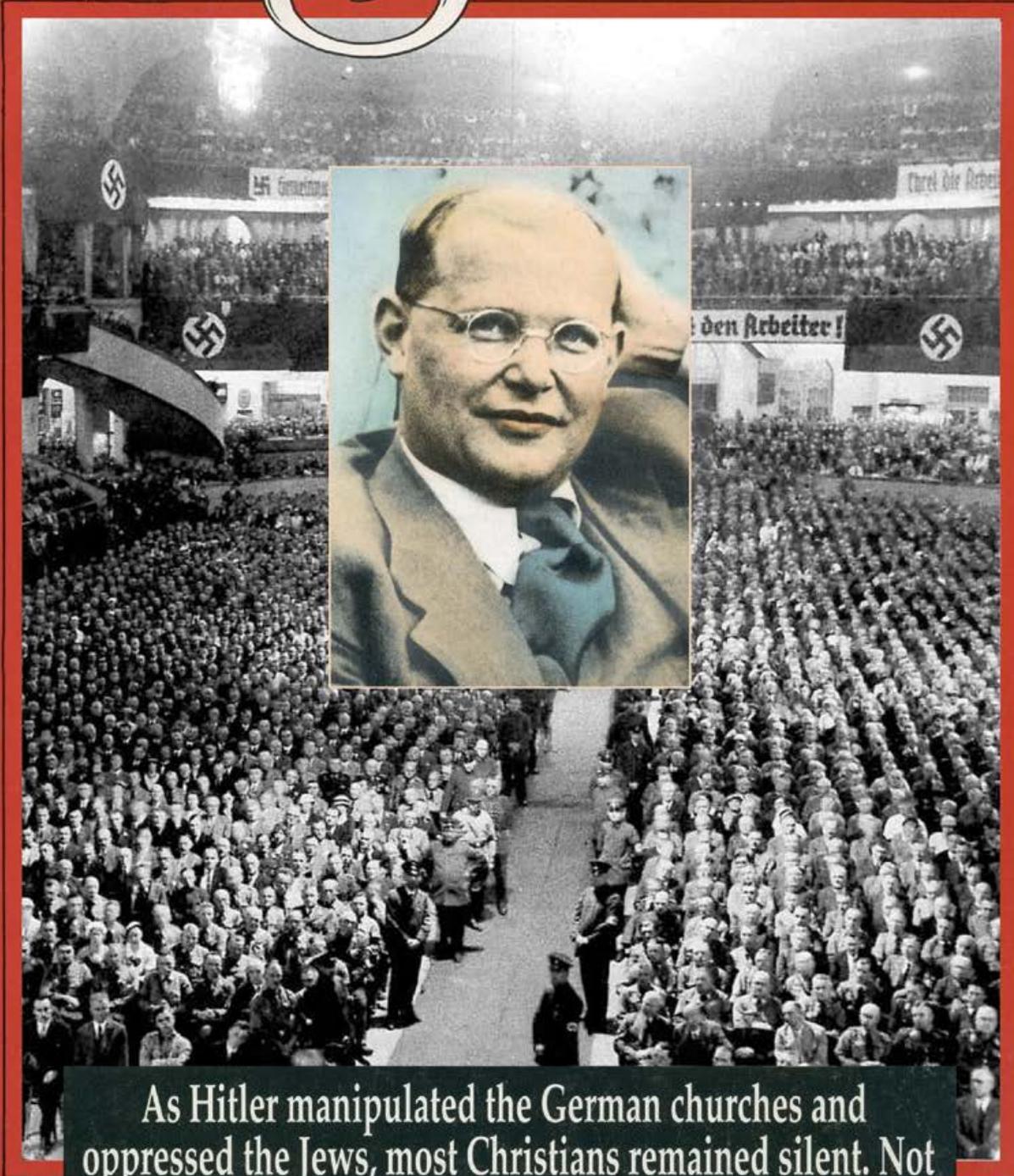


# CHRISTIAN HISTORY



As Hitler manipulated the German churches and oppressed the Jews, most Christians remained silent. Not

**DIETRICH BONHOEFFER**

# Did You Know?

MARK and BARBARA GALLI

## Little-known or remarkable facts about Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)

**D**ietrich Bonhoeffer was a twin. (He was born just before his twin sister, Sabine.)

Dietrich's father, Karl, was Berlin's leading psychiatrist and neurologist from 1912 until his death in 1948.

Dietrich was so skilled at playing the piano that for a time he and his parents thought he might become a professional musician.

At 14, Bonhoeffer announced matter-of-factly that he was going to become a theologian.

Bonhoeffer earned his doctorate in theology when he was only 21.

Though later he was an outspoken advocate of pacifism, Bonhoeffer was an enthusiastic fan of bullfighting. He developed the passion while serving as assistant pastor of a German-speaking congregation in Barcelona, Spain.

By the end of 1930, the year before

The seven oldest (of eight) Bonhoeffer children. Three-year-old Dietrich is second from left.

Bonhoeffer was ordained, church seminaries were complaining that over half the candidates for ordination were followers of Hitler.

In 1933, when the government instigated a one-day boycott of Jewish-owned businesses, Bonhoeffer's grandmother broke through a cordon of SS officers to buy strawberries from a Jewish store.

In his short lifetime, Bonhoeffer traveled widely. He visited Cuba, Mexico, Italy, Libya, Denmark, and Sweden, among other countries, and he lived for a time in Spain, in England, and in the United States.

Bonhoeffer taught a confirmation class in what he described as "about the worst area of Berlin," yet he moved into that neighborhood so he could spend more time with the boys.

Bonhoeffer was fascinated by Gandhi's

methods of nonviolent resistance. He asked for—and received—permission to visit Gandhi and live at his ashram. The two never met, however, because the crisis in Germany demanded Bonhoeffer's attention.

Bonhoeffer served as a member of the *Abwehr*, the military-intelligence organization under Hitler. (He was actually a double agent. While ostensibly working for the *Abwehr*, Bonhoeffer helped to smuggle Jews into Switzerland—and do other underground tasks.)

Bonhoeffer studied for a year in New York City. He was uniformly disappointed with the preaching he heard there: "One may hear sermons in New York upon almost any subject; one only is never handled, . . . namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ, of the cross, of sin and forgiveness. . . ."





Bleak and oppressive Buchenwald concentration camp. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned here in early 1945 until he was transferred to another camp to be executed. (The post at left was used for tying up and torturing prisoners.)

While a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Bonhoeffer regularly attended the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. He taught one youth Sunday school class and one women's Bible study; he also helped weekly in Sunday school.

Bonhoeffer learned to drive a car while in the United States—yet he failed his American driver's-license examination three times.

Bonhoeffer directed an illegal seminary for two and a half years until it was closed by the Gestapo. The seminary trained pastors for the "Confessing Church," a group Bonhoeffer and others had formed as an alternative to the Nazi-influenced German Reich Church. It was at this seminary that he developed his classic work *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Just before World War II, Bonhoeffer was invited to lecture in the United States. This allowed him to escape increasing persecution and the impending draft. But Bonhoeffer decided he must share the fate of those suffering in Germany. In less than a month, he returned home.

In 1936, because of his anti-Nazi views, Bonhoeffer was no longer permitted to teach at the University of Berlin. Two years later, he was forbidden to live in Berlin. In 1940, the German authorities forbade him to speak in public, and he had to report regularly to the police.

Bonhoeffer was engaged to be married, but he was arrested and eventually killed before he and his fiancée could be married.

During Allied bombing raids over Berlin, Bonhoeffer's calm deeply impressed his fellow prisoners at Tegel Prison. Prisoners and even guards used all kinds of tricks to get near him and find the comfort of exchanging a few words with him.

The majority of Bonhoeffer's classic *Letters and Papers from Prison* was smuggled out by guards who chose to assist Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer could have escaped from prison but chose not to for the sake of others. He had prepared to escape with one of the guards when he learned that his brother Klaus had been arrested. Fearing reprisals

against his brother and his family if he escaped, Bonhoeffer stayed in prison.

The German underground failed on numerous occasions to assassinate Hitler. Had they succeeded, Bonhoeffer probably would not have been executed.

Adolf Hitler was directly involved in the decision to execute Bonhoeffer and his co-conspirators.

Bonhoeffer's brother Klaus and two of his brothers-in-law were also executed for their roles in the resistance movement against Hitler.

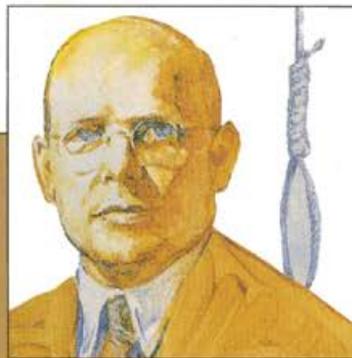
Some of Bonhoeffer's best-known works, such as *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, were not published until after his death.

Bonhoeffer's parents did not learn of his death until three and a half months afterward, when they tuned into a radio broadcast of a London memorial service for their son.

Mark and Barbara Galli live in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. This is their first joint contribution to CHRISTIAN HISTORY.

## From the Editor

# A SPIRITUAL TONIC



This issue marks only the second time *CHRISTIAN HISTORY* has featured a twentieth-century figure. (The first was Issue 7 on C. S. Lewis.)

I happily acknowledge a long-standing debt to Bonhoeffer. During my seminary days, in the midst of an overly smug orthodoxy, his writings motivated me to keep on with the theological quest. At a practical level, his forthright explications of "cheap grace" and "religionless Christianity" helped make sense of the church in today's world.

It seems that about every five years, Bonhoeffer has provided a needed spiritual tonic for me. His poem "Who Am I?" written in prison, gave me permission to ask some disturbing questions in the confidence that "God knows," even though I wasn't sure. Later, Bonhoeffer's pilgrimage offered me a much-needed clue for reapproaching the adventure of faith. This is well summed up in the words of his biographer Eberhard Bethge: "The witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer began with the attempt to live and say what it is to be with Christ, and it ended with teaching what it is that Christ is with us."

Most recently my gratitude to him has been kindled through a chance comment written by a friend in Uganda. He said that Bonhoeffer's book on the Psalms was selling well in Christian bookstores there. I ordered it out of curiosity: What did these believers in such difficult circumstances find in this little, 86-page book?

Through the book, Bonhoeffer not only brought me back to the Psalms, but he also reminded me of the necessity of morning prayer—a lesson I learned, like so many of you, as a youth at Bible camp but had drifted from in favor of less-demanding evening devotions. His words are to the point: "The entire day receives order and discipline when it acquires unity. This unity must be sought and found in morning prayer. It is confirmed in work. The morning prayer determines the day. Squandered time of which we are ashamed, temptations to which we succumb, weaknesses and lack of courage in work, disorganization and lack of discipline in our thoughts and in our conversation with other men all have their origin most often in the neglect of morning prayer."

Bonhoeffer's life was caught up in epochal events that have shaped our century. Nevertheless, his teaching, writing, and living inevitably seemed to come around to how we think, believe, and pray.

As a filmmaker, for over twenty years I have tried, without success, to organize a feature film or television movie on the life of Bonhoeffer. All the elements are there for a captivating production that could speak the gospel uniquely to today's world. Others, too, have tried in vain to mount such a dramatic film. It is still a worthy project, and may God enable the right producer to worthily accomplish that task.

Don't be surprised if, after reading this issue, you find yourself waking up playing the movie out in your imagination. It's that compelling a story and one we long looked forward to publishing for you. DR. KEN CURTIS

FOUNDER AND SENIOR EDITOR

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# BONHOEFFER



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Lecturer in Theology, Ecumenical Leader (1932) ▶



▲ Pastor, Church Opposition Leader (1934)



▲ "Illegal" Seminary Director (1935)



▲ Conspirator (1942)



▶ Prisoner and Martyr (1944)

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# THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A MODERN MARTYR

*Born into privilege, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was headed toward a brilliant career as a theologian. Then he came to see life "from the perspective of those who suffer." In Nazi Germany, that cost him his life.*

GEFFREY B. KELLY

In 1942, Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer sent a Christmas gift to his family and his friends who were involved in a plot to kill Hitler. It was an essay, titled "After Ten Years." In it, Bonhoeffer reminded his co-conspirators of the ideals for which they were willing to give their lives. In his words: "We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer."

As he sifted through the various reasons why they had to kill Hitler and bring down the Nazi government, Bonhoeffer spoke to them of the example of Jesus Christ. Jesus had willingly risked his life defending the poor and outcasts of his society—even at the cost of a violent death.

By the time of his arrest, Bonhoeffer's life had become an ever-twisting journey in which he had been moved to action by that "view from below." His life took him from a comfortable

---

The Bonhoeffers at their vacation home in the hills, in 1911. Dietrich, 5 years old, is third from right. The wealthy and cultured family did not regularly attend church (although Dietrich's mother provided her children with religious instruction). Dietrich did not attend church regularly, in fact, until his mid-20s, when, in his words, "something happened, something that has changed and transformed my life. . . . For the first time I discovered the Bible. . . ." In the words of his biographer Eberhard Bethge, "The theologian became a Christian."





Dietrich (right) and his twin sister, Sabine, at age 8. They would often lie awake at night talking about eternal life and what it would be like to die.

teaching post at the university to the isolated leadership of a minority opposition within his church and against his government. He moved from the safety of a refuge abroad to the dangerous life of a conspirator. He descended from the privileges of clergy and the respect accorded a noble family, to his harsh imprisonment and eventual death as a traitor to his country.

### Steely determination

Few people would have predicted that the young Bonhoeffer would end up as a political conspirator. Born in Breslau in 1906, Dietrich was his family's fourth son and sixth child (his twin sister, Sabine, was born moments later). His mother, Paula von Hase, was daughter of the preacher at the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Dietrich's father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was a famous doctor of psychiatry and professor at the university.

