

# Getting the Word Out

by K Karpen

In 1934, Adolf Hitler summoned the leaders of the German churches to a meeting to clarify their new, subservient role in the new Germany. Most were deferential and polite. Pastor Martin Niemüller of Berlin was an exception. He had things to say about this new Germany, regardless of who didn't want to hear it. He had things to say about what the role of the church could and couldn't be, regardless of who didn't want to hear it. He had a word to speak, and he had no choice but to get it out.

Getting the word out cost Niemüller ten years of his life. At first, he was watched, and his parsonage and phone were bugged. For a while, Niemüller continued to organize, resisting the pressure to let the church be Germanized. He preached, "We may not, for heaven's sake, turn the Gospels into the German gospels, the church into the German church, Christians into German Christians."

Most people in that situation would watch what they had to say. For the most part, Niemüller did. Until one unguarded moment on the phone when he just had to get the word out.

He soon found himself in prison, charged with treason. The day he was released from prison, the Gestapo met him at the gates and took him to Sachsenhausen, their new concentration camp. He was told he was the personal prisoner of the Führer.

At Sachsenhausen Niemüller was kept in solitary confinement. Still, each morning he could hear some prisoners as they were brought into the yard to exercise. He thought of a way to get the word out:

"I placed my table under the window, my stool on top, and climbed up... Every morning I called out some words from the holy book to the prisoners below."

Reading a Psalm or a few verses of Isaiah through a prison window might strike us now as a pitiful resistance to a vast apparatus that was gearing up to conquer Europe and exterminate Europe's Jewish population. But this exercise in futility kept Niemüller going. He later wrote, "Hitler had brought about something he certainly would not have wanted: the word of the Lord was now being heard at the very gates of hell."

Two weeks ago, on a murky Tuesday in April, I stood with some friends from Berlin in the middle of the cell that had been Niemüller's home. We had spent a week talking about the centrality of scripture, and the importance of careful and thorough study of scripture to authentic and faithful Christian witness. But it wasn't until that day in Sachsenhausen that it became completely clear to me that getting the word out is still a matter of life and death.

As we left the camp that day a soft, gentle rain began to fall, washing away the awful blandness of the place. But in the sound of the rain hitting the leaves you could almost hear a Psalm called through an open window.