

Peace through Faith & Courage!

I have a friend back east who inherited his uncle's personal diary. It was the diary Tom's uncle kept as a soldier during WW2. Tom shared parts of the diary with me. It was not difficult to discern his uncle's descending state of mind, his increasing despondency, as he experienced the march of time and tribulation during those awful days in war-torn Europe. One entry was particularly revealing. It read:

“Today we marched past a cemetery. I saw row upon row of crosses. There must have been a thousand graves. I wished that I was in one of them!”

Many veterans can empathize with such feelings. They are all too acquainted with the horrors of war. Those who were born after the last Great War can only imagine. They have no direct connection with war simply because it has never come to our soil. Here in Canada we have been insulated from it. For a long time our only exposure to war was as depicted by Hollywood, a depiction that tends to glamorize rather than evoke a sober picture of war.

But times are changing. The events of 9/11 have introduced a new kind of war - and brought it right to our shores. We now feel an increased sense of vulnerability and anxiety. The destruction of the two towers in New York and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have tarnished this illusory glamour of war. Now that Canada is at war in Afghanistan and the coffins come back to Canadian soil we find ourselves increasingly fearful for our children.

The so-called “war to end all wars,” fought almost 100 years ago, did not deliver on its promise. A mere 20 years after WW1 we had WW2, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, then Korea, Viet Nam, the Middle East, Central America, Rwanda, Bosnia, and now the so-called war on terrorism. This is a war that some are already labeling as WW3! To what end will it all escalate?

A moment's reflection tells us that war is always a result of evil ambition, selfishness, pride and prejudice, all of which eventually lead to unbridled hatred. War is irrational as are those who trigger it! Men like Adolf Hitler are neither rational nor sane. They must be resisted. If left unopposed they inevitably wreck more and more havoc and evil on the innocent. There are times when just men must go to war, and there are causes that good men must defend. There are hapless victims who must be defended. There are things such as truth and justice for which good men and women must fight.

As Christians, we must be willing to defend the Faith, witness for Jesus, and live as the Master lived. We must do this whatever the personal cost. This requires us to be aware of the erosion of truth and the propagation of lies so that we do not end up denying Christ and allying ourselves with those who deceive or are deceived. If we to be peacemakers, then we will also have to fight for truth and stand firm for Christ who is the Truth. If there is anything we can learn from the past, surely it is the example of courageous, godly men and women who have done so. The path to war is generally paved with lies and deception.

(What follows [indented] is a condensed, redacted version of Dr. Victor Shepherd's reflections on the courageous stand taken by Martin Niemoeller in Nazi Germany).

Following World War 1 Germany was in economic ruins. The people were humiliated, impoverished, confused, and lost. Germany was drifting without a rudder. Hitler promised to rebuild the economy, restore the people's pride, overturn their national humiliation and eliminate the rampant immorality in the larger cities. He seasoned his public speeches with religious references, talked about the blessings of Almighty God, and handed out pious stories to the press. He even displayed a tattered Bible and declared that he drew strength from the Word of God. Then he announced, "**Today Christians ... stand at the head of Germany.**" It is little wonder that people were inspired to follow him. Not everyone, however, was fooled!

One of the real heroes of that era was a pastor named Martin Niemoeller. He saw that Hitler was secretly conscripting - and distorting - the Christian Faith in order to use it in the service of political power. Soon the state church began publishing manifestos boasting of national superiority.

Pastors were ordered to read out proclamations of thanksgiving, praising the state "for assuming the great burden of reorganizing the church." Niemoeller refused to read it in his church. He realized that Hitler wanted only to use the church as a political tool. Soon he would leave it to "rot like a gangrenous limb," in the words of the Fuehrer himself.

The pseudo-faith of the state church was labeled "Positive Christianity." Positive Christianity had become nothing more than a cloak for rabid nationalism, so-called racial purity, and military superiority. Niemoeller saw right through the outer garment of "Positive Christianity." He flatly stated that the Gospel compels the church to preach Jesus Christ, crucified and raised from the dead. That was her message and only hope.