As a lad of 14, Dietrich surprised his family by declaring he wanted nothing more than to be a minister-theologian in the church. That announcement provoked mild consternation among his brothers. One was destined to be a physicist, the other a lawyer; both were achievers for whom service in the church seemed a sinecure for the petty bourgeois. His father felt the same way but kept silent, preferring to allow his

son freedom to make his own mistakes. When his family criticized the church as self-serving and cowardly, a flash of Dietrich's steely determination came out: "In that case, I'll reform it!"

### A "theological miracle"

Following a family custom, young Dietrich studied at Tübingen University for one year before moving on to the University of Berlin, where the family resided. At the university, he came under the influence of distinguished church historian Adolf von Harnack and Luther scholar Karl Holl.

Von Harnack regarded Bonhoeffer as a potentially great church historian able one day to step onto his own podium.

To von Harnack's dismay, Bonhoeffer steered his scholastic energies to dogmatics instead. His main interests lay in the allied fields of Christology and church. Bonhoeffer's dissertation, *The Communion of Saints*, was completed in 1927, when he was only 21. Karl Barth hailed it as a "theological miracle."

In this dissertation Bonhoeffer declares in a ringing phrase that the church is "Christ existing as community." The church for him is neither an ideal society with no need of reform, nor a gathering of the gifted elite. Rather, it is as much a communion of sinners capable of being untrue to the gospel, as it is a communion of saints for whom serving one another should be a joy.

### Grim encounter with poverty

Not yet at the minimum age for ordination, and in need of practical experience, Bonhoeffer interrupted his academic career. He accepted an appointment as assistant pastor in a Barcelona parish that tended to the spiritual needs of the German business community.

His months in Spain (1928–29) coincided with the initial shock waves of the Great Depression. Hence, parish life in Barcelona gave Bonhoeffer his first grim encounter with poverty. He helped organize a program his parish extended to the unemployed. In desperation, he even begged money from his family for this purpose. In a memorable sermon he reminded his people that "God wanders among us in hu-

man form, speaking to us in those who cross our paths, be they stranger, beggar, sick, or even in those nearest to us in everyday life, becoming Christ's demand on our faith in him."

Back in Germany, Bonhoeffer turned his attention to his "second dissertation"—required to obtain an appointment to the university faculty. Published as a book in 1931, *Act and Being* outwardly appears to be a rapid tour of philosophies and theologies of revelation. If revelation is "act," then God's eternal Word interrupts a person's life in a direct way, intervening often when least expected. If revelation is "being," then it is Christ's continued presence in the church. Throughout the intersecting analyses of this book, we also detect Bonhoeffer's deep struggle between the lure of academe's comfortable status, and the unsettling call of Christ to be a genuine Christian.

### First visit to America

Having secured his appointment to the university faculty, Bonhoeffer now decided to accept a Sloane Fellowship. This offered him an additional year of studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Later he would describe this academic year of 1930–31 as "a great liberation."

At first, Bonhoeffer looked harshly

*For him, the Christ of 1933 was the persecuted Jew and the imprisoned Christian dissenter.*

on Union Theological Seminary, judging it to be so permeated with liberal humanism that it had lost its theological moorings. Yet courses with Reinhold Niebuhr and long conversations with his closest American friend, Paul Lehmann, stirred sensitivity to social problems.

Bonhoeffer's friendships at Union deeply influenced him. They fueled his growing passion for the concerns of the Sermon on the Mount. Through a black student from Alabama, Reverend Frank Fisher, Bonhoeffer experienced firsthand the oppressive racism endured by the black community of

Harlem. Admiring their life-affirming church services, he took recordings of black spirituals back to Germany to play for his students and seminarians. He spoke to his students often about racial injustice in America, predicting that racism would become "one of the most critical future problems for the white church."

Another friend, the French pacifist Jean Lasserre, moved Bonhoeffer to transcend his natural attachment to Germany in order to make a deeper commitment to the cause of world peace. Bonhoeffer became devoted to non-violent resistance to evil, and later he strongly advocated peace at ecumenical gatherings. For Bonhoeffer, war overtly denied the gospel; in it, Christians killed one another for trumped-up ideals that only masked more sinister political aims.

People noticed the changes in Bonhoeffer's outlook on his return to the University of Berlin. His students described him as unlike his more stuffy, aloof colleagues. Trying to explain what had happened to him, Bonhoeffer said simply that he had become a Christian. As he put it, he was for the first time in his life "on the right track," adding, "I know that inwardly I shall be really clear and honest only when I have begun to take seriously the Sermon on the Mount."

### Electrifying university lecturer

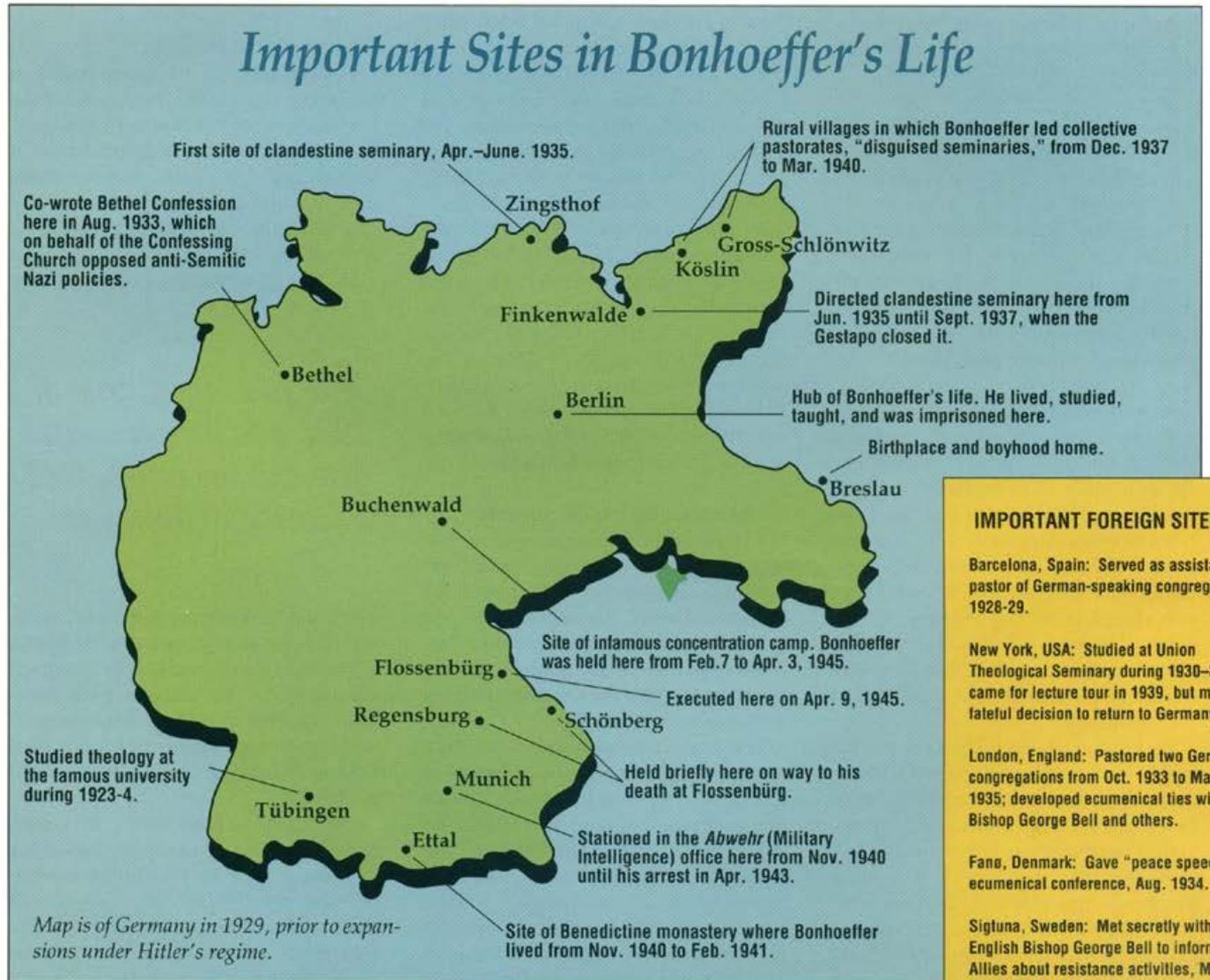
Returning from America, Bonhoeffer paused at Bonn University, where he finally met theologian Karl Barth. Barth's writings had electrified the theological world and had captivated Bonhoeffer during his student days in Berlin. Now the two became good

friends. Barth appreciated Bonhoeffer's incisive warnings about organized religion's cozy accommodation of political ideologies. Bonhoeffer began to use Barth as a sounding board, trusting Barth's mature assessments of how to counteract the church's compromises with Nazism.

The youngest teacher on the faculty, Bonhoeffer became noticed for his way of probing to the heart of a question and setting issues in their present-day relevance. One student wrote that under Bonhoeffer's guidance "every sentence went home; here was a concern for what troubled me, and indeed all of us young people, what we asked and wanted to know." Yet Bonhoeffer's teaching career was shadowed by Hitler's ascendancy to power. Students attracted to Nazism avoided him.

Some of Bonhoeffer's university

## Important Sites in Bonhoeffer's Life



Based upon map in *The Steps of Bonhoeffer* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1969).

courses during this period have since been published as books. In *The Nature of the Church*, Bonhoeffer observed that the church had gone adrift; it had too often sought the comfort of the privileged. The church, he told his students, had to confess faith in Jesus with unaccustomed courage and to reject without hesitation all secular idolatries.

In his lectures on Christology, published as *Christ the Center*, Bonhoeffer urged his students to answer disturbing questions: Who is Jesus in the world of 1933? Where is he to be found? For him, the Christ of 1933 was the persecuted Jew and the imprisoned dissenter in the church struggle.

During the university years, Bonhoeffer also found time to teach a confirmation class in a slum section of Berlin. To be more involved in the confirmands' lives, he moved into their neighborhood, visited their families, and invited them to spend weekends at a rented mountain cottage. After the war, one of these students remarked that the "class was hardly ever restless."

### Growing church struggle

During this period, many Christians within Germany had adopted Hitler's National Socialism as part of their creed. Known as "German Christians," their spokesman, Hermann Grüner, made it clear what they stood for:

"The time is fulfilled for the German people in Hitler. It is because of Hitler that Christ, God the helper and redeemer, has become effective among us. Therefore National Socialism is positive Christianity in action. . . . Hitler is the way of the Spirit and the will of God for the German people to enter the Church of Christ."

Ordained on November 15, 1931, Bonhoeffer, with his group of "Young Reformers," attempted to persuade delegates to church synods not to vote for pro-Hitler candidates. In a memorable sermon just before churchwide elections in July 1933, Bonhoeffer pleaded: "Church, remain a church! Confess, confess, confess!" Despite Bonhoeffer's efforts, the German Christians elected as National Bishop a Nazi sympathizer, Ludwig Müller. In a letter to his grandmother that August, Bonhoeffer stated frankly, "The conflict is really Germanism or Christianity, and the sooner the conflict comes



out in the open, the better."

By September 1933, the conflict was out in the open. In the "Brown Synod" that month (so called because many of the clergy wore brown Nazi uniforms and gave the Nazi salute), the church adopted the "Aryan Clause," which denied the pulpit to ordained ministers of Jewish blood. Bonhoeffer's closest friend, Franz Hildebrandt, was affected by the legislation (along with countless others). This Aryan Clause would split Germany's Protestant church.

### Outspoken defense of the Jews

Bonhoeffer's first public reaction to the anti-Jewish legislation had come early. In April 1933 he talked to a group of pastors on "The Church and the Jewish Question." In his address, he urged the churches to first, boldly challenge the government to justify such blatantly immoral laws. Second, he demanded that the church come to the aid of victims—baptized or not. Finally, he declared that the church should "jam the spokes of the wheel" of state should the persecution of Jews continue. Many of the gathered clergy left in a huff, convinced they had heard sedition.

Shortly after the Brown Synod, Bonhoeffer and a World War I hero, Pastor Martin Niemöller, formed the "Pastors' Emergency League." They pledged to fight for repeal of the Aryan Clause, and by late September, they had obtained 2,000 signatures. But to Bonhoeffer's disappointment, the church's bishops again remained silent.

Berlin in about 1930. Bonhoeffer's family moved to Berlin when he was 6, and the city became the center of his life. He earned his theological degree from Berlin University and later taught on the faculty. He was ordained in Berlin, served as a chaplain at the city's technical college, and taught a confirmation class here. He watched as the city became the "epicenter of Nazism." Ultimately, in 1938, he was forbidden by the Nazis from working in the city he knew and loved.

At the Barmen Synod of May 29–31, 1934, however, the new "Confessing Church" (those pastors who opposed the Aryan Clause and other Nazi policies) affirmed the now-famous Barmen Confession of Faith. Drawn up in large part by Karl Barth, its association of Hitlerism with idolatry made many of the signers marked men with the Gestapo: "We repudiate the false teaching that there are areas of our life in which we belong not to Jesus Christ but to other lords. . . ."

### Abandoning a promising career

Because the German Christians were now entrenched in church leadership positions, Bonhoeffer was rejected for a pastorate. The comments against him pointed out his radical and intemperate opposition to government policies. And he was considered too linked with his Jewish-Christian friend, Franz Hildebrandt. The creeping Nazification of the churches left Bonhoeffer feeling isolated and unable to muster a fearless opposition to Hitler among the clergy.

In his teaching post, he felt the university had inexcusably yielded to the popular mood that hailed Hitler as a



political savior. He was disturbed, too, by the universities' lack of protest at the disenfranchisement of Jewish professors. These frustrations made it easier for Bonhoeffer to decide to leave Germany. In the fall of 1933 he assumed the pastorate of two German-speaking parishes in London.

