

The Question of Hitler

*Some of My Own Attitudes Towards
the Example of Hitler
that So Many Cite
So Often*

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How many of you believe that you are a more worthy candidate for salvation than Hitler was? Bear in mind that, unlike Hitler, none of us here have the power of a modern state at our disposal, so the amount of harm we can do is in that sense limited by the grace of God. If we get angry with someone in this forum, for example, we might say something nasty, but we are in no position to send the Gestapo after the person who offends us. Nor are we in a position, such as Hitler was, where our own weaknesses and prejudices can easily be transformed into political terror. The same weaknesses and prejudices may in fact be there, but we do not have available to us the same means of expressing them that Hitler had available to him.

“Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” said Lord Acton. But few of us have experienced even the temptations of political power, much less the temptations of “absolute” tyrannical power. So how many are utterly confident that in Hitler’s precise circumstances you would have come off any better than he did?

First, I strongly suspect that Hitler was in a far more hopeful condition at the end of his earthly life, after all of his evil plans and ambitions had come to ruin, than he was at any time previously ... Historians believe that Hitler committed suicide at the end, though no one really knows this for sure. But even if he did commit suicide, the very despair or sense of defeat that sometimes leads to suicide can just as easily lead to repentance and to a voluntary submission of one’s will to God. If I were to speculate, therefore, I would guess that Hitler, like the terrorist Saul of Tarsus, may have been far closer to the kingdom of God, even during his earthly life, than many professing Christians who continue to harbor hatreds, secret

resentments, and petty jealousies in their own hearts. For though Hitler's hatred of the Jews was no less intense than Saul's hatred of Christians, it was at least out in the open where it could be dealt with effectively.

Second, I have no confidence at all that in Hitler's shoes I would have fared any better than he did ... I have a hard time imagining myself masterminding genocide ... I have a hard time seeing myself as an evil monster. But here I would make two observations.

(1) I was reared in one of the most loving families that you could possibly imagine. My mother constantly cultivated a sense of empathy in her children, constantly taught us to consider the other person's feelings, constantly asked questions like, "How would you feel if ...?" Had I been switched as a baby and placed in a very different home, perhaps that of a white racist family, or had I been exposed to various kinds of physical and sexual abuse as a child, or had I been exposed to the same forces that shaped Hitler's personality, I have no confidence that I would have turned out any better than he did.

(2) Even as an adult with all the advantages I have had, I have done some pretty rotten and some pretty selfish things. So if I were suddenly thrust into truly terrifying circumstances – like armed combat, for example – or if I were required to live with a persistent fear for the safety of my family, or if I were to come to believe, however irrationally, that a group of people were a threat to our nation and to our very way of life, I see no reason why I might not gradually be seduced – these things usually come about gradually – into some truly monstrous acts ... I am capable of all sin, and only the grace of God has kept me from horrendous ones.

Third, I have every confidence that the difference between Hitler and me is not a simple matter of my having made better free choices than he did. I believe in free will, but I also accept the Pauline assertion that our destiny "*is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy*" (Romans 9:16). We are guilty of self-righteousness if we start to think so-and-so (Hitler in this example) is worse off than we are in God's eyes. Self-righteousness or spiritual pride is one of the most pernicious of all sins – which is why, I believe, that Jesus came down upon it so harshly. Put it together with a heavy dose of fear – such as fear of everlasting punishment – and you have a prescription for truly monstrous acts. Unfortunately, some of the greatest theologians in the Western tradition, men still widely revered as heroes of the faith, have in fact supported acts of terror that are every bit as evil as Hitler's own actions were.

Why suppose that the weakness and fear that led Augustine to support the persecution of the Donatists, or the weakness and fear that led the religious leaders in Geneva to burn Servetus at the stake (over green wood so that it took three hours for him to be pronounced dead), or the weakness and fear that led the Calvinists in Zurich to drown Anabaptists in a sort of hideous parody of their belief in believer's baptism – why suppose that any of this was essentially different from the weakness and fear that led Hitler into some of his own most monstrous acts? The only difference I can discern is that you can't do as much damage with a sword and a Medieval torture chamber as you can with guns, airplanes and gas chambers.

I offer this not as an argument for anything, but merely as a description of some of my own attitudes and beliefs.

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