

No one left to speak

On Jan. 14, we celebrate the birth of Martin Niemöller and his life of conversion. Niemöller may be best known for his stark “First they came” statement about the complicity of Protestant church leaders who stood silent during the Nazi imprisonment, persecution and murder of millions of people.



*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me –
and there was no one left to speak for me.*

As seemingly simple as this sentiment sounds, however, Niemöller’s life was far more complex.

Born in Germany in 1892, Niemöller became a prominent Lutheran pastor. He did not speak out for the Jews initially because he was an outspoken antisemite. He didn’t express regret about this until 1963.

Niemöller loved his church and his nation. Adolf Hitler’s vision of Christianity’s importance to German renewal appealed to him. But it would go too far, and when Niemöller observed Nazi ideology warping Christian theology and autonomy, he resisted. With others, he founded what would become the Confessing Church, which courageously opposed efforts to place country above God and race above baptism.

Niemöller became an outspoken foe of Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in the Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps. He served much time in solitary confinement, but later lived among Jews and other Holocaust victims for whom people of faith, himself included, had failed to speak.

While “speaking out” might sound like the response of a pacifist, Niemöller wasn’t one in the early post-war years when he spoke “First they came...” He had been a German U-boat commander during World War I. Even during his years in concentration camps, he still held a strong sense of nationalism and petitioned twice to re-enlist in the German navy. He did not embrace pacifism until the mid-1950s.

But he was quick to speak bold words of complicity, a message of collective guilt for Nazi crimes against humanity. His famous quote is often shared as a more expansive litany, including Catholics and Communists. Niemöller’s net not only widens for many victims but haunts the silent people of his time and ours.

Martin Niemöller is a witness to the transformative power of God. Like the reluctant prophet Jonah, like the converted nemesis Paul, he shows each of us that as we change our ways, we can change the world.

Discover more about [Martin Niemöller](#) at the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website](#), from which this resource draws much of its information.