For this move, Bonhoeffer received a stinging rebuke from Karl Barth, who thought he was fleeing the scene when he was most needed. Barth accused Bonhoeffer of depriving the church struggle of his "splendid theological armory" and "upright German figure."

Yet Bonhoeffer was not abandoning the fight against Nazism. From London, he intended to bring outside pressure on the German Reich Church. In a letter to the head of the Ecclesiastical Foreign Ministry, Bonhoeffer refused

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other delegates to an ecumenical conference in Fanø, Denmark, in 1934. At the conference, Bonhoeffer preached a stirring sermon to Christian leaders from more than 15 nations. "The world is choked with weapons," he said, "and dreadful is the distrust which looks out of every human being's eyes. The trumpets of war may blow tomorrow." In such a time, he urged Christians to speak out against war and dare the "great venture" of peace.

to abstain from criticism of the German government.

#### Rallying world church support

It was at the ecumenical level that Bonhoeffer hoped more effectively to continue the church struggle. Bonhoeffer had been appointed international youth secretary for the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches (a forerunner of

the World Council of Churches). In this role, he rallied the international churches to take a stronger anti-Nazi stand, to support the Confessing Church, and to oust the Reich Church from the ecumenical movement.

His activities led to a lasting friendship with English Bishop George Bell. Bell was president of the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work, which worked closely with the World Alliance. He endorsed Bonhoeffer's plea that the Confessing Church be recognized as sole representative of the Protestant church of Germany.

Bonhoeffer's efforts reached a climax at the 1934 conference held in Fanø, Denmark. Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Youth Commission astounded the delegates by its refusal to couch resolutions in polite diplomatic language. Further, Bonhoeffer wanted the churches to declare as unchristian any church that had become a mere uncritical adjunct of political policies. All delegates knew the German Reich Church was the target of these resolutions.

Bonhoeffer's most lasting contribution to this conference, however, was an unforgettable morning sermon on peace, entitled "The Church and the Peoples of the World." His student Otto Dudzus reported that Bonhoeffer's words left the delegates "breathless with tension." How could the

## DARING THOUGHTS

*Selected quotations from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings*

**T**he church was silent when it should have cried out.

Christ kept himself from suffering till his hour had come, but when it did come he met it as a free man, seized it, and mastered it. . . . We are not Christians, but if we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ's largeheartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom when the hour of danger comes. . . .

*In a letter from prison to his fiancée, Maria:* It would be better if I succeeded in writing to you only of my gratitude, my joy, and my happiness in having you and in keeping the pressure and the impatience of this long imprisonment out of sight. But that would not be truthful, and it

would appear to me as an injustice to you. You must know how I really feel and must not take me for a stone saint. . . . I can't very well imagine that you would want to marry one in the first place—and I would also advise against it from my knowledge of church history.

Only those who cry out for the Jews may also sing Gregorian chant.

There are three possible ways in which the church can act toward the state:

In the first place . . . it can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate and in accordance with its character as state, i.e., it can throw the state back on its responsibilities.

Second, it can aid the victims of

state action. . . . The church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community. "Do good to all people." . . .

The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke in the wheel itself. Such action would be direct political action, and is only possible and desirable when the church sees the state fail in its function of creating law and order. . . .

There are things for which an uncompromising stand is worthwhile.

I ask with all my strength what God is trying to say to us through [the Bible] . . . since I have learnt to read the

churches even justify their existence, he asked, if they did not take measures to halt the steady march toward another war? He demanded that the ecumenical council speak out "so that the world, though it gnash its teeth, will have to hear, so that the peoples will rejoice because the church of Christ in the name of Christ has taken the weapons from the hands of their sons, forbidden war, proclaimed the peace of Christ against the raging world." One sentence of that sermon remained forever emblazoned in the memories of Bonhoeffer's students: "Peace must be dared; it is the great venture!" Even Dudzus remarked that "Bonhoeffer had charged so far ahead that the conference could not follow him."

### Brave new seminary

In 1935, leaders of the Confessing Church asked Bonhoeffer to direct an illegal seminary near the Baltic Sea. For the Confessing Church, establishing its own seminaries was a bold move. They would simply bypass the typical training of candidates at universities tainted by Nazism. With their own seminaries, they could ignore the requirements that candidates prove their pure Aryan blood and loyalty to Nazism as conditions for ordination. These seminaries would be supported not by stipends from the government

but by freewill offerings.

The young candidates, who gathered first at Zingst on the Baltic Sea and later at an abandoned private school in Finkenwalde, remembered the seminary as an oasis of freedom and peace. Bonhoeffer structured the day around common prayer, meditation, biblical readings and reflection, fraternal service, and his own lectures. Each day was lightened by recreation, including singing of the black spirituals Bonhoeffer had brought from America.

The highlight of their training, however, was Bonhoeffer's lectures on discipleship. These gave rise to the best known of his books, *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it Bonhoeffer indicted Christians for pursuing "cheap grace," which guaranteed a bargain-basement salvation but made no real demands on people, thus poisoning "the life of following Christ." Bonhoeffer challenges readers to follow Christ to the cross, to accept the "costly grace" of a faith that lives in solidarity with the victims of heartless societies.

The Gestapo closed the seminary in October 1937. Bonhoeffer then tried to conduct a secret "seminary on the run." This proved unsuccessful. The spirit of Finkenwalde has survived, however, in *Life Together*. Published in 1939, the book records the seminarians' "experiment in community." The

church, Bonhoeffer believed, needed to promote a genuine sense of Christian community. Without this, it could not effectively witness against the nationalist ideology to which Germany had succumbed. A church congregation was not to be closed in on itself, but be a vortex of renewal for the spiritually drained and a refuge for the persecuted. Through prayer and caring service the church could become again "Christ existing as community."

### The church's failure of nerve

The years 1937 to 1939 were particularly problematic for Bonhoeffer and his role in the church struggle. The Confessing Church's leaders seemed to lack fortitude on the question of taking the civil oath to Hitler. Hitler offered Confessing Church ministers legitimacy in return for their quiet support of his expansionist plans, including the annexation of Austria. Peace, respectability, and patriotism were the bait. Bonhoeffer wanted the bishops to defend the right of pastors to refuse taking the oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler.

Bonhoeffer was stymied, too, in his efforts to stir up in the church a more strenuous opposition to the cruel persecution of the Jewish people. To him, church synods (assemblies)

Bible in this way . . . it becomes more marvellous to me every day.

It is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith.

Peace is the opposite of security.

Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes.

*In a letter to Eberhard Bethge from Tegel Prison, April 30, 1944:*  
You would be surprised, and perhaps

even worried, by my theological thoughts and the conclusions that they lead to; and this is where I miss you most of all, because I don't know anyone else with whom I could so well discuss them to have my thinking clarified. What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. . . . We are moving toward a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as "religious" do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by "religious."

The only fight which is lost is that which we give up.

Bonhoeffer in early 1935. He had just begun directing a seminary for the Confessing Church, a group that resisted Nazi policies. Two years later, the Gestapo closed the seminary.

Quotations primarily from *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (HarperCollins, 1990).



looked out for their own interests. They lacked heart for the more urgent issue: how to counteract the abuse and denial of civil rights within Germany. He decried their lack of sensitivity to the plight of pastors imprisoned for their dissent.

Whether the church leaders spoke up for the Jews now became Bonhoeffer's measure of the success or failure of any synod. "Where is Abel your brother?" he would ask. Bonhoeffer's essays and lectures of this period exude his bitterness over the bishops' failure of nerve. He would frequently quote Proverbs 31:8, "Who will speak up for those who are voiceless?" to explain why he had to be the voice defending the Jews in Nazi Germany.

In June 1938 The Sixth Confessing Church Synod met to resolve the church's latest crisis. Dr. Friedrich Werner, state commissar for the Prussian Church, had threatened to expel any pastor refusing to take the civil oath of loyalty as a "birthday gift" to Hitler. Instead of standing up for freedom of the church, the synod shuffled the burden of decision to the individual pastors. This played into the hands of the Gestapo, who could then easily identify the disloyal few who dared to refuse. Infuriated at the bishops, Bonhoeffer demanded, "Will the Confessing Church ever learn that majority decision in matters of conscience kills the spirit?"

### **Mistaken trip to America**

By the autumn of 1938 Bonhoeffer felt he was a man without a church. He could not influence the Confessing Church to take a courageous stand against a civil government he regarded as inherently evil. On the ecumenical front, he had been unable to persuade the World Alliance of Churches to unseat the German Reich delegation at their conferences. In February 1937, he resigned as youth secretary in protest.

On "Crystal Night" (Kristallnacht), November 9, 1938, the full frenzy of Nazi anti-Semitism was unleashed on Jewish citizens. The police watched passively as German hordes broke windows of houses and stores, burned synagogues, and brutalized Jews. Bonhoeffer was away from Berlin on that night, but he quickly raced to the scene. He discredited attempts to attribute this violence to God's so-called curse of the Jews because of the death



The pastor and theologian in August 1935, at age 29.

## Who Am I?

*A poem written from  
a Berlin prison cell*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

*We are not permitted to  
reproduce this poem in  
the online magazine.*

of Christ. In his Bible he underlined Psalm 74:8—"They say to themselves: let us plunder them! They burn all the houses of God in the land"—and marked it with the date of Crystal Night.

Bonhoeffer felt keen disappointment over the church's dishonorable silence following that mayhem. This was one of the factors that led him to contemplate a second trip to America. He wanted to rethink his commitment to the Confessing Church, then the focal point of his opposition to Hitler.

Another reason for leaving Germany was the imminent call to arms of his age group. Bonhoeffer realized that his refusal to be inducted into the army would bring Nazi wrath upon his closest colleagues in the Confessing Church. Also, Bonhoeffer had entered closer contact with his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi. Dohnanyi, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, and Colonel Hans Oster (all in the military intelligence unit, or *Abwehr*) were preparing a military-led coup d'état. Bonhoeffer feared being an unwitting cause of the Gestapo's stumbling on to their plans.

For all of these reasons, Bonhoeffer explored the possibility of leaving Germany, this time via a lecture tour in the United States for the summer of 1939. He intended to stay a year at most. His closest American friend, Paul Lehmann, and his former teacher, Reinhold Niebuhr, were eager to rescue Bonhoeffer from the fate of dissenters in Nazi Germany. Thus, they arranged for the tour with the unspoken intention that he would remain in America once the impending war began. Bonhoeffer embarked for the United States on June 2, 1939.

The peace of his journey was disturbed, however, by the thought of the persecution that dissenting pastors were facing. The Godesberg Declaration of April 4, 1939, had enjoined on all pastors the duty to devote themselves fully to "the Führer's national political constructive work." It was becoming even more dangerous to be numbered among the enemies of the Third Reich. Bonhoeffer's diary for that period is filled with expressions of anxiety. Why had he come to America when he was needed by the Christians of Germany?

Bonhoeffer soon made up his mind to return. He departed on July 8, 1939, a mere month after his arrival. "I have made a mistake in coming to Amer-

ica," he wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr. "I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people."

### Secret courier activities

On his return home, Bonhoeffer was forbidden to teach, to preach, or to publish without submitting copy for prior approval. He was also ordered to report regularly to the police.

The freedom to continue his writing came unexpectedly through his being recruited for the conspiracy. Hans von Dohnanyi and Colonel Hans Oster, leading figures in German military intelligence, arranged to have him listed as indispensable for their espionage activities. This exempted Bonhoeffer from the draft and, because he was assigned

to the Munich office, removed him from Gestapo surveillance in Berlin.

His ostensible mission was to scout intelligence information through his "pastoral visits" and ecumenical contacts. Under this cover, however, Bonhoeffer was involved in secret courier activities. His principal mission was to seek terms of surrender from the Allies, should the plot against Hitler succeed. The highpoint of these negotiations came at a secret rendezvous with Bishop Bell in Sigtuna, Sweden in May 1942. Bonhoeffer convinced Bell that the conspirators could be trusted to overthrow the Nazi government, restore democracy in Germany, and make war reparations. Bell took the information to British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, but Allied response to Germany had already hardened into "Unconditional Surrender!"

When not dallying in the Munich office, Bonhoeffer made his head-

quarters in a nearby Benedictine monastery. There he continued writing what he once declared to be his main life's work, *Ethics*. Posthumously reconstructed by Eberhard Bethge, the book is hardly a completed ethic. It is, rather, a collection of at least four fragmentary approaches to the construction of a Christian ethic in the midst of Germany's national crises. In it, Bonhoeffer upbraided the church for not having "raised its voice on behalf of the victims and . . . found ways to hasten to their aid." In a stinging phrase he declared the church "guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenseless brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ."

### Letters and papers from prison

While working for the Abwehr, Bonhoeffer also became involved in "Operation 7," a daring plan to smuggle Jews out of Germany. This attracted the Gestapo's suspicions. On April 5, 1943—after the conspiracy had led two failed attempts on Hitler's life—Bonhoeffer was arrested and incarcerated at Tegel Military Prison in Berlin. At first the Nazis had only vague charges against him: his evading of the military draft, his role in "Operation 7," and his prior disloyalties.

While in prison, Bonhoeffer wrote inspiring letters and poems that are now regarded as a Christian classic. After the posthumous publication of these *Letters and Papers from Prison* (by Eberhard Bethge), people around the globe began to appreciate Bonhoeffer's creative, relentless probing into the meaning of Christian faith. In them, Bonhoeffer is harsh on religion for short-circuiting genuine faith. Meaningless religious structures and abstract theological language were a vapid answer to the cry of people lost in the chaos and killings of the battlefields and death camps.

