

## Chapter One

# WHEN GOD IS SEPARATED FROM GOVERNMENT, JUDGMENT FOLLOWS

**HITLER DID NOT** discourage people from attending church. He was a baptized Catholic who had long since abandoned his faith, but he did not mind if others continued to attend church as long as it did not affect the way they lived or the values they held. In fact, he explicitly said that he would not interfere with the specific doctrines of the church, just as long as the churches were teaching those things that were in harmony with the good of the German people. He called this “Positive Christianity.”

Of course he knew he would encounter some opposition from those who were not on board with his vision of a toothless Christianity. But he believed that he could crush any opposition he might encounter—and in effect he did just that—by intimidation and controlling their salaries. (Because Germany had a state church, the pastors were dependent on

## WHEN A NATION FORGETS GOD

the good graces of the government for their income.) Hitler ridiculed the Protestant pastors, saying they were cowering dogs who would do his bidding for the sake of “their miserable salaries.”

So, right from the beginning Hitler sought to marginalize the church to guarantee that no Christian influence would be allowed to inform government policy. Worship would have to be a private matter between a man and his God; at all costs the official state policy would have to be based on humanistic principles to give Hitler the freedom to do what was “best” for Germany. He said that the churches must be “forbidden from interfering with temporal matters.” *The state would have to be scrubbed clean of all Christian convictions and values.*

Since Germans had for centuries celebrated Christmas and Easter, Hitler had to reinterpret their meaning. Christmas was turned into a totally pagan festival; in fact, at least for the SS troops, its date was changed to December 21, the date of the winter solstice. School prayers were banned and carols and Nativity plays were forbidden in the schools; and in 1938 even the name *Christmas* was changed to *Yuletide*. Crucifixes were eliminated from classrooms. Easter was turned into a holiday that heralded the arrival of spring. If religion was tolerated, it had to be secularized so that it would be compatible with the state’s commitment to the greater good of a revived Germany. Most of the churches bowed to the cultural currents and endorsed the “Positive Christianity” that was in line with government policies.

Of course, Hitler’s real intentions were not immediately revealed. Soon after he was sworn in as chancellor, he paid tribute to Christianity as an “essential element for safeguarding the

soul of the German people” and promised to respect the rights of the churches. He declared his ambition to have “a peaceful accord between Church and State.”<sup>1</sup> He expressed his intentions to improve his relationship with Pope Pius XII. He also distributed a picture of himself coming out the door of a church to show that he had religious sympathies.

He was willing to give the churches freedom, he said, “as long as they did not do anything subversive to the state.” Of course behind that promise lay his own definition of what might be subversive. But this guarded promise, as well as a concordat with the Vatican that appeared to guarantee freedom for the Catholic Church, was welcomed.

Article 24 of the party platform demanded, “liberty for all religious denominations in the State so far as they are not a danger . . . to the moral feelings of the German race.” Hitler spoke approvingly of his “Positive Christianity” that would contribute to the German struggle. He won some goodwill by appearing to be conciliatory; the churches liked his use of the words *freedom* and *tolerance*. He assured them that he was doing what was best for Germany. Of course, what was “best” would be defined by him, not by the churches, not by the Bible, not even by natural law.

The Germans had become accustomed to the doctrine of the “two spheres,” which was interpreted to mean that Christ is Lord of the church, but the Kaiser (or Caesar) is, after a manner of speaking, lord over the political sphere. Allegiance to the political sphere was as high and honorable a duty as was one’s allegiance to God. Indeed, allegiance to God was best demonstrated by allegiance to the State.

Within the Lutheran church there was a strong pietistic

## **WHEN A NATION FORGETS GOD**

movement that advocated a return to biblical piety, the worship of God within the heart. For the most part these people were opposed to biblical scholarship (especially of the liberal kind) and withdrew from the intellectual theological debates within Germany. They witnessed to the saving grace of Christ but believed that the church's mission was only to preach Christ. Pietism, with its emphasis on personal devotion to Christ, was used to inject spiritual life into the mainstream Lutheran church. But by insisting that their faith was private and should not be brought into the political sphere, pietism had scant influence in stemming the Nazi tide.

So those who dutifully tolerated the excesses of the Nazi regime, but simply continued to study the Bible to maintain a warm heart, are to be commended for getting it half right. Certainly they were much more effective than those who ceased to study their Bibles and enthusiastically endorsed the regime. These pious Christians thought that if they left Hitler alone, he would leave them alone. But they discovered that was not possible. Hitler also put pressure on them to have their children indoctrinated in the state schools and, thanks to the cultural pressure, their churches were not equipping members to stand against the abuses that were developing around them.

