

"THE BRAVE EXAMPLE OF A COUNTRY PASTOR"

(Romans 13:1-7)

(Frank Theilman)

Paul Schneider was one faithful Christian who did not compromise with the Nazis and through whom the Lord spoke, first from his prison cell and then from his grave. Schneider was a Reformed German pastor of two churches in the small neighboring towns of Dickenschied and Womrath in the Rhineland of west-central Germany. Simply because he did not allow the tiny Nazi minority within these churches to act on their ideology in matters that concerned the Church, the Gestapo arrested him on May 31, 1937 and kept him in prison without charge for eight weeks. When they finally released him they gave him a "deportation order" that prohibited his return to his congregations, an order that he promptly tore to pieces in the presence of the Gestapo officials.

As he explained in a letter, written, incredibly, to the Reich chancellery in Berlin, the charges of injustice and rebellion leveled against him were unproven in a court of law and were untrue. Therefore, he would not obey the Gestapo order to stay away from his churches. God had placed him in charge of these congregations, and they wanted and needed him to return to them. He had made solemn vows to them before God at his installation, and he had no intention of breaking those vows. "The word of Holy Scripture applies to this joint assignment: 'What God has joined together, let man not separate,' just as much as it applies to Christian marriage."

Schneider knew that the course of disobedience he had undertaken was very dangerous, and he lists in his letter the consequences of threats ... fines ... arrest... detention" that he could face as a result of his actions. He was also fully aware of Romans 13:1, a verse that had been thrown in his face by the Gestapo. His reply to their use of this verse follows the same pattern that Origen outlined almost seventeen centuries earlier:

Even if the punishments are applied, I still know that God will establish justice for all who suffer injustice, and that he will also judge between me and my government on his Day of Judgment as to the obedience we owe according to God's Word in Romans 13:1, a verse they held against me during my deportation, and as to the disobedience that is commanded according to God's Word in Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men," a verse to which I also appealed when I refused to accept my deportation.

He concludes his letter by reminding the Reich chancellery that the Lord of the church is also the Lord of the government, and that his decision to obey his Lord and theirs, rather than their instructions is the right course. He has given the government the worldly sword to punish the wicked and to protect the righteous, but he has given the church the spiritual sword of his holy and eternal Word until God's Kingdom comes in eternal and perfect righteousness when our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ himself will be both priest and king."

On the Sunday that Schneider returned to his church in Dickenschied, and only a few weeks after Kasemann's release from prison, he was arrested and imprisoned. Eventually he was sent to the concentration camp at Buchenwald where he insisted on preaching the gospel through his cell window, refused to salute the Nazi flag, and on Hitler's birthday would not remove his cap in honor of the Fuhrer. This was not a refusal to



repay the obligation of honor to government officials (Rom 13:7), because no real obligation existed in this case: despite their murderously enforced claims to the contrary, Hitler and the National Socialists were due no honor.

Schneider's courage and integrity were repaid with brutal beatings, torture, and finally, on July 18, 1939, death by lethal injection, a means of execution designed to hide his murder behind the mask of medical treatment. At any point during his detention he could have been released and returned to his wife and four small children, whom he dearly loved, had he simply agreed to abide by the Gestapo's orders not to pastor the two little country churches where God had placed him.

Schneider had a clear and exegetically sound understanding of Romans 13:1-7. The church should leave to God the judgment of the governing authorities and obey them as far as possible. "If possible," Paul says in 12:18, "to the extent that it is up to you, live at peace with all human beings." But, as both Origen and Kasemann argued, disobedience is the only path for the church when government policies and officials perversely require Christians to abandon their witness to God's lordship over the entire earth and to abandon their calling of showing love to others.