In these letters, too, Bonhoeffer raised disturbing questions that would rattle the nerves of church leaders. In the letter of April 30, 1944, he confides that "what is bothering me incessantly is the question of what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today."



Douglas R. Gilbert

A cell at Tegel Prison. Bonhoeffer lived here for 18 months. The cell was 6 feet by 9 feet; it held a plank bed, shelf, stool, and a bucket. At first, Bonhoeffer could not use the blankets because of their stench.

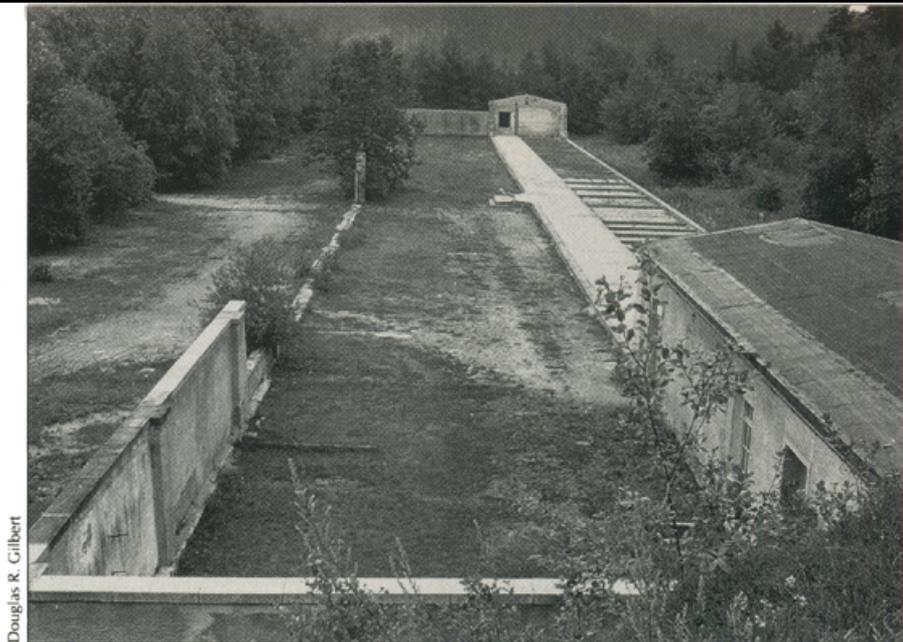
In responding to that question, Bonhoeffer observed that the church, anxious to preserve its clerical privileges and survive the war years with its status intact, had offered only a self-serving religious haven from personal responsibility. It had failed to exercise any moral credibility for a "world come of age." The church had to shed those "religious trappings" so often mistaken for authentic faith. For Bonhoeffer, if Jesus is "the man for others," then the church can be the church only when it exists to be of courageous service to people.

Bonhoeffer also wrote letters to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer. He had fallen in love with Maria in 1942, during stays with her family between his Abwehr journeys. He had been charmed by her beauty, personal verve, and spirit of independence. Her family initially objected to their engagement because of their youth—she was 18, and he was 37. He was also involved in secret actions that could prove dangerous to her. But after his imprisonment, they publicly announced their betrothal as a display of support for him. Maria's visits became Bonhoeffer's main sustenance during the grim early days of his imprisonment.

One letter to Maria speaks of their love as "a sign of God's grace and kindness, which calls us to faith." Bonhoeffer adds, "and I do not mean faith which flees the world, but the one that endures the world and which loves and remains true to the world in spite of all the suffering which it contains for us. Our marriage shall be a yes to God's earth. . . . I fear that Christians who stand with only one leg upon earth also stand with only one leg in heaven."

### Death camp at Flossenbürg

On July 20, 1944, the "officers' plot" to assassinate Hitler failed. In the dragnet that ensued, the Gestapo's investigations closed in on the main conspirators, including Bonhoeffer. He was transferred to the Gestapo prison in Berlin in October 1944. Maria and Dietrich were completely separated from each other. In February 1945, Dietrich was shifted to the concentration camp at Buchenwald. Amidst the chaos of the Allies' final assault, Maria traveled to all the camps between Berlin and Munich, often by foot, in a futile attempt to see him again.



Douglas R. Gilbert

What we know of those last days is gleaned from the book *The Venlo Incident*, written by a fellow prisoner, British intelligence officer Payne Best. Bonhoeffer and Best were among the "important prisoners" taken to Buchenwald. Best later wrote of Bonhoeffer: "He was one of the very few men I have ever met to whom his God was real and ever close to him. . . ."

On April 3, Bonhoeffer and others were loaded into a prison van and taken to the extermination camp at Flossenbürg. In transfers of prisoners like this, death sentences had already been decreed in Berlin. The SS carried out the formalities of a court martial, executed these enemies of the Third Reich, and disposed of the bodies.

On April 8, they reached the tiny Bavarian village of Schönberg, where the prisoners were herded into a small schoolhouse being used as a temporary lockup. It was Low Sunday [the first Sunday after Easter], and several prisoners prevailed on Bonhoeffer to lead them in a prayer service. He did so, offering a meditation on Isaiah's words, "With his wounds we are healed." In his book Best recalled that moment: "He reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment, and the thoughts and resolutions which it had brought."

Their quiet was interrupted as the door was pushed open by two men in civilian clothes, members of the Gestapo. They demanded that Bonhoeffer follow them. For the prisoners, this had come to mean only one thing: he was about to be executed. Bonhoeffer took the time to bid everyone farewell. Drawing Best aside, he spoke his final

The execution shed at Flossenbürg concentration camp. At dawn on April 9, 1945, Bonhoeffer and six co-conspirators were hanged for "political high treason." In his final known words he said, "This is the end—for me, the beginning of life."

recorded words, a message to his English friend, Bishop Bell: "This is the end—for me, the beginning of life."

Early the next morning, April 9, Bonhoeffer, Wilhelm Canaris, Hans Oster, and four fellow conspirators were hanged at the extermination camp of Flossenbürg. The camp doctor, who had to witness the executions, remarked that he watched Bonhoeffer kneel and pray before being led to the gallows. "I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer," he wrote. "At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. . . . In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."

In the distance boomed the cannons of Patton's army. Three weeks later Hitler would commit suicide, and on May 7, the war in Europe would be over.

The Nazism against which Bonhoeffer struggled would linger in other forms of systemic evil in the modern world. But his witness to Jesus Christ lives on. Bonhoeffer continues to challenge Christians to follow Christ to the cross of genuine discipleship and to hear the cry of the oppressed. □

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# FAMILY, FRIENDS & CO-CONSPIRATORS

*Significant people in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life*

F. BURTON NELSON



Dorothee Bracher

## KARL & PAULA BONHOEFFER

(1868–1948) (1874–1951)

### *Distinguished parents*

Dr. Karl Bonhoeffer was a prominent neurologist and a professor of psychiatry at the University of Berlin. In addition, he served as director of the psychiatric and neurological clinic at the Charité Hospital Complex in Berlin. Trained in the disciplines of science, he encouraged in his children self-reliance, control, independence, and objectivity. He was not at all enthused when Dietrich decided as a boy to become a minister and theologian.

Paula Bonhoeffer was daughter of Karl-Alfred von Hase, a chaplain in the court of Kaiser William II. Her grandfather was renowned church historian Karl-August von Hase. Paula exercised profound influence on all her children. She was concerned that they develop

familiarity with the Bible, hymns, and traditions of the Christian faith.

The Bonhoeffers had eight children: Walter, Karl-Friedrich, Klaus, Ursula, Christine, Sabine, Dietrich, and Susanne.

The Bonhoeffer home nourished a climate of anti-Nazism from the 1920s. Karl wrote in his memoirs: "From the outset we considered the victory of National Socialism in the year 1933 and Hitler's being named Reich Chancellor as a misfortune."

In addition, the parents fought anti-Semitism from the beginning of their family life. In a recent interview Eberhard Bethge stated with potency: "I am absolutely convinced that for Dietrich Bonhoeffer as for his family, the Jews were the main reason for sharing in the conspiracy." It was little wonder that the Bonhoeffers' home became a meeting place for resisters to the Nazis.

## EBERHARD & RENATE BETHGE

(1909–) (1925–)

### *Best friend and niece*

Were it not for Eberhard and Renate Bethge, it is unlikely this issue of *CHRISTIAN HISTORY* could have appeared. More than any other persons, living or dead, they have been responsible for transmitting Bonhoeffer's written legacy.

Eberhard met Dietrich in 1935 when he studied at the Finkenwalde Seminary that Bonhoeffer directed. Eberhard was the son of a Lutheran pastor from the province of Saxony; even today he refers to himself as a country boy.

In time he became Dietrich's closest friend and confidant. A participant in the resistance, Eberhard was drafted to serve in the German army. He was imprisoned for the final months of the war in Berlin's Moabit prison.

Eberhard served pastorates after the war and spent several years at the



same London congregation that Bonhoeffer shepherded in 1933-35.

Eberhard edited the significant *Letters and Papers from Prison*; most of its letters were addressed to him. He also wrote the massive biography *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (Harper & Row, 1970).

Renate Bethge is the niece of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of four children of Ursula (Bonhoeffer's older sister) and Rüdiger Schleicher. She spent her childhood in a home next to the Bonhoeffer family home in Berlin.

"I was 7 when Hitler came to power," she remembers, "and we knew from the beginning that the Nazis were very dangerous, and that we were not supposed to talk to others about things which were talked about in the family." The family "told us what Hitler was doing, above all, the trouble with the Jews, that it was terrible how they maltreated Jews, that already Jews were being put into concentration camps and beaten up. So this was in the family from the beginning, and I as a child really thought all the time they were planning something to get rid of Hitler from the government or to kill him."

Renate helped preserve Bonhoeffer's letters to her husband and others. Many of the letters were buried for safekeeping in the backyard of the Bonhoeffer home, awaiting the end of the Nazi regime when they could be brought to light.

Since the war, Renate has been a partner with her husband in writing and speaking. The Bethges, parents of three grown children, live in the town of Villiprott, near Bonn, Germany.

## HANS VON DOHNANYI

(1902-1945)

### "Intellectual head" of the conspiracy against Hitler

The son of a Hungarian composer, Hans von Dohnanyi was a brilliant lawyer who married one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's older sisters, Christine, in 1925. He became a personal assistant to the Reich Minister of Justice in 1933.

Consequently, early in the Hitler regime von Dohnanyi became aware of the Nazis' crimes on their way to absolute power in Germany. He began to compile a "Chronicle of Shame" documenting the heinous injustices—persecution of churches, torture and mistreatment of individuals in concen-



tration camps, sterilization, violence against the Jews. The record was used as evidence in the post-war Nuremberg War Crimes Trials.

Hans von Dohnanyi continually channeled behind-the-scenes information to his pastor brother-in-law, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1939 von Dohnanyi joined the *Abwehr*, the secret intelligence agency under Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. He arranged for Bonhoeffer to become attached to the Munich office of the *Abwehr*, thereby keeping him from service in Hitler's army. Von Dohnanyi arranged several trips (to Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway) for Bonhoeffer. Ostensibly, Bonhoeffer was to perform assignments for the *Abwehr*, but actually he represented the German resistance movement to key contacts in these countries.

Von Dohnanyi, a strategic figure in the resistance, was described by the Gestapo as "the intellectual head of the movement to overthrow the Führer." Arrested in 1943, he underwent severe tortures and illnesses until his execution (at Sachsenhausen) on April 9, 1945—the same day Bonhoeffer was hanged at Flossenbürg.

## SABINE (BONHOEFFER)

LEIBHOLZ (1906-)

### His twin

Of the eight children born to Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer, only Dietrich's twin sister, Sabine, still survives. Soon 86 years old (on February 4, 1992), she lives in Göttingen, Germany, with her elder daughter, Marianne.

At 18, Sabine married Gerhard Leibholz, a brilliant lawyer who had earned

his doctorate in philosophy at 19. Leibholz became judge of a district court and later, a professor of constitutional law at the University of Göttingen.

The twins, Dietrich and Sabine, enjoyed a unique chemistry in the large Bonhoeffer family. In 1938, the year after the Gestapo closed the Confessing Church's seminary at Finkenwalde, Dietrich stayed in the Leibholz home and wrote his classic *Life Together*.

Gerhard Leibholz and his two brothers were baptized Christians, but because their father was Jewish in background, they were classified as Jews by Nazi interpretation. In the fall of 1938, as persecution of Jews increased, the Leibholz family—Gerhard, Sabine, and their two daughters—fled. They were driven to the Swiss border by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge and crossed over late at night.

Throughout the war years, they lived in England. The profundity of Dietrich's correspondence with his twin can be seen in an April 1942 letter:

"It is good to learn early enough that suffering and God are not a contradic-



tion but rather a unity, for the idea that God himself is suffering is one that has always been one of the most convincing teachings of Christianity. I think God is nearer to suffering than to happiness, and to find God in this way gives peace and rest and a strong and courageous heart."

It was in Sabine's Oxford home that the shattering news arrived in 1945 that Dietrich and other family members had been murdered by the Nazis. With the collapse of the Hitler regime,

the Leibholz family moved back to Göttingen to pick up the threads of their lives. Professor Leibholz taught political science until his retirement in the mid-1970s. He died in 1982.

Sabine has continued to provide insights into the Bonhoeffer family. Her book, *The Bonhoeffers: Portrait of a Family* (first published in English in 1971) will become available from Covenant Publications in 1992.

## MARTIN NIEMÖLLER

(1892–1984)

### *Famous resister*

Martin Niemöller had been a World War I hero as a naval lieutenant and submarine commander. Ordained in 1924, he came later to the prestigious pulpit of the Berlin-Dahlem parish.