## **USING THE CHURCH**

Before Hitler moved to destroy the church, he decided to make peace with it and use it for his own ends. On March 21, 1933, he arranged an impressive spectacle for the opening of the new session of the Reichstag (German Parliament) in the

Garrison Church in Potsdam. With pomp and ceremony he sought to assure the nation that he could follow a conservative path and seek harmony with the churches. Two days after the ceremony, the Reichstag passed the so-called Enabling Law whereby the power of the Reichstag was reduced to a sounding board for the party. The necessary majority to pass the bill was secured by the arrest of some opposition parliament members and the threatening of others. By July, Hitler proclaimed the Nazis as the only party in Germany.

Despite his conciliatory beginning, Hitler would later try to obliterate the church. In the end, he wanted to transform the church so thoroughly that every vestige of Christianity would be smashed. There was not enough room in the churches for both the cross and the swastika. As he himself mused, "One god must dominate another." Given the weaknesses of the church, his goal appeared to be within reach, though it would not be as easy as he thought.

## **NIEMOLLER MEETS HITLER**

Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (we shall meet both of these men in more detail later in this book) garnered opposition to Hitler's intrusion into the affairs of the church. When Hitler heard that there might be a church split because some pastors objected to his agenda, he summoned the leaders of the churches to a personal conference to which Niemoller was included on January 25, 1934. Niemoller and other members of the clergy walked past the SS guards to the Reich Chancellery in Berlin and soon were ushered into Hitler's study.

## **WHEN A NATION FORGETS GOD**

Hitler began by reproaching his guests, treating them to a tirade about how he was misunderstood. “Peace,” he said, is all that he wanted. “Peace between Church and state.” He blamed them for obstructing him, sabotaging his efforts to achieve it.

**“YOU CONFINE YOURSELF  
TO THE CHURCH. I’LL TAKE  
CARE OF THE GERMAN PEOPLE.”**

—HITLER

Niemoller was waiting for a chance to speak, and when he had the opportunity, explained that his only object was the welfare of the church, the state, and the German people. Hitler listened in silence and then said, “You confine yourself to the Church. I’ll take care of the German people.” The conversation then drifted to other themes.

When it was over, Hitler shook hands with the clergy and Niemoller realized this would be his last opportunity to speak his mind. Carefully choosing his words, he said, “You said that ‘I will take care of the German people.’ But we too, as Christians and churchmen, have a responsibility toward the German people. That responsibility was entrusted to us by God, and neither you nor anyone in this world has the power to take it from us.”<sup>2</sup> Hitler turned away without a word.

That same evening, eight Gestapo men ransacked Niemoller's rectory for incriminating material. A few days later a homemade bomb exploded in the hall. Interestingly, the police came to the scene even though no one had called them. These threats were easier for Niemoller to bear than some of the criticism he received from his colleagues for his strong words to Hitler. Clearly the majority of the clergy had adopted an attitude of safety first. More than two thousand pastors who had stood with Niemoller and Bonhoeffer withdrew their support. They believed that appeasement was the best strategy; they thought that if they remained silent they could live with Hitler's intrusion into church affairs and his political policies.

## **PUT YOURSELF IN THEIR SHOES AND ASK: "WHAT WOULD I HAVE DONE?"**

Please read this eyewitness account of how some members of the church reacted to the Nazism of their times. Put yourself in their shoes and ask: "What would *I* have done?"

I lived in Germany during the Nazi Holocaust. I considered myself a Christian. We heard stories of what was happening to the Jews, but we tried to distance ourselves from it, because, what could anyone do to stop it?

A railroad track ran behind our small church and each Sunday morning we could hear the whistle in the distance

## WHEN A NATION FORGETS GOD

and then the wheels coming over the tracks. We became disturbed when we heard the cries coming from the train as it passed by. We realized that it was carrying Jews like cattle in the cars!

Week after week the whistle would blow. We dreaded to hear the sound of those wheels because we knew that we would hear the cries of the Jews en route to a death camp. Their screams tormented us.

We knew the time the train was coming and when we heard the whistle blow we began singing hymns. By the time the train came past our church we were singing at the top of our voices. If we heard the screams, we sang more loudly and soon we heard them no more.

