

Martin Niemoller

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Since the days of Hitler the name of Martin Niemoeller has drawn the interest of Christians. His latest trip to Moscow has evoked much criticism. It was with these things in mind that several of us took an interest to hear him when he spoke in, the Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles.

His, speech was to explain why he accepted the invitation of the patriarch of Moscow, to come to Moscow. In the first place he gave as his reason, his desire to bring the gospel that God is willing and able to save. He considered it the greatest danger of the church of Russia that it would fall into despair concerning this truth and deny Christ as the only ruler. He was not so concerned, he said, about persecution. He brought out that God has postponed the Judgment day and that we must seek to show our love for all men. For Christ died for Adolph Hitler and Stalin too he said, or he did not die for Martin Niemoeller. We have no right to look upon any one as long as he lives as lost. We must hate sin and sinful systems but not the sinner.

His second reason for his visit to Moscow was that the church stands for peace and not for war. He does not believe at all in the principle that through war we must seek peace. The first two world wars took many lives and the next war will destroy all the rest. Therefore it is impossible to conceive of war as an instrument of peace.

His third reason was that he had an invitation from the Christian Church. In this connection he confronted himself with the question: Is the church of Moscow an instrument of Bolshevism or is it an instrument of Christ? Although the Russian Church is not a free church like ours, he believed it was not a propaganda instrument of the Bolshevist state. He based his conclusions on his observation of several things. First of all when they attended a gathering he was startled by the fact that they were preaching. For a very long time the Russian Orthodox Church was not preaching the Word. Now he observed they were preaching the Word again. Also when he was asked to speak for five minutes he spontaneously continued to speak for forty minutes instead of five. Although they did not understand his speech, they knew he was preaching the Word and he felt their responsive enthusiasm, as if they knew what he wanted to tell them. His conclusion, therefore, was that that was a congregation of Jesus Christ, and the Russian Church is not a dying church. Moscow with its seven million people had about seven or eight hundred churches in 1918. During the second world war and shortly thereafter there were twenty left. Now again there are found sixty churches in Moscow.

It is not my purpose to offer a critique of Martin Niemoeller's speech or theology. It is very evident that there are several statements with which we cannot agree. We cannot agree with the statement that Christ died for Hitler or Stalin. Although Niemoeller added that as long a sinner lives we may not look upon him as lost, which is true, that does not warrant the statement that Christ died for them. Such a statement is equivalent to saying that Christ died for everyone,— universal atonement.

I wish to point out that the message would have been more correct according to the Scriptures if Niemoeller had presented it as Paul did to Timothy. In I Timothy 1:15 we read, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief." We may emphasize that Christ died for all sinners. But that does not give us the right to say that certain individuals are sinners. It takes the grace of God to classify ourselves in the class of sinners. We never heard Hitler or Stalin say that they were

sinner and that they sought salvation in Christ. The murderer on the cross did; it is recorded for us to know and to hear the judgment of Christ, "today thou shalt be with me in paradise." And Jesus said that He came not to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.

A very common question may be asked and it really is the same question that Niemoeller asked about the Russian Church. We often hear the question, is such an one a minister of Christ? Niemoeller asked whether the Russian Church was an instrument of Christ. We may probably turn it around and ask whether Niemoeller is an instrument of Christ, when he preaches universal atonement.

When he or anyone preaches an error he is not serving Christ when he does so. Nevertheless Christ may use him in his service. Christ may use men such as Balaam to serve Him. With respect to Niemoeller it did not seem that he knowingly falsified the truth of the Gospel. He was not a liberal who denied the blood of Christ. Christ uses that man to preach the everlasting Gospel that there is salvation in Christ alone. That among other things warmed my heart to that speech of Niemoeller.

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