One of the earliest Protestant critics of National Socialism, he was a founder of the Pastors' Emergency League in 1933. The letter of call to join the league, sent to pastors all over Germany, was signed by both Niemöller and Bonhoeffer. It summoned pastors to a strong allegiance to the Scriptures and a rejection of the Aryan Clause. By the end of 1933, six thousand pastors had joined the Emergency League. The



following year, this group became the nucleus of the Confessing Church.

Niemöller remained a key figure in the Confessing Church until his arrest and imprisonment. Bonhoeffer and Bethge were present in the Niemöller residence the day the Gestapo came for the esteemed pastor. Under orders from Hitler, he was imprisoned in the Moabit prison, then placed in solitary confinement at Sachsenhausen, and finally, transferred to Dachau until the

end of the war in 1945.

Franklin H. Littell has captured Niemöller's significance succinctly: "If Karl Barth was the most important theologian of the church resistance to Nazism, Martin Niemöller was until his imprisonment its primary strategist."

Niemöller emerged from his years of detention as a towering symbol of the church struggle. He eventually became one of the presidents of the newly organized World Council of Churches. In travels to America, he addressed over two hundred audiences, sometimes concluding with words that have become famous:

"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."

Niemöller did, however, speak out, as did his friend, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a consequence, Bonhoeffer lost his life and Niemöller lost eight years of his freedom.



## MARIA VON WEDEMEYER-WELLER

(1924–1977)

### *Brave young fiancée*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer first met Maria von Wedemeyer when she was still a girl. Her grandmother, Ruth von Kleist-

Retzow, brought Maria on a visit to Finkenwalde, the Confessing Church's preachers' seminary.

The grandmother, born the Countess of Zedlitz and Trützschler, belonged to the landed gentry of Prussia, but she was strongly anti-Nazi and sympathetic to the views of Bonhoeffer. She persuaded him to teach confirmation lessons to young Maria, her brother, Max, and several other children.

Bonhoeffer visited in the von Kleist home many times, especially on holidays during the 1930s. He eventually completed *The Cost of Discipleship* there in the spring of 1937. In that year Maria was only 13 and Dietrich was 31, but by 1942, she had turned 18. Despite their great difference in age, they fell deeply in love.

Their engagement was bonded early in 1943 (in spite of Maria's mother's request that they stay apart for one year). Just three months later, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned. He had agreed with

Maria's mother and her guardian that the engagement would not be made public for some time. But upon his arrest, in a show of support, they publicly announced it.

Maria was permitted to visit Dietrich a number of times while he was at Tegel Military Prison in Berlin. Between visits, letters were exchanged, sometimes smuggled in or out. (The collection of Dietrich's thirty-eight letters to his young fiancée is housed at Harvard, and at her request they will not be opened to the public until the year 2002.)

In October 1944 Bonhoeffer was moved to the Gestapo prison at Prinz Albrecht Strasse in Berlin. Despite Maria's frequent attempts, the two never saw each other again.

Following the war, Maria married twice, mothered two sons, and lived out the balance of her years in the United States. A mathematician, she held a position of high rank in her field of engineering at Honeywell.

## GEORGE K. A. BELL

(1883–1958)

### *Ecumenical leader*

English bishop George Bell was a respected figure in the early ecumenical movement. In 1932 he became president of the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work. Bonhoeffer met him that year in Geneva, and during Bonhoeffer's pastorate in London (1933–35), they became good friends. More than anyone else, Bonhoeffer



conveyed to Bell the character of the Nazi takeover.

The bishop wrote a now-famous Ascensiontide letter in May 1934 to ecumenical leaders in a dozen Western nations. The letter, which was profoundly influenced by Bonhoeffer, stressed that questions about the freedom of the German church affected all Christian churches, not simply those in lands dominated by the swastika.

The two friends had a historic meeting in May 1942 at Sigtuna, Sweden, during the dark days of World War II. Representing one segment of the resistance movement, Bonhoeffer gave Bell the names of Germans who were at the center of the conspiracy against Hitler. Bell transmitted this information to Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary.

Just before his execution, Bonhoeffer requested that a message be communicated to Bishop Bell: "Tell him that this is the end—for me, the beginning of life."

In the foreword to an early edition of *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bishop Bell wrote of Bonhoeffer: "He was one of the first, as well as one of the bravest,

witnesses against idolatry. He understood what he chose, when he chose resistance. . . . He was crystal clear in his convictions; and young as he was, he saw the truth and spoke it with a complete absence of fear."

## RÜDIGER SCHLEICHER

(1895–1945)

### *Brother-in-law and fellow conspirator*

Though Dietrich Bonhoeffer is celebrated for his sacrifices and martyrdom, the entire Bonhoeffer family was involved in the German resistance. Several family members were executed by the Nazis:

—Hans von Dohnanyi, his brother-in-law (see page 19)

—Klaus Bonhoeffer, his older brother, who was condemned by a "people's court" and shot by the Gestapo on April 23, 1945

—Rüdiger Schleicher, his brother-in-law, who was executed with Klaus.

After being wounded as a soldier in World War I, Rüdiger Schleicher studied law, entered civil service in Württemberg, and in 1922 arrived in Berlin to be an assessor in the Reich Ministry of Transportation. The following year he married Ursula Bonhoeffer, Dietrich's older sister. Schleicher then became director of the legal department of the Reich Aviation Ministry, and in 1939 associate professor and director of the Institute for the Law of the Air at Berlin University.

The Schleicher family lived next door to the Bonhoefers. During the early years of the Hitler era, the family held far-into-the-night discussions on the growing Nazi menace.



Rüdiger Schleicher was arrested at his office on October 4, 1944, and incessantly interrogated for weeks. Although the prosecutor could not prove his involvement in the July 20, 1944, plot against Hitler, the fact that he knew of plans for an overthrow, and that he opposed the government, sufficed for a death sentence. He was shot through the head on April 23, 1945, by the Gestapo.

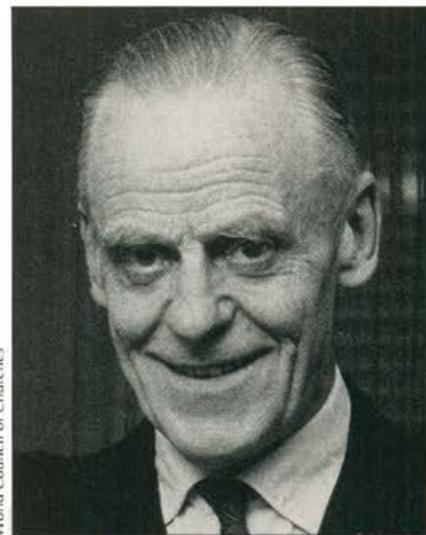
## W. A. VISSER'T HOOFT

(1900–1985)

### *International contact*

Visser't Hooft, a Dutch ecumenical leader, had been impressed by Bonhoeffer's 1935 article, "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement." But he first met Bonhoeffer at the Paddington train stop in London in 1939.

Visser't Hooft remembered: "He



World Council of Churches

spoke in a way that was remarkably free from illusions, and sometimes almost clairvoyant, about the coming war, which would start soon, probably in the summer, and which would cause the Confessing Church to be forced into even greater distress. . . ."

During the war Bonhoeffer consulted with Visser't Hooft and others in Geneva, conveying precise information about the church struggle. After the war, Visser't Hooft served as first general secretary of the World Council of Churches (1948–66). □

*Dr. F. Burton Nelson is professor of theology and ethics at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois, and co-author of A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (HarperCollins, 1990).*

# PASTOR BONHOEFFER

*Though known as a theologian and resister, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was also a pastor—even in his final moments.*

F. BURTON NELSON

**F**rom the age of 14, Bonhoeffer yearned for ministry in the church. His brothers, however, charged that the church was “a poor, feeble, boring, petty bourgeois institution.” Dietrich’s physician father wrote later: “When you decided to devote yourself to theology, I sometimes thought to myself that a quiet, uneventful minister’s life, as I knew it . . . , would really almost be a pity for you.”

## Ministry in Spain and the U.S.

Despite his family’s reservations, Bonhoeffer prepared himself for ministry. At age 22, he received an appointment as curate (assistant pastor) in a German-language Lutheran congregation in Barcelona. In addition to his encountering businessmen and their families, Bonhoeffer also met poverty firsthand. “I have seen long-established and prosperous families totally ruined,” he wrote, “so that they have been unable to go on buying clothes for their children. . . .”

The multiple facets of pastoral ministry were all present: preaching, teaching Sunday school, leading youth activities, doing visitation, counseling the unemployed, meeting with committees, comforting the bereaved. Bonhoeffer preached nineteen sermons; twelve have survived. His senior minister wrote that Bonhoeffer “proved most capable in every respect and has been a great help. . . . He has been able in particular to attract children, who are very fond of him.”

Bonhoeffer was invited to stay a second year, but he opted to resume his studies at the University of Berlin. The



Dietrich Bonhoeffer with 8 of his confirmation-class students in 1932. He was asked to take over the class of 40 to 50 boys because it was out of control. In *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Eberhard Bethge describes how Bonhoeffer met his new class: “The aged minister and Bonhoeffer slowly walked up the stairs of the school building, which was several storeys high, while the boys looked over the banisters, making an indescribable din and dropping things on them. When they reached the top, the minister tried to force the throng back into the classroom by shouting and using physical force.” When the youths heard their new teacher’s name, “they started shouting ‘Bon! Bon! Bon!’ louder and louder.” Bonhoeffer just stood silently, hands in pockets, for minutes. His coolness won control, and “after that he had no more cause to complain about their lack of attentiveness.”

following year, he studied in New York. While at Union Theological Seminary, Bonhoeffer wished to maintain contact with a vital congregation. Through his good friend Franklin Fisher he found one—the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem—and became involved with a boys’ Sunday school class.

## Teaching a rough class

Upon his return to Berlin in 1931, Bonhoeffer was ordained. He began

serving as student chaplain at the Technical University of Charlottenburg.

He also became teacher of a confirmation class in the Zion parish of Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin. Many of the forty children he catechized were from poor, even impoverished, homes. A letter to his close friend, Erwin Sutz, put it succinctly: “It’s about the worst area of Berlin with the most difficult social and political conditions.”

Bonhoeffer was not satisfied with

merely in-class contacts with his confirmands, so he rented a room in their neighborhood. Years later, Richard Rother, one of the students, wrote: "Never before or after has Zion Church had such a strong congregation as when this gifted man was its pastor. . . . He was so composed that it was easy for him to guide us; he made us familiar with the catechism in quite a new way, making it alive for us by telling us of many personal experiences. Our class was hardly ever restless because all of us were keen to have enough time to hear what he had to say to us."

### Two London congregations

From the fall of 1933 to the spring of 1935, Bonhoeffer served two small, German-speaking congregations in London—one in Sydenham, the other in the East End.

The two congregations were quite different. Sydenham, which gathered businessmen and families, and a few members of the German diplomatic community, numbered thirty to forty. St. Paul's, a Reformed congregation with a two-century history, numbered about fifty. It comprised mostly tradesmen—butchers, tailors, bakers—and their families.

During his eighteen months in his only full pastorate, Bonhoeffer introduced children's services, youth clubs, Nativity and Passion plays, financial assistance for German refugees, and a revised hymnal.

Preaching was his finest hour. (He was considerably less enthused about routine parish meetings.) Eberhard Bethge has written, however, that not all the parishioners understood or appreciated his preaching, some finding it too "oppressive and emphatic." Yet one elderly parishioner said years later, "I never fell asleep while Pastor Bonhoeffer was preaching!"

### A pastor to pastors

His tenure in England was cut short by a call to serve the Confessing Church in his native Germany. Bonhoeffer became director of an illegal seminary located in Zingst, near the Baltic Sea, and then in Finkenwalde. He now served as chief shepherd of a flock of about twenty-five candidates for ministry.

Bonhoeffer conceived that this seminary (one of five for the Confessing

Church) would do more than provide academic preparation. It should also be a place of "brotherly help and fellowship," with a "well-ordered, well-regulated common life," a "common obedience to the commandments," "deepest inward concentration for service outward," and "prayer, meditation, study of Scripture, brotherly discussion, and open confession."

One of his students, Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, wrote years later: "Each Saturday evening Bonhoeffer addressed us, as a pastor, guiding us to live in brotherhood, and working out what had been experienced during the last week, and what had gone wrong. Thus we gradually grasped that this experiment in life together was a serious matter. And gradually we became ready to fall in with him and to do with zest what we were asked to do."

In this communal setting Bonhoeffer

*One parishioner  
remembered, "I never  
fell asleep while  
Pastor Bonhoeffer  
was preaching!"*

articulated some of his keenest insights for ministry:

- insistence on discipleship as a core in the life of a pastor and congregation;
- the centrality of Jesus Christ;
- the importance of preaching;
- the necessity of a disciplined daily life of prayer, meditation, intercession, and reading Scripture;
- emphasis on care for the sick and troubled and outcast;
- the role of continuing celebration of worship and the sacraments;
- the sincere practice of confession.

Bonhoeffer wrote letters to his students during the dark years of the church struggle (1936–42). Even though his young friends were compelled to serve in Hitler's army, Bonhoeffer encouraged them to be pastors, no matter where they were: "Certainly none of us is ever released from the responsibility of being a Christian, and no one may deny that he is a pastor."

### A minister to the end

A pastoral ministry, in a wider sense, continued even into Bonhoeffer's trying months in Nazi prisons and concentration camps. Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law Gerhard Leibholz wrote in a preface to an early edition of *The Cost of Discipleship*: "His own concern in prison was to get permission to minister to the sick and to his fellow prisoners, and his ability to comfort the anxious and depressed was amazing."

The day before his execution, Bonhoeffer conducted a worship service for fellow prisoners. He preached on the text for that Sunday, Isaiah 53:5—"By his wounds we are healed." He also meditated briefly on the text from 1 Peter 1:3—"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Fellow prisoner Payne Best wrote later that Bonhoeffer "reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment, and the thoughts and resolutions which it had brought."

At Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945, Bonhoeffer's life came to its untimely and tragic end on the gallows. It is significant to note the descriptive title given to him by the camp doctor a decade later: "The prisoners . . . were taken from their cells, and the verdicts of the court martial read out to them. Through the half-open door in one room of the huts, I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a prayer, and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."

To the very end, he was "Pastor Bonhoeffer." □

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*Dr. F. Burton Nelson is professor of theology and ethics at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois, and co-author of A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (HarperCollins, 1990).*

## 1906-27

1906: Feb. 4: Dietrich and twin sister, Sabine, born in Breslau

1912: Bonhoeffers move to Berlin

1913: Dietrich enters grammar school after early years of home schooling



1918: Oldest brother, Walter, killed in World War I

1920: At 14, decides he will be a theologian

1921: Confirmed at Grunewald Church, Berlin

1923: Begins theological studies at Tubingen University

1924: Travels to Rome and North Africa with brother Klaus

1924: Begins studies at Berlin University

1927: Receives licentiate in theology, *summa cum laude*; defends doctoral thesis, *The Communion of Saints*

### GERMAN & WORLD EVENTS

1914: World War I begins

1918: "November Revolution"; Kaiser William II abdicates

1919: Treaty of Versailles

1920: League of Nations begins

## 1928-32

1928: Assistant pastor of congregation in Barcelona, Spain

1929: Assistant in systematic theology department at Berlin University

1930: Second dissertation, *Act and Being*, qualifies him for teaching position; July 31: first public lecture; Sept. 5: begins year of study at Union Theological Seminary in New York

1931: July: meets theologian Karl Barth; Aug.: appointed lecturer in theology at Berlin University; Sept.: appointed youth secretary of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches; Oct.: appointed chaplain at Technical College, Berlin (serves until 1933); Nov. 15: ordained; during this period, "becomes a Christian"

1932: Teaches confirmation class in poor section of Berlin (classes began in late '31); attends ecumenical meetings in Geneva and elsewhere



1928-29: The Great Depression

1932: Apr. 23: Ludwig Müller appointed Hitler's personal representative for the Protestant churches

## 1933-34

1933: Feb. 1: radio broadcast on "the leadership principle" cut off the air; April: article on "The Church and the Jewish Question"; Sept. 21: with Martin Niemöller, organizes Pastors' Emergency League, which opposes the "Aryan Clause" excluding Jews from ministry; Oct. 17: pastors two congregations in London (until March 1935); develops friendship with Bishop George Bell

1934: May 29-31: the Confessing Church adopts Barmen Confession of Faith; Aug. 23-30: Bonhoeffer delivers speech on peace to ecumenical conference at Fano, Denmark



1933: Jan. 30: Adolf Hitler made chancellor of Germany; Feb. 27: burning of Reichstag building in Berlin gives Hitler chance to increase state control; Mar. 20: first concentration camp (Dachau) opened; Apr. 1: boycott of Jewish-owned businesses; Apr. 7: Jews banned from holding public office; Dec. 20: Protestant youth organizations incorporated into Hitler Youth; Einstein moves to U.S. to escape Nazi persecution

1934: June 30: Hitler purges SA leaders; Aug. 2: President Hindenburg dies; Hitler becomes both chancellor and president; Dec. 15: Karl Barth dismissed from Bonn University

## 1935-37

1935: April 26: preachers' seminary opens at Zingsthoof on the Baltic Sea; June 24: seminary relocates to Finkenwalde; Bonhoeffer publishes influential article on "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement"

1936: Declared a "pacifist and enemy of the State," Bonhoeffer has his authorization to teach at Berlin University terminated; lectures at Confessing Church program near Olympic stadium

1937: Feb.: at ecumenical meeting in London, resigns as youth secretary in protest of the World Alliance's failure to speak out for the Jews; Sept.: seminary at Finkenwalde closed by Gestapo; Nov.: *The Cost of Discipleship* published; Dec.: leads "collective pastorates" for clandestine training of clergy

1935: Sept. 15: citizenship for German Jews cancelled; marriage between Jews and Aryans prohibited; Dec. 1: Confessing Church training centers declared invalid; radar invented



1936: Jessie Owens wins four gold medals at Berlin Olympics; Edward VIII abdicates British throne

1937: Mar. 4: papal encyclical warns Hitler's government; July 1: Martin Niemöller arrested; Nov. 27: twenty-seven Finkenwalde graduates arrested; Amelia Earhart lost over Pacific Ocean; first jet engine

# BONHOEFFER

1938-39



1938: Jan. 11: forbidden to live or work in Berlin; Feb.: contacts leaders of the political resistance, including Gen. Wilhelm Canaris; Sept.: writes *Life Together*; helps twin sister and her husband escape Germany

1939: Mar.: in London, meets with Bishop Bell, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Dutch ecumenical leader Willem Visser 't Hooft; June 2: travels to U.S. for lecture tour; July 8: decides he must return to Germany and suffer with his people; Aug.: becomes civilian agent of the *Abwehr*, German military intelligence agency

1938: Mar. 13: Germany annexes Austria; Apr. 20: German pastors ordered to take oath of allegiance to Hitler; Sept.: Hitler and Neville Chamberlain sign Munich Agreement; Nov. 9: Crystal Night triggers destruction of synagogues and mass arrests of Jews

1939: Jan. 1: Jewish businesses liquidated; Mar.: Germany invades Czechoslovakia; Sept. 1: Germany invades Poland; Britain and France declare war on Germany; Hitler calls for extinction of the Jews

1940-42

1940: Mar.: collective pastorates closed by Gestapo; Sept. 9: prohibited from public speaking and ordered to report regularly to police; begins writing *Ethics*; Nov.: assigned to *Abwehr* staff in Munich; stays at Benedictine abbey nearby

1941: Meets Barth and Visser 't Hooft in Switzerland; Mar. 27: forbidden to publish because of his "subversive activities"

1942: Travels to Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland for the resistance; May 30-June 2: meets Bishop Bell in Sigtuna, Sweden, on behalf of the resistance; writes Christmas essay, "After Ten Years," to remind co-conspirators of their ideals



1940: Germany invades Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, France; Aug. 24: Luftwaffe begins to bomb London; Churchill becomes prime minister

1941: Germany invades Yugoslavia, Greece, and Soviet Union; Sept. 19: German Jews required to wear yellow star; first gas chambers installed at Auschwitz, Poland; Dec. 7: Japan attacks Pearl Harbor; Dec. 11: Germany declares war on U.S.; "Manhattan Project" atomic research begins

1942: Jan. 20: Nazi leaders plan the "Final Solution"—extermination of all European Jews; first automatic computer

1943-44



1943: Jan. 17: engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer; Apr. 5: arrested and held in Tegel Prison, Berlin; Apr. 29: charged with "subversion of the armed forces"; May 15: Eberhard Bethge, his friend, marries Renate Schleicher, his niece; July: interrogated intensely; writes letters to Eberhard Bethge and others that later form *Letters and Papers from Prison*

1944: Mar.: daylight bombing raids over Tegel Prison begin; Apr. 30: writes first "theological" letter; Sept. 22: Gestapo discovers incriminating *Abwehr* files; Oct. 5: Gestapo arrests brother Klaus, brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher, and others, causing Bonhoeffer to abandon escape plan; Oct. 8: moved to Gestapo prison at Prinz Albrecht Strasse, Berlin; Dec. 19: last letter to Maria

1943: Jan.: German army surrenders at Stalingrad; Jan. 14: Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin meet in Casablanca (and in Teheran in Nov.); May 13: German-Italian forces surrender in North Africa; May 19: Goebbels declares that Germany is free of Jews; polio epidemic in U.S.



1944: Jan. 22: Allies land at Anzio, Italy; 437,000 Hungarian Jews shipped to Auschwitz; June 6: Allies land at Normandy; July 20: Count Stauffenberg attempts to assassinate Hitler

1945

1945: Feb. 7: moved to Buchenwald concentration camp; Apr. 3: moved to Regensburg; Apr. 5: in Hitler's midday conference, order given to annihilate the Canaris resistance group, which includes Bonhoeffer; Apr. 6: moved to Schönberg; Apr. 8: moved to Flossenbürg concentration camp and court-martialed; Apr. 9: hanged with six other resisters; brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi executed at Sachsenhausen concentration camp; Apr. 23: brother Klaus and brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher killed for their role in conspiracy; July 27: Bonhoeffer's parents learn of his death via London broadcast of memorial service



1945: Feb. 4-11: Allied conference at Yalta; Mar. 7: Allies cross Rhine River; Apr. 12: Roosevelt dies; Truman becomes president; Apr. 23: Red Army reaches Berlin; Apr. 30: Hitler commits suicide; May 7: Germany surrenders; July 6-Aug. 7: Potsdam conference; Aug. 6-9: U.S. drops A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; Aug. 15: war ends in Far East

Information based upon timelines in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) and *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* edited by Geoffrey Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990). Photo credits: Young Bonhoeffer—*Life in Pictures*; soup line—National Archive; Hitler—clipart.com; Jesse Owens—Wikipedia/Bundesarchiv; Bonhoeffer, Maria—Christian History Inst. archives; Heinkel bombers—Wikipedia; Jude star—Wikipedia/Midnightcomm; Flossenbürg—Douglas R. Gilbert.

# BONHOEFFER'S COSTLY THEOLOGY

*His controversial yet Christ-centered beliefs  
were formed not only in the classrooms of Tübingen,  
but also in the cells of Tegel Prison.*

JOHN D. GODSEY

**D**ietrich Bonhoeffer first became widely known not for his thought but for his actions.

He was talked about as the German Lutheran pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis for resisting the racial and military policies of Hitler's totalitarian regime. Only gradually did the church and world become aware of the rich theological legacy of this modern Christian martyr.

## What shaped his theology?

Bonhoeffer's thought cannot be divorced from his life.

*Turbulent Times:* He grew up in Berlin during the era of the Weimar Republic. He lost a brother in the First World War. He experienced the rise to power of Hitler's National Socialists, and he helped establish the "Confessing Church" during the German church struggle of the 1930s. Finally, toward the end of the Second World War, he was hanged as a conspirator against Hitler. His theology was forged amid these turbulent times.

*Cultured Family:* Bonhoeffer's family deeply influenced his character and thinking. He and his twin sister were the sixth and seventh of the eight children of a prominent physician and his wife. His father was a neurologist and professor of psychiatry at the University of Berlin. Dietrich was reared in



The theological student at age 18. At the time of this picture (May 1924), Bonhoeffer had just completed a year of theological studies at Tübingen. That fall he began studies at Berlin University, including seminars under famous scholar Adolf von Harnack.

this educated, cultured family.

The Bonhoeffers embodied the best of the German liberal tradition that prized personal integrity and civic duty. Dietrich grew to combine the analytical objectivity of his father and the piety and practical realism of his mother. Nourished and supported by this loving family, he grew to love life. He valued honesty and self-discipline, rejoiced in human ties and human pleasures, and enjoyed literature, music, and art.

*Varied Experiences:* Often overlooked as significant influences on Bonhoeffer are certain life experiences, mainly outside Germany. A trip to Rome during university days quickened his interest in the church. He took an excursion to Islamic North Africa. He spent a year as a vicar in Barcelona and a year as a student at Union Seminary in New York. For a year and a half he served as pastor of two German-speaking congregations in London. These immersions into different cultures greatly widened his perspective on life.

For example, while at Union Seminary, Bonhoeffer encountered the black church in Harlem. Here he began to see things "from below," from the perspective of those who suffer oppression—a perspective that would later be his own when he was imprisoned.

### Concrete, "this world" revelation

Bonhoeffer's passion was for the *concreteness* of revelation—in Jesus of Nazareth, in the church. The Word became *flesh*, Bonhoeffer stressed, and dwelt among us: living, teaching, dying on a cross, being raised to new life, taking form in a new community. From the outset Bonhoeffer emphasized the "this world" quality of revelation.

Because God has entered human history, new relationships are engendered. Those who respond to this revelation bear a responsibility. Bonhoeffer insisted on the *social intention* of every Christian doctrine.

This became evident in his 1927 dissertation at the University of Berlin, *The Communion of Saints*. In it, Bonhoeffer used sociology and social philosophy to aid in his theological interpretation of the church. (This "social" emphasis also reflected the ongoing influence in Berlin of the liberal tradition; the same strand runs from Schleiermacher and Hegel to Troeltsch



In 1930–31, Bonhoeffer (third row, at right) studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He considered American theology shallow—"They intoxicate themselves with liberal and humanistic assumptions," he wrote. Yet Bonhoeffer was stretched by the social ethics of professor Reinhold Niebuhr (back row, tallest person in center). And his friendship with student Frank Fisher (second row, second from right) introduced him to the pain and oppression of American blacks.

and Toennies.) Crucial to Bonhoeffer's social analysis is the concept that the transcendence of God is moral and social. Thus, it is not an abstract idea. God is as close as the nearest neighbor in need!

### Christ and the church

For Bonhoeffer, all true theology begins in prayer and is centered on Jesus Christ. Like Luther, Bonhoeffer could point to this one who was born in a crib and died on a cross, and say, "This man is God for me." Bonhoeffer, unlike prevailing liberal theologians, refused to separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith.

We meet the risen Christ who is present in the church's proclamation, he insisted. But the present Christ is none other than the historical Jesus who taught and healed, forgave sinners, and died on a cross.

As the incarnate One, Christ demonstrates God's love for the world. As the crucified One, Christ discloses God's judgment upon humanity's sin. As the risen One, Christ reveals God's will for the renewal of humanity. Like spokes that go out from the hub of a wheel, everything in Bonhoeffer's theology radiates from Christ the center. He is the center of human existence, of history, and even of nature.