Years have passed and no one talks about it anymore. But I still hear that train whistle in my sleep. God forgive me; forgive all of us who called ourselves Christians yet did nothing to intervene.<sup>3</sup>

We should not be too critical of the church in Germany. What would we have done in the face of such abuses? What should we do when the state's policy is evil? What train is rumbling past us today whose whistle we ignore? Answers are not easy to come by. Yet the question is just as relevant today as it was back then: *What is the role of the church in the face of governments that have self-consciously excluded God from their policies?* Was Hitler right when he told Niemoller that he should limit himself to taking care of the church while he (Hitler) had the responsibility of taking care of the German people? Or was Niemoller right in insisting that the church also had responsibility for the German people at large?

Hitler responded to the opposition of the church in the same way all hostile governments respond to those who would disagree with them: He created a flurry of new laws and then accused pastors and church leaders of breaking them. In one way or another God had to be separated from government policies and ejected from the public square. The voice of courageous Christians had to be silenced. *God had to be removed to make way for the National Socialist policies.*

Niemoller was later imprisoned for what we today call “hate speech” because he dared criticize the regime within his church. Specifically, the charges against him were “abuse of pulpit” and he was charged with speaking, “with malicious and provocative criticism . . . of a kind calculated to undermine the confidence of the People in their political leaders.” He had involved himself with matters that “were of concern only to the state.”<sup>4</sup> He had violated a new law for the “Prevention of Treacherous Attacks on State and Party.” For speaking out—his crime was simply preaching what he believed his people should hear—he was sentenced to prison and then confined to concentration camps, ending up in Dachau where he remained until liberated by Allied troops.

Hitler always said that the best way to conquer your enemies is to divide them. He encouraged a movement simply called, “God Believers” (he was willing to use the word *God* as long as it was emptied of all essential meaning), a policy designed to persuade individuals to withdraw from the churches. The sales pitch was that there was an alternative to the church; the state could have a ceremony to dedicate infants; the state could have its own holidays without the need to celebrate the Christian ones. Marriages, for those who

## WHEN A NATION FORGETS GOD

wished, could also be performed by the state. The blessings of Mother Earth and Father Sky were frequently invoked upon the couple until their destiny was fulfilled. In the same way, same-sex marriage proponents say today that marriage can take place without the blessings of a religious body; it can be a purely secular act separated from religious overtones.

And so it was that secularism was imposed on the German people. The role of the church was minimized by privatizing faith and instituting laws about what could or could not be said from a pulpit. Religious leaders who opposed the secular steamroller were intimidated by threats to them and their families. With God and religion removed from government, the values of Hitler's socialism filled the vacuum. The church would increasingly become the enemy of the state.

Keep in mind that all of this happened under code words such as *freedom*, *peace*, and *fairness*. The people were assured that these changes were made with their best interests in mind. The Greater Good of Germany eclipsed individual freedoms and the right to opposition. Everyone was expected to be in sync with the accepted cultural values and goals. Those who opposed the regime paid a price.

## WHITHER AMERICA?

Here in America where freedom of speech is expressly granted in the Constitution, we might think that Nazi Germany has little to teach us about a secular state. If you think that is the case, think again. When truth is rejected in the public sphere, the state will either turn to some semblance

of natural law or more ominously, to lies. Secular values will be imposed on society, and it will be done in the name of “freedom.”

Our social planners who are dedicated to reshaping America according to purely humanistic values agree with Hitler that God and religion must be removed from government. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) believes that God must be separated not just from government, but from every sphere of American life. Religion—particularly Christianity—must be ousted from government, from law, education, and the workplace.<sup>5</sup>

Thus with the so-called public square free of any hint of religious values, the vacuum is then filled with secular values: the cheapness of human life (abortion and euthanasia), the promotion of all forms of immorality (including homosexual marriages), and the sexualization of schoolchildren (often with pornography and the ridicule of traditional values). This secularism is not religiously neutral but is being imposed upon society as the only viable point of view. So laws are being passed that will prevent effective opposition to these changes, so that secularism can reign supreme. Freedoms formerly a part of our history can be withdrawn as religion is designated as “private” which is code for “irrelevant” and “powerless.”

Just as Germany had Christian holidays paganized, just so, we have witnessed the systematic removal of religious symbols from public places. First it was crosses on Christmas trees, and then it was Christmas trees themselves that became a point of controversy. During the holiday season public schools seldom refer to Christmas anymore in their celebrations. Instead, they use phrases such as “winter program” or

## WHEN A NATION FORGETS GOD

“winter holidays.” Following a school board decision to rename a school’s Christmas program a “winter” program, teachers in one district even began to forbid their students to say the word *Christmas* on school grounds.<sup>6</sup> The ACLU stands ready to intimidate any teacher who dares to tell students that Christmas is a religious holiday. A kindergartener asking God’s blessing on her lunch was tapped on the shoulder by her teacher and was told that she must not do that at school.<sup>7</sup> All this, despite the fact that compelling arguments can be made that America’s prosperity, freedoms, and generosity can be traced to its founding as a nation rooted in faith in God and respect for the Bible as His Word.

