

This Week in Eden History

May 15 | Otto Dibelius



Otto Dibelius in the pulpit of St. Mary's Church, Berlin, 1959. | [Source: Wikimedia Commons.](#)

Friedrich Karl Otto Dibelius, prominent 20th century German Protestant churchman and bishop known for opposing Nazis and Communist totalitarianism, was born on May 15, 1880, in Berlin.

Dibelius was one of the few German Church leaders with long-term connections to the Evangelical Synod. In 1921, he visited the denomination's General Conference. The Eden Archives has correspondence between Dibelius and Evangelical Synod president John Baltzer (1920-28). He recorded his impressions of the denomination in a recently discovered 1922 publication.

In 1933, Eden Theological Seminary awarded Dibelius an honorary Doctor of Divinity. His friends in the Evangelical Synod hoped that this additional public attention would protect him at a time when he was publicly confronting the Nazi government. His 1947 speaking tour of the U.S. was sponsored by the Evangelical & Reformed Church and the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ.

After receiving a doctorate in theology from the

University of Berlin in 1901 and seminary study, Dibelius rose rapidly through the German Protestant hierarchy, writing numerous articles and books on theology, Church history and the Church's role in society. His book, *Das Jahr-hundert der Kirchen* [The Church's Century] (1927), was one of the most widely read books on the Church in Germany.

Many blamed Germany's political and economic turmoil after its defeat in WWI on the punitive Treaty of Versailles, communists, and the Jews. Dibelius was a political conservative and a member of the German National People's Party, a nationalist and anti-semitic political organization whose members transferred their support to the Nazi Party after Hitler took office in 1933. Dibelius' own diocesan newsletter and sermons during these years include numerous antisemitic and pro-NSP statements.

Dibelius's opposition to Hitler began when the government attempted to assert its control over the German Protestant churches in July 1933. The Prussian Church had been a state church until 1919, when the Weimar Republic replaced the monarchy. Church organizations were given the freedom to conduct themselves free from government interference, a change that Dibelius believed would allow the Church to become the ethical voice of society. When the Nazi government installed Ludwig Muller as Reichsbischof of the newly created and unified German Christian Church, Dibelius joined Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemoller and others in forming the underground "Confessing Church." Dibelius was arrested three times in 1933 but managed to avoid punishment.

In 1945, Dibelius became Bishop of Berlin and Brandenburg, an area that included the divided city and surrounding areas within the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR). His anti-communist sermons and diocesan newsletter articles created ongoing tensions with the GDR authorities. He was barred from preaching in areas outside of Berlin in 1957 and restricted only to West Berlin after construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. He continued to serve as bishop until 1966 and died on Jan. 31, 1967, in West Berlin.

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