In Bonhoeffer's theology, there is an intimate relationship between Jesus

Christ and the church. In his letters from prison Bonhoeffer spoke of Jesus as "the man for others." And in parallel fashion he wrote that the church is truly the church only when it exists for others. Just as Jesus lived his life completely for others (even unto death on the cross), so the church is to serve

*For Bonhoeffer, all true  
theology begins in prayer  
and is centered on  
Jesus Christ.*

God by serving the world of need.

The church represents that gracious realm of God where sinners are welcomed, the wounded are healed, the oppressed are set free, and the poor receive the good news of the gospel. In *The Communion of Saints*, Bonhoeffer defined the church as "Christ existing as community." He believed that through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christ actually takes form in this community as it lives for others. Christ is revealed not just through the preached

# BARTH AND BONHOEFFER

## What did Bonhoeffer think of this century's most influential theologian?

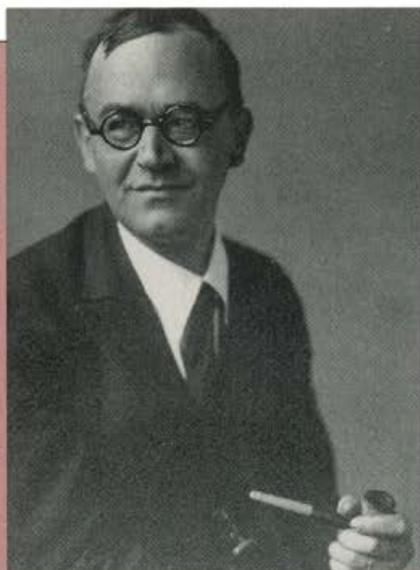
Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) rocked the world of theology when he published his commentary on Romans in 1919. His focus on God as truly God and his return to Scripture “destroyed the older liberalism,” in one scholar’s words. Later, Barth helped draft the Barmen Declaration (1934) that declared the true German church could never give ultimate allegiance to the Nazi state.

How much did Barth influence Bonhoeffer, who was twenty years younger?

Bonhoeffer studied theology at the great liberal faculties of Tübingen and Berlin. At the University of Berlin, he was especially stimulated by his study of Martin Luther. But the greatest theological influence on Bonhoeffer came from the writings of a Swiss theologian who was then teaching in Germany—Karl Barth.

Bonhoeffer never studied with Barth, but he devoured his writings. Barth led the new “dialectical theology” movement that was rediscovering the great themes of the Reformation and the “strange new world” within the Bible.

Like Barth, Bonhoeffer rejected the nineteenth century’s liberal theology, with its focus on human religion. He embraced Barth’s theology of grace revealed in Jesus Christ as the Word of God, attested by Scripture and proclaimed by the church. Barth’s battle cry, “Revelation, not religion!” would remain a fundament of Bon-



Karl-Barth-Archiv, Basel

Theologian Karl Barth, in about 1930. After reading Bonhoeffer’s doctoral dissertation, *The Communion of Saints*, Barth declared it “a theological miracle.”

hoeffer’s theology to the end. (But, like Luther, Bonhoeffer would stress that God’s revelation is deeply hidden “in the likeness of sinful flesh.”)

Bonhoeffer finally met Barth in the summer of 1931. “I was even more impressed by his discussion than by his writings and lectures,” Bonhoeffer said. The two remained friends, and they became allies, especially in the struggle against the “German Christian” theology that tried to amalgamate Christianity and Nazism.

But Bonhoeffer was an independent thinker. Quite early he criticized Barth for interpreting God’s freedom as more a freedom *from* the world than a freedom *for* the world. Toward the end of his life he accused Barth of a “positivism of revelation.” He apparently meant that though Barth revived the great doctrines of the church, he failed to adequately interpret their meaning for everyday life in the world. *John D. Godsey*

Word and the administered sacraments, but through the Christian community itself.

### Faith and obedience

Lutheran theologians generally center their attention on the New Testament writings of Paul. The apostle champions their doctrine of justification by grace, through faith alone, and not by works of the law.

Bonhoeffer, however, loved the Old

Testament (especially the Psalms) and its focus on the law (Torah). He drew upon its demand for righteous living within the realm of God.

In addition, already in the early 1930s Bonhoeffer was attracted to the Gospels—especially to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Bonhoeffer read this as his own serious call to discipleship as a follower of Jesus. He took to heart the claims that Jesus’ teachings made on his life. The demands of the kingdom

of God were to be obeyed. To Bonhoeffer, they were not given, as many Lutherans supposed, to show the impossibility of their fulfillment.

At the Finkenwalde seminary, where Bonhoeffer trained ministerial candidates for the “Confessing Church” during the Nazi period, he lectured on the Sermon on the Mount. These lectures became the heart of the book he published in 1937, *The Cost of Discipleship*. In the book he warned against “cheap grace,” which is the grace we bestow on ourselves in order to live the Christian life as effortlessly as possible. Bonhoeffer called people to the costly grace of following Jesus and obeying his commands. He put his theological perspective into this sentence: “Only the one who obeys believes, and only the one who believes obeys.” Although *theologically*, faith comes before obedience, faith and obedience can never be separated.

### Christian living and ethics

After the Gestapo closed his “illegal” seminary in 1937, Bonhoeffer wrote *Life Together*. In it, he presented one example of how a group of Christians had tried to live “under the Word of God.” The seminarians’ life incorporated regular spiritual disciplines surrounding the day of work—and usually evenings of play! Bonhoeffer, an excellent pianist, would accompany their singing, or he would play records of Negro spirituals he had brought from New York. He insisted that Christian life together is always life in and through Christ, and it necessitates a rhythm of both “being together” and “being alone.”

Bonhoeffer taught his students that self-justification and judging others go together. On the other hand, justification by grace and serving others also go together. He proposed to his students the ministries of holding one’s tongue, meekness, listening to others, active helpfulness, bearing the burdens of others, and when timely, speaking God’s Word to another. He also advocated oral confession in preparation for the Lord’s Supper—not to a priest or minister, but to any Christian who lives under the Cross.

Following *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer joined the underground resistance against Hitler and became a civilian employee of the *Abwehr* (the German military intelligence service, whose of-

ficers were at the heart of the resistance). He began working on *Ethics*, an unfinished book that, along with *Letters and Papers from Prison*, was published posthumously. Basically, he considered Christian ethics to be an ethics of responsibility. Since the Incarnation, God and the world have been “polemically” united. A person cannot relate to the one without the other. This means that ethical thinking can no longer be done in terms of two spheres, one sacred and one secular. In their lives in the world, Christians are called to live responsibly by fulfilling certain divinely imposed and interrelated “mandates”—those of marriage and family, government, labor (or culture), and church. No mandate, wrote Bonhoeffer, is more “divine” than another. Now a Christian must make ethical decisions in the face of various demands that come from being a member of a family, a citizen, a worker, and a member of the church.

### His most controversial ideas

In 1943 Bonhoeffer was imprisoned. In uncensored letters from prison to his friend Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer raised the burning question of “who Christ is for us today—really.” How is Christ related to a world that has become more and more secular and that does not look to God for answers to its unsolved problems? Is there a “non-religious” understanding of Christian faith that fits a “world come of age”?

“Religious” people, contended Bonhoeffer, tend toward individualism (concern for saving one’s own soul for another world), metaphysics (using a concept of “God” to fill gaps in knowledge or to solve personal problems), parochialism (relegating God to only a part of life), or arrogance (thinking God favors them over others). These “religious” views, wrote Bonhoeffer, are anachronistic in a modern, “religionless” world. And they do not accord with the Bible: In Jesus Christ, God lives and suffers with humans in the midst of everyday life. God becomes weak in the world in order that we might become strong and mature. Like Jesus, we are to be there for others in the joys and sorrows of mundane life.

Bonhoeffer’s idea of “religionless Christianity” has been controversial (as has his statement, “Before God and



Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo / Alamy Stock Photo

Bonhoeffer’s theology was forged amid turbulent times. On April 1, 1933, the SA and SS led a one-day national boycott of Jewish businesses. This kiosk reads, “Germans, Beware! Do Not Buy from Jews!” Later that month, Bonhoeffer drafted a response in “The Church and the Jewish Question.” He called the church to support all Jews, even those not baptized as Christians. The church might even have to “jam a spoke in the wheel” of the state if it continued to oppress the Jews. Bonhoeffer’s conclusions were so radical that some of the pastors who heard him deliver the paper walked out of the meeting.

with God we live without God”). By it, Bonhoeffer intended that all Christian doctrines be reinterpreted in “this world” terms. For example, the Resurrection is not only the answer to life after death; it sends us back into the world to live in a renewed way.

If the church cannot interpret Christian faith in language meaningful for the ordinary person in our secular world, then, Bonhoeffer believed, it must limit itself to two things: prayer and righteous action. Out of that it might be born again and discover a new language that would impress the world with its freshness and power.

The only way to find God, then, is to live fully in the midst of this world. Christians must participate in Jesus’

living for others. They share in God’s suffering on behalf of the poor, the helpless, and the oppressed.

Despite his sometimes jarring, controversial statements, Bonhoeffer has elicited a positive response from all types of Christians—liberals and conservatives—and from non-Christians as well. All these people find in Bonhoeffer’s life and thought a challenging faith that is worth living for, and dying for. □

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DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

# Nachfolge



Die Frage nach dem Gehorsam gegen Gottes Wort ist unter uns aufgesprungen. Jesu Ruf „Folget mir nach“, dem wir so gern gehorchen möchten, stellt uns vor eine Entscheidung. Da will nun dieses Buch uns helfen, indem es uns zeigt, was Nachfolge Christi ist und wie sie uns teilhaftig werden kann. Wir werden von neuem auf das Wort der Schrift hingewiesen und durch viele Einzelauslegungen schlichter Art zu dem evangelischen Zeugnis hingeführt. Der Ruf Jesu Christi in das gehorsame Leben, in seine Gemeinschaft ergeht durch das Zeugnis der Schrift heute an uns, und alle, die bereit sind, werden mit großem Segen dieses glühend geschriebene Buch sich zu eigen machen.

# THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

The first edition of *The Cost of Discipleship*, which appeared in 1937. The German title *Nachfolge* means, simply, “Following” or “Discipleship.”

*A radical call to follow Christ.*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

**C**heap grace is the deadly enemy of our church. We are fighting today for costly grace.

Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjack's wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost!

The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infi-

nite. What would grace be, if it were not cheap? . . .

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.

Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: “ye were bought at a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God. . . .

We Lutherans have gathered like ravens round the carcass of cheap grace, and there we have drunk of the poison which has killed the life of following Christ. It is true, of course, that we have paid the doctrine of pure grace divine honors unparalleled in Christendom; in fact we have exalted that doctrine to the position of God himself. . . .

But do we also realize that this cheap grace has turned back upon us like a boomerang? The price we are having to pay today in the shape of the collapse

of the organized church is only the inevitable consequence of our policy of making grace available to all at too low a cost. We gave away the Word and sacraments wholesale; we baptized, confirmed, and absolved a whole nation unasked and without condition. Our humanitarian sentiment made us give that which was holy to the scornful and unbelieving. We poured forth unending streams of grace. But the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way was hardly ever heard. . . .

### Discipleship and the Cross

We have . . . forgotten that the cross means rejection and shame as well as suffering. The psalmist was lamenting that he was despised and rejected of men, and that is an essential quality of the suffering of the cross. But this notion has ceased to be intelligible to a Christianity which can no longer see any difference between an ordinary human life and a life committed to Christ. The cross means sharing the suffering of Christ to the last and to the fullest. Only a man thus totally committed in discipleship can experience the meaning of the cross.

The cross is there, right from the beginning, he has only got to pick it up; there is no need for him to go out and look for a cross for himself, no need for him deliberately to run after suffering. Jesus says that every Christian has his own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God. Each

*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.*

must endure his allotted share of suffering and rejection. But each has a different share: some God deems worthy of the highest form of suffering, and gives them the grace of martyrdom, while others he does not allow to be tempted above that they are able to bear. But it is the one and the same cross in every case.

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man

which is the result of his encounter with Christ.

As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise God-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call.

Jesus' summons to the rich young man was calling him to die, because only the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ. In fact every command of Jesus is a call to die, with all our affections and lusts. But we do not want to die, and therefore Jesus Christ and his call are necessarily our death as well as our life. The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life.

The call of Christ, his baptism, sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil. Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus Christ's sake. The wounds and scars he receives in the fray are living tokens of this participation in the cross of his Lord.

But there is another kind of suffering and shame which the Christian is not spared. While it is true that only the sufferings of Christ are a means of atonement, yet since he has suffered for and borne the sins of the whole world and shares with his disciples the fruits of his passion, the Christian also has to undergo temptation; he too has to bear the sins of others; he too must bear their shame and be driven like a scapegoat from the gate of the city.

But he would certainly break down under this burden, but for the support of him who bore the sins of all. The passion of Christ strengthens him to overcome the sins of others by forgiving them. He becomes the bearer of other men's burdens—"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). As Christ bears our burdens, so ought we to bear the burdens of our fellow men.



Bonhoeffer walks reflectively, papers in hand, during his first summer as director of the seminary in Finkenwalde. At this seminary and community, Bonhoeffer crystallized the ideas that appeared in *The Cost of Discipleship*. As he wrote to his brother, "The restoration of the church will surely come only from . . . a complete lack of compromise in a life lived in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount in the discipleship of Christ."