Most of the German pastors promoted this so-called "Positive Christianity" in order to save their skin. Niemoeller stated publicly that any clergyman who took refuge in being "politically correct," while waiting for the storm to pass, was "**a traitor to Jesus Christ.**"

From 1933 on the Gestapo shadowed Niemoeller wherever he went. Matters came to a head in 1934. Niemoeller courageously appeared at a meeting of Nazi officials. An enraged Hitler ordered him to step forward. The Fuehrer berated Niemoeller furiously. The pastor was frightened. As he listened to the Fuehrer's tirade, however, he realized that here was a man enslaved and driven by fear - fear of being assassinated every time he left the Chancellery. Here was a man whose lack of godly fear made him paranoid, suspicious, and fearful of everyone else.

Niemoeller was emboldened by his own faith in Jesus Christ, and he spoke into Hitler's face, "**We pastors have a responsibility to the German people laid on us by God. Neither you nor anyone else can take that away from us.**" Hitler turned on his heel and stormed off. Over the course of the next four years, Niemoeller was imprisoned five times, each time being released after a few days.

On July 1, 1937, he was eating breakfast with his wife when the Gestapo arrested him again. He expected the same quick release this time, but he was mistaken. This time he would be in prison for eight years. As he was being admitted to the Berlin prison, he was accosted by the prison chaplain, a man who was now a Nazi stooge. "**Pastor Niemoeller,**" the chaplain remonstrated, "**Why are you in prison?**" Niemoeller stared at him and replied, "**Why are you not in prison?**"

Niemoeller was in prison until the end of the war, when he was finally liberated by American troops. He lived until 1984 when he died at the age of 92. A few days before his death he said this: **“When I was young I felt I had to carry the gospel; now that I am old I know that the gospel carries me.”**

He is right! The only thing that can save us and carry us is the love of God revealed in the life of Jesus Christ. The only thing that will bring peace is the transformation of the heart. When Mankind turns to the One who is known as the *Prince of Peace*, Jesus Christ, then and only then will we know peace.

Why do we remember Martin Niemoeller? Is it because he was intellectually gifted? He was surely that! But so were thousands of other university professors and pastors in Nazi Germany. What separated Martin Niemoeller from the majority of them was his courage and his unshakable faith in Christ.

Courage is not the absence of fear. The bravest people are often afraid. It is their courage keeps them from being paralyzed and immobilized by their fear. Their courage keeps them from being deflected from doing what God has appointed them to do. It was Christ who enabled Niemoeller to go face to face with the most powerful and evil man in Europe.

Niemoeller frequently quoted a text from the Book of Joshua: **“*Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go*”** (1:9). The Lord and Savior Jesus Christ went with this courageous pastor when he stood before Hitler. The Lord went with him when he was imprisoned in the concentration camps at Sachsenhausen and Dachau.

The Lord will surely go with us when we are forced to stand before those who are powerful and evil. But our courage and our faith in Christ must remain unshakable. It is Jesus who both commands courage and provides it by his indwelling presence. The secret is Jesus! He is the One most to be remembered on Remembrance Day.

History teaches us that Man has never learned to live without war. We have yet to learn that violence cannot be eradicated with more violence. That’s why war keeps breaking out. But peace will never “break out.” Peace must be made! Jesus said, **“Blessed are the peace-makers.”**

This Remembrance Day we must remember Jesus Christ above all else. We must stand firm as witnesses for Jesus, and we must be unwavering in our faith and trust in him! Peace will come only when courageous men and women of God stand up not only for truth, but for the One who is the Truth. He alone will be our peace! He alone is the Prince of Peace! Martin Niemoeller remembered this when many other pastors and churchgoers forgot it. He stands tall in our memories as a great defender of the Faith and witness for Jesus in perilous times. He shone as a light in a dark place. So must we!

“When I was young I felt I had to carry the gospel; now that I am old I know that the gospel carries me.” – Martin Niemoeller