**SHE REPLIED, “THE PEOPLE IN CHINA  
HAVE FREEDOM OF RELIGION . . .  
THEY CAN BE AS FREE AS THEY  
WISH WITHIN THEIR OWN MINDS!”**

When my family and I were in the People’s Republic of China back in 1985, we asked a tour guide about freedom of religion. She replied, “The people in China have freedom of religion . . . they can be as free as they wish within their own minds!” Freedom of religion, then, has a new definition: we are free to practice our religion with our thoughts and perhaps in private conversation. In our own country one of our chief justices lamented that the court would have religion be

like “pornography,” indulged only in private.<sup>8</sup>

When God is ousted from government, transcendent values are replaced by:

- The raw use of power
- Eroticism
- Arbitrary judicial rulings
- The morality of personal pragmatism

Without overarching absolutes, the unity of society is threatened in the face of fragmentation and the quest for personal “rights.” Civility, long a characteristic of American life, has degenerated into name-calling and a desire to destroy the opposition. As Dostoevsky has famously said, when God does not exist, anything is possible.

Political correctness has now affected the general culture and created an aura of censorship and a climate of fear. Many years ago Malcolm Muggeridge said, “The whole structure is now tumbling down, dethroning its God, undermining all its certainties. All this, wonderfully enough, is being done in the name of the health, wealth, and happiness of all mankind.”<sup>9</sup> As John Whitehead says, “The noose is growing tighter around religious speech and its various expressions.”<sup>10</sup> And, yes, Muggeridge is right, this is all being done in the name of health, wealth, and the happiness (and we might add the *equality*) of all mankind!

As I, write hate crimes legislation has passed in both the US Senate and the House of Representatives. Although the Senate version contained an exemption for religious institutions, the language of this special exemption was somewhat

## WHEN A NATION FORGETS GOD

weakened when reconciled with the version passed by the House. The bottom line is that we are going down a dangerous path as “hate crimes” are linked to “hate speech” and thus our First Amendment rights are curtailed. Thus, certain classes of people receive special treatment under the law. From “Hate Crimes” the next step is for the courts to prosecute those who are deemed guilty of “Hate Speech,” which one of our senators called “domestic terrorism.” Thus, what we think and what we say are both open to prosecution. Hate speech in this country will mean the same as it did in Nazi Germany: *It is simply stating an opinion that the government thinks should not be expressed.*

No wonder the Muslim community supports hate-speech legislation. Britons are hotly debating issues of “hate speech” against Muslims. For the most part, Europe has already lost the freedom to criticize Islam. Given the strong response to the cartoon controversy of a few years ago (when more than a hundred people died in riots), and given laws against hate speech, the Europeans are paralyzed, incapable of speaking their mind even on subjects that are important to their future. We shall return to this subject in a later chapter.

More than a decade ago, John Whitehead, speaking of America, observed, “Citizens increasingly feel powerless to act. Indeed, modern governments often pose a threat more serious than the older ones because government has become even more pervasive. The modern welfare state controls more and more of the totality of life—often in response to the demands of its citizens that it do so.”<sup>11</sup> If that was true a decade ago, think of how much more relevant it is today.

As the state encroaches on our liberties, the spiritual

“sphere” will continue to shrink, and our freedoms will be slowly curtailed. Statism, the notion that there is no power above the state to which it must be subject, will always work toward the diminishing of individual freedoms. No one is able to run and hide. “Statism,” someone has said, “is the Golden Calf of the modern world.”

## **OUR CHILLING FUTURE**

What can we expect in the future?

Here in America there will probably be no overnight revolution culminating in totalitarianism, but as Whitehead predicts, “Rather, the current trend of government, media and public state-controlled education toward greater control and manipulation of the individual citizen will continue.”<sup>12</sup> Today our government has tools of manipulation that the world has never known before, from mass communication resources to faceless computerized bureaucracies to the ability to nationalize banks and companies.

