execution. It was entitled "Schuldig Bin Ich" ("I Am Guilty.")

"The burden of my guilt," the condemned man wrote,
"before the law weighs light on my shoulders.
To plot and conspire was my duty to the people.
I would have been a criminal had I not.
I am guilty, although not in the way that you think.
I should have done my duty sooner. I was wrong.
I should have called the evil more clearly by its name.
I hesitated to condemn for far too long.
I now accuse myself within my own heart.
I have betrayed my conscience for far too long.
I have deceived myself and my fellow man.
I knew the course of evil from its start.
My warning was not loud enough or clear enough.
Today as I die, I know what I am guilty of."

We, too, have known the evil from its start. In this great nation, where for 27 long years the innocent unborn have been slaughtered, we have grown accustomed to the killing and have gone on with our business, with our lives and our ministries while the little ones have perished every

day, 4,500 a day. This is what we have come to in America. The Supreme Court of our land sanctions the horror of partial birth abortion, this most barbaric and grotesque killing of a child in the midst of its birth. And yet, even in the face of this abomination, the churches of America, the pastors of America, are silent. Where is the cry of outrage? Where is the indignation of the people of God? We, too, have known the evil from its start. Dumpsters full of ravaged infant bodies stand in mute testimony to our failure and to our guilt.

The Christians of Germany realized only too late how much had been at stake and how much they had lost. But we may still have a chance. It's not too late yet for our America. The righteous judgment of God has not yet come upon us. The New Testament speaks of unique moments of divine destiny, when God confronts His people with a challenge and offers them an opportunity. The Greek word for such a moment of divine destiny is "kairos." I believe that the Church in America has come to such a time, a biblical kairos, a moment of divine destiny. If we fail to meet this challenge and rise to this opportunity, our nation will not survive. It is as simple and as stark as that.

This is our moment, my friends. Our time of testing. I pray that we may be equal to the challenge of these days, that we may seize this precious opportunity from God, that we may be within this dying culture the stinging salt that stops the decay of death, the shining light that dispels the darkness of doubt and despair, that America may once again be the gleaming city set high upon a hill that shines as a beacon light of life and hope for this nation and to every nation. I pray that we may serve the Lord Jesus Christ with courage and with honor, for the glory of His name, that we may snatch our country back from the brink of destruction and preserve this legacy of faith and freedom for those who will come after us. This is our moment of divine destiny, our kairos.

In the winter of 1943, a group of university students in Munich, calling themselves The White Rose, began a desperate effort to awaken the young people of that nation to the malignant evil that had engulfed their country. Led by a 25-year old student named Hans Scholl, they distributed leaflets across the campus in a doomed effort to provoke resistance to the Hitler regime. Six leaflets were written. Number Four in the series included this desperate plea, a plea which could have been written today, a plea which could have been addressed to us. Scholl wrote, "Everywhere, at all times of greatest trial, men have appeared, prophets and saints, who cherished their freedom, who preached the one God and who with His help brought the people to a reversal of their downward course. I ask you now, as a Christian, wrestling for the preservation of your greatest treasure: Why do you hesitate? Why are you inclined toward intrigue, calculation and procrastination? Are you hoping that someone else will raise his arm in your defense? God has given you the strength! God has given you the will to fight! We must attack the evil now, where it is strongest!"

Their valiant effort was crushed after only a few weeks. Scholl and his young comrades were beheaded by the Gestapo. They died for their faith, but their words reverberate down across the years to us in America today, to a nation that has been blessed more richly than any other nation in the history of mankind. Their words come to us:

"Why do you hesitate? God has given you the strength! God has given you the will to fight! We

must attack the evil now where it is strongest.”

Christians of America, this is our kairos, our moment of divine destiny. God has given us this time. Let us use it to His glory. To that end, may our gracious God bless you, and may God bless our America. Thank you.