

Johan H. Hegeman
***The Call of Conscience:
Protestant Clergy and Jews
in the Netherlands, 1935-1945***

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In recent decades, there has been a renewed interest in exploring how Christian denominations and congregations in various countries responded to the challenge of Nazi Germany's campaign of conquest and the implementation of its systemic antisemitic agenda during the Holocaust era.

As a neighbor of Germany, the experience of the Netherlands provides an intriguing context for historians. In *The Call to Conscience*, Dr. Johan H. Hegeman presents a thoughtful and well-researched analysis of how the Reformed Churches, their theologians, and their clergy challenged Nazi antisemitism and its pernicious policies towards both the Jewish citizens of the Netherlands and Jewish refugees that fled to the country seeking safety.

Hegeman's methodology is straightforward and thematically focused. He explores how "conscience" informed denominational institutions and individual leaders' attitudes towards Nazi totalitarianism, antisemitism, and the plight of Jewish people. In the Reformed tradition, Christian conscience was formed through interacting with Scripture and theological tradition and provided motives for living out Christian life and faith as disciples of Jesus Christ. Conscience provided the basis for one's call, revealing God's will concerning how to relate to both the German occupation and Nazi antisemitism.

The structure of the book reflects the dynamics between conscience and call, both before the German conquest (1935-1939) and then during the occupation (1940-1945). Chapter 1 discusses the struggle of the Reformed denominations in dealing with religious antisemitism, negative attitudes towards Jews due to the latter's rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, and the place of Jewish converts to Christianity within the Church. Chapters 2 and 3 document how the Reformed Churches sought to express their call to minister to Jewish people in general—materially and through missionizing—and refugees in particular, while forming an initial assessment of Nazism. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on how conscience informed

the call for moral leadership in light of the suffering of the Jewish people in their midst. Chapter 6 details how conscience motivated protests, which were ultimately largely ineffective; the Nazis were not concerned about Christian ethical qualms and convictions. On the defensive during the latter half of the occupation, leaders and clergy reverted to ministering to the remnant of Jews in the churches and at the Westerbork transit camp (chapter 7).

The foremost protagonist of Hegeman's historical narrative is Jan Koopmans (487), who in November 1940 composed one of the most significant conscience-based protest documents—*Almost Too Late!* (Appendix Exhibit 1, 497-507). Koopmans urged his Dutch readers to prove they had a “working conscience” that recognizes the “difference between good and evil” (498). To succumb to Nazism could only be “bought at the price of a good conscience” (498). Cooperating with anti-Jewish actions imposed by the Nazi conquerors “implies surrendering purity of conscience” (499). By considering non-compliance with unjust Nazi directives, they may possess “tormented and enslaved consciences” and yet still hear a call from Scripture and so practice their religion faithfully (500). Always a defender of Jewish converts to Christianity and Jewish refugees, Koopmans urged Dutch Christians to live out their call to serve Jews, even if a great price had to be paid: “But as Christians we must remember, then, that we should not compromise in matters of conscience, and that it is worth standing and, if need be, falling for a good cause” (502). The document climaxes with a moving charge—a call—to remain faithful and stand firm:

People of the Netherlands, it is almost too late—but not quite yet! It is not yet too late to return to the Christian faith and to a good conscience. It is not yet too late, for reasons of charity and on grounds drawn from Holy Scripture, to stand up for our Jewish compatriots. It is not yet altogether too late to show the Germans that their wickedness does not conquer all things, but that there are people around who will not simply allow themselves to be robbed of their Christian faith and good conscience.

O God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Come to the aid of your poor Christians, and have mercy on the Netherlands. (507)

Hegeman, after devoting a significant part of chapter 5 to Koopmans, observes that *Almost Too Late!* “served as a flaming protest against injustice targeting the Jews. Its appeal to conscience was remarkable. The pamphlet served as a clear call to moral leadership” (320). However, Hegeman acknowledges that the efforts of Koopmans and others to inspire Dutch clergy and laypeople to embrace God's call, based on conscience, to save the Jewish people did not wholly succeed: “despite the moral prowess shown by many individuals, the churches failed even by their own principles” (487). Why did the clergy's appeal “to moral responsibility” based on conscience fail? Hegeman concludes that basing the call to save the Jewish people on conscience had a fatal flaw: “Its weakness was its inability to overcome

the influence of authoritarianism and quietism among orthodox Protestants, which hindered the care for Jews in need” (486).

The Call to Conscience succeeds in illuminating the ethical perspectives and motives behind some of the Church’s efforts to rally support for the Jewish people during the occupation of the Netherlands. Hegeman’s portrayal of Koopmans as a courageous and influential leader, whose message is only incompletely embraced by the Reformed Church and its members, is both inspirational and sobering. In the face of overwhelming evil, there is no guarantee that even the Church will heed a morally imperative call to action.