And as Whitehead writes, “The media does more than affect public opinion—it *alters the consciences and worldview of entire generations.*”<sup>13</sup> All of this will be imposed upon us with the reminder that this is for our good, that it benefits the majority, that it is for the sake of “freedom” and “fairness” and, of course, “tolerance.” C. S. Lewis was a prophet when he wrote:

Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. . . . Those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for

## WHEN A NATION FORGETS GOD

they do so with the approval of their own conscience. . . . In reality, however, we must face the possibility of bad rulers armed with a Humanitarian theory of punishment. . . . We know that one school of psychology already regards religion as a neurosis. When this particular neurosis becomes inconvenient to government, what is to hinder government from proceeding to “cure” it? Such a “cure” will, of course, be compulsory; but under the Humanitarian theory it will not be called by the shocking name of Persecution.<sup>14</sup>

## WHEN DO WE TOLERATE THE CURTAILMENT OF OUR FREEDOMS AND AT WHAT POINT SHOULD WE SPEAK AND ACT?

Just last week I read the headline, “Florida Principal, Athletic Director Could Go to Jail for Prayer Before Lunch at School.”

The text reads, “A principal and an athletic director could be charged with crimes and spend six months in jail after they prayed before a meal at a school event, the *Washington Times* reported. . . . They’re accused of violating the conditions of a lawsuit settlement reached last year with the American Civil Liberties Union, according to the *Times*.”<sup>15</sup>

We can expect more such headlines in the future. As Americans we must keep in mind that the First Amendment

was not intended to mean that atheists and agnostics have veto power over all those who believe in God.<sup>16</sup> We need to develop a “theology of civil disobedience”; that is, we need to think through this question: When do we tolerate the curtailment of our freedoms and at what point should we speak and act? That, of course, is beyond the scope of this book. But we are not left without guidance, for men like Niemoller have shown us the way.

## **FROM NIEMOLLER’S HEART**

Niemoller has a word for us who live in America. Of course he was thinking of his own church and the people of Germany when he spoke these words, but they are for us as well. Early in 1934, he mounted the pulpit of his church in the Berlin suburb of Dahlem and prophetically declared God’s purpose in the trials that faced the German church:

We have all of us—the whole Church and the whole community—we’ve been thrown into the Tempter’s sieve, and he is shaking and the wind is blowing, and it must now become manifest whether we are wheat or chaff! Verily, a time of sifting has come upon us, and even the most indolent and peaceful person among us must see that the calm of a meditative Christianity is at an end. . . .

It is now springtime for the hopeful and expectant Christian Church—it is testing time, and God is giving Satan a free hand, so he may shake us up and so that it may be seen what manner of men we are! . . .

Satan swings his sieve and Christianity is thrown hither

## WHEN A NATION FORGETS GOD

and thither; and he who is not ready to suffer, he who called himself a Christian only because he thereby hoped to gain something good for his race and his nation is blown away like chaff by the wind of time.<sup>17</sup>

Yes, God is separating the wheat and the chaff! This is no time to pout but to accept our role as Christians in this society with joy. Yes, with every challenge to our liberties we have another opportunity to prove our love for Christ and the Gospel. Bonhoeffer was right when he said that we will never be a victorious church until we see suffering as a divine *gift*. “For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him but to suffer for his sake” (Philippians 1:29 NKJV). God sends persecution to both purify her and to sharpen her Christian witness.

It is time for us to reread the New Testament book of 1 Peter, written specifically to believers living in a hostile, pagan culture. They had no representatives in government to plead their case; they had no power to “vote the bums out” as we do in America. They did not have courts that would give them a fair hearing. There was just persecution, intimidation, and deprivation. And sometimes death.

To them Peter wrote, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (1 Peter 4:12–14 NIV).

**WE WILL NOT WIN THESE  
BATTLES SIMPLY WITH POLITICS  
[HOWEVER IMPORTANT THAT IS]  
NOR BY ARGUMENT.**

When confronted with these challenges we are tempted to do the wrong thing—to react with judgmental anger which will only entrench those who are on the other side in this culture war. We must do the opposite: to respond with humility, love, and gracious courage. We will neither win these battles simply with politics (however important that is) nor by argument. Every Christian must regain the high ground with credibility, winsomeness, and yes, with joy. We must stand our ground giving thanks to God, even as it shifts beneath our feet. *We dare not give to Caesar that which is God's.*

Niemoller was right: we are being sifted to separate the wheat and the chaff. Whether in Nazi Germany or America, believers cannot choose to remain silent under the guise of preaching the Gospel. Sharing the Gospel is, of course, our primary responsibility since it is only the cross of Christ that can transform the human heart. But once we have received the gift of salvation through Christ, we must live out the implications of the cross in every area of our life. We must be prepared to submit to the Lordship of Christ in all “spheres.”

Keep reading.