The law of Christ, which it is our duty to fulfill, is the bearing of the cross. My brother's burden which I must bear is not only his outward lot, his natural characteristics and gifts, but quite literally his sin. And the only way to bear that sin is by forgiving it in the power of the cross of Christ in which I now share. Thus the call to follow Christ always means a call to share the work of forgiving men their sins. Forgiveness is the Christ-like suffering which it is the Christian's duty to bear. □

# RADICAL RESISTANCE

*Bonhoeffer took an early and active stand against the Nazis.*

RICHARD V. PIERARD

**M**ost Germans welcomed Adolf Hitler's appointment as German chancellor (prime minister) on January 30, 1933. Few were more jubilant than Protestant church leaders. They welcomed the possibility of a national regeneration.

The dean of the Magdeburg Cathedral exulted in the Nazi flags prominently displayed in his church. "Whoever reviles this symbol of ours is reviling our Germany," he declared. "The swastika flags around the altar radiate hope—hope that the day is at last about to dawn."

Some churchmen even referred to the "turning point in history" where "through God's providence our beloved fatherland has experienced a mighty exaltation." Pastor Siegfried Leffler declared that "in the pitch-black night of church history, Hitler became, as it were, the wonderful transparency for our time, the window of our age, through which light fell on the history of Christianity. Through him we were able to see the Savior in the history of the Germans." Pastor Julius Leuthener added that "Christ has come to us through Adolf Hitler."

## Welcoming Hitler: Why?

The Protestant press in 1933 was full of editorials affirming that Germany's honor would be vindicated. The humiliation of the lost world war would be left behind. Old moral values of authority, family, home, and church would be restored. The stagnant economy would move once again.

These editorials reflected the reality that the church had long held strong ties to German monarchs. Church leaders looked upon the "November Revolution" in 1918, which forced the abdication of the Kaiser (Emperor Wil-



A 1931 picture of Adolf Hitler leaving church. Two years later, Hitler became chancellor and moved to control the German churches. He even distributed this photograph as part of his effort to gain support.

liam II), as an unparalleled disaster.

Socialists had been leaders in that revolution, and they had helped form the subsequent liberal democratic Weimar Republic. Most Protestant clergy were anti-Marxist and feared communism. To them, the hated Weimar Republic had "casually" accepted the humiliating peace terms following World War I. The republic allegedly was dominated by liberals and Jews who were leading the country to destruction.

Jews, who composed only 1 percent of the German population, were accused of fostering materialism, secularism, pacifism, anti-patriotism, and moral degeneracy. The clergy also bitterly hated the Western Allies for imposing the harsh Versailles peace treaty upon Germany.

These factors insured that Protestant leaders would be solidly in the conservative camp in the 1920s. They called for a synthesis of *Volkstum* (German national identity) and Christianity.

Although many German Protestants bought into this anti-democratic moral myopia, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not one of them. Two days after Hitler's appointment, he delivered a radio address. In it, he warned that if a leader (*Führer*) should succumb to the wishes of his followers and become their idol, then he would be a "misleader" who "makes an idol of himself and his office, and who thus mocks God." The microphone was mysteriously shut off before Bonhoeffer could utter the last sentences.

### Brewing controversy in the church

In the flush of enthusiasm following Hitler's appointment, some Protestants set out to achieve their long-desired hope: replacing their scattered regional churches with one centralized national church ("Reich Church").

Others wanted to revise the churches' creeds to bring them into line with National Socialism. These churchmen were known collectively as the "German Christians." They planned to appoint a single national "Reich Bishop."

More ominously, they wanted to apply within the church the "Aryan Paragraph" of the new Nazi civil-service law. This clause, passed on April 7, 1933, prohibited Jews (or those of Jewish ancestry) from being appointed to

any civil-service or government positions. Applied to the church, the Aryan Paragraph would have barred any Jewish Christian from holding ministerial office, or ultimately, from being part of the church at all.

In his first essay on the "Jewish question," written in April, the young pastor and university lecturer Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenged the Nazi world view. He rejected the exclusion of Jewish Christians from the church as schismatic and heretical.

In early May, Bonhoeffer became involved in the Young Reformer group.



The cross and swastika stand united in this detail from a German church's altar banner. The "German Christian" group wanted the church to embrace Nazi policies (such as forbidding any Christian of Jewish descent from holding a church office). Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood against such efforts and ultimately helped form an alternative Christian body, the "Confessing Church."

The group formed to counter the German-Christian effort to take power in the church. The German Christians sought to elect their own Reich Bishop, Ludwig Müller, a colorless former army chaplain and ardent Nazi. Bonhoeffer and others wanted the church to maintain its integrity against efforts to Nazify it.

But their resistance was not intended as resistance to the state as such. The Lutheran theology of the German churches held that there are "two kingdoms" of church and state, both ordained by God, but with separate spheres of responsibility. The church is responsible only for the inward, or spiritual, sphere. This belief destined that the struggle would be for

the "inner freedom" of the church and not a challenge to the National Socialist order per se. However, the totalistic claims of the Third Reich made a political confrontation inevitable.

### Linking Christianity and Nazism

Elections for the new national German Evangelical (Protestant) Church were scheduled for July 23, 1933. With the other Young Reformers, Bonhoeffer threw himself into the campaign to counter the German Christians, who had official support and even the personal endorsement of Hitler. But they could not stop the steamroller. The "leadership principle" (allegiance to the Führer) and "racial conformity" (restrictions on Jews) were quickly introduced into the church. The Nazi Müller was easily elected Reich Bishop at the national synod (assembly) on September 27.

The Young Reformers, led by Martin Niemöller, recognized that the matter of power in the church had been resolved. Now they decided to focus on the question of truth.

Utilizing the opportunity afforded by the new church constitution, they emphasized the need to develop a confession of faith—one that would counter the false doctrines of the German Christians. In August, Bonhoeffer and a colleague were sent to a retreat center at Bethel, in Westphalia, to draft a confession that could be presented at the national synod in September. However, when the text of this Bethel Confession was reviewed by others, they watered it down so much that Bonhoeffer refused to sign the final version.

Another critical event occurred on September 5. At the Prussian General Synod, the hard-liners set out to ram through the Aryan Paragraph. (This meeting is often referred to as the "Brown Synod" because the German Christian representatives, who were in the majority, appeared in brown Nazi uniforms. The other ministers wore clerical gowns.)

The Aryan Paragraph disqualified all clergy or church officials of "non-Aryan extraction" (i.e., those who had a Jewish grandparent, or who were married to such a person). When it became apparent the racist provision would be adopted, the opposition walked out. For all practical purposes this split the church.

### Forming a breakaway church

The following day the opposition met to discuss the situation. Bonhoeffer, whose thinking on the "Jewish question" was more advanced than that of anyone else in the group, showed that the Aryan Paragraph was "a false doctrine" that "destroys the basic nature of the church." He favored formally withdrawing and founding a free church. The majority, however, agreed to stay in and hold fast to the claim that they were the true Evangelical Church in Germany.

Immediately afterward, the Pastors' Emergency League was formed under the leadership of Martin Niemöller. For this group, the Aryan Paragraph was a *status confessionis*, an issue on which the church must take a stand. By January, seven thousand (out of a total of eighteen thousand pastors) had joined the league.

Ultimately, on April 22, 1934, five thousand pastors and laypeople gathered in Ulm and created the "Confessing Church." (The name referred to their reliance on the Reformation confessions in interpreting Scripture.) The Council of Brethren, which led the new group, convened a synod at Wuppertal-Barmen on May 29-31 to draft a confession. The resulting Barmen Declaration proved to be the most significant theological statement of the church struggle.

In many ways, however, the Confessing Church was a "reluctant resistance." Its goal was to preserve the church, not to topple the Hitler regime. The great majority of Christians supported the Führer, even when he led them into war. With its idealistic view of the state as being always God's agent, the Confessing Church was slow to recognize how perverted the political order had become.

Still, Article 5 of the Barmen Declaration spoke against the theological exaltation of the state and its supreme head. In 1936 the Confessing Church sent a letter to Hitler protesting the deChristianization of the people. The letter further warned the regime that its human presumption was in revolt against God. In 1938, on the eve of the expected attack on Czechoslovakia, the Confessing Church adopted a prayer of atonement. And in 1943 it produced a statement affirming human life as sacred to God and condemning the annihilation of those who were mentally ill or who belonged to

another race (including the people of Israel). These actions reveal that the Confessing Church had indeed ventured on the totally new and risky path of political resistance.

### Leading an "illegal" seminary

In 1933, Bonhoeffer had accepted a call to pastor two German congregations in London. Thus, he was not directly involved in the crucial events of 1934. But he kept in close touch with matters back home by telephone, telegraph, messenger, and personal visits. Also, he continued to expand his ties within the ecumenical movement. These contacts would prove invaluable during his later involvement in the active resistance.

As Confessing Church students were excluded from the universities, the group set up alternate seminaries to train its clergy. In March 1935, Bonhoeffer came back from London to lead one such theological school, held primarily at Finkenwalde in Pomerania. When he took his students to an ecumenical gathering in Sweden the following year, his lectureship at Berlin University was abruptly canceled. In September 1937 the Gestapo closed the Finkenwalde seminary. For the next two years Bonhoeffer trained students secretly in "collective pastorates."

As his position deteriorated, Bonhoeffer was invited to America by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. However, as soon as Bonhoeffer arrived in the safety of the United States (in June 1939), he began to feel pangs of conscience. He concluded he would have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if he did not share the current trials with his people. After a month he returned home.

### Willing his country's defeat

Now Bonhoeffer had reached a crucial turning point. In the letter to Niebuhr explaining his decision, he acknowledged, "Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security." He had made the final break with traditional Lutheran views about unconditional

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A code used by Bonhoeffer while in prison. Throughout the summer of 1943, Bonhoeffer was being interrogated about his activities. In order that his answers would mesh with answers from other accused prisoners, he was sent messages in code. His family would bring him a book; inside it, a single letter was lightly penciled on every other page, beginning at the back of the book. Above is the deciphering of part of one message.

obedience to civil authority.

As he wrote in his work *Ethics*, this was the "exceptional necessity" in which lay the "freedom of responsibility." There was no law that compelled responsible action; the individual must take the risk to do what was in accordance with the divine guidance of history. The effort to remove Hitler, even if it meant tyrannicide, was in fact a matter of religious obedience; the new methods of oppression by the Nazis justified new types of disobedience.

Thus Bonhoeffer could say in 1941: "I pray for the defeat of my country, for I think that is the only possibility of paying for all the suffering that my country has caused in the world." On another occasion he declared, "If we claim to be Christians, there is no room for expediency. Hitler is anti-Christ. Therefore we must go on with our work and eliminate him whether he is successful or not."

Actually, those who desired Hitler's ouster faced problems of such magnitude that an effective resistance became virtually impossible. For example, enormous ideological differences existed among them. Meanwhile, the ever-watchful and utterly ruthless secret police ferreted out and crushed any indication of opposition. Abroad, the Allies were suspicious of, or at best, dubious about, a German resistance. The Allies' stated objective was "unconditional surrender." So it was questionable whether they would accept a new German regime that resulted from a military coup.

### Becoming a double agent

Bonhoeffer's position further deteriorated in 1940. Increasing pressure forced his collective pastorate to be dissolved in March. Then he traveled for the Confessing Church as a pastor-at-large. In September the Gestapo prohibited him from speaking publicly because of his "subversive activity."

But in the following month, his lawyer brother-in-law, Hans Dohnanyi, got Bonhoeffer a position as a "confidential agent" in the *Abwehr* (military intelligence). This protected him from being called up for military service.

Dohnanyi was a deputy to Hans Oster, an *Abwehr* department head. Both Oster and Dohnanyi were deeply involved in the resistance movement, so Bonhoeffer quickly was drawn in as well. The pretext for Bonhoeffer's *Ab-*



Bonhoeffer and fellow prisoners in the courtyard of Tegel Prison in Berlin. (A staff sergeant who arranged the photograph is in the center.) While at Tegel, Bonhoeffer's skill in first aid was discovered. He was always fetched to the first-aid post when the air-raid alarm sounded. He spent quieter hours analyzing people's handwriting, drafting portions of a novel and play, and writing what became *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

wehr membership was that he could use his ecumenical contacts to help the unit assess the political situation in Switzerland, Britain, America, and Scandinavia. In fact, Bonhoeffer would use these contacts to increase communication between the resistance movement and the Allies.

Bonhoeffer made three visits to Switzerland, where messages about resistance activities were passed to London through ecumenical channels. He also made noteworthy trips to Norway and Italy. Most important was his journey to Sweden in spring 1942. There he gave English bishop George Bell vital information about figures in the resistance. He expressed the movement's willingness to negotiate a compromise peace following the overthrow of Hitler. Bell took this to British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, but Eden did nothing with it. Bonhoeffer utilized his position also to smuggle Jews into Switzerland as alleged *Abwehr* agents.

### Facing prison and execution

The Gestapo began closing in on the *Abwehr*. Bonhoeffer was arrested in April 1943, even though it was not clear that he was involved in a conspiracy.

Bonhoeffer was lodged at Tegel Prison in Berlin. He effectively disguised the true nature of his *Abwehr* activities, and he was even allowed to

write and to receive visitors. Because of his imprisonment, he was not directly involved in the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt on Hitler.

He might have been charged only with draft-dodging and survived the war. But certain secret papers were discovered at the military-high-command headquarters in Zossen. The papers, which had been kept by the resistance for use in a possible trial of Hitler, implicated Bonhoeffer and other *Abwehr* figures. Bonhoeffer was then moved downtown to the main security office for interrogation.

In February 1945 he was taken to Buchenwald concentration camp and then in April was transferred to the Flossenbürg camp. On Hitler's orders he was given a summary court-martial and hanged on April 9. In a farewell message to Bishop Bell, Bonhoeffer said: "This is the end—for me, the beginning of life."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and death left a clear legacy for subsequent generations of Christians. From his shining example we learn that spiritual power will surely prevail over the forces of evil—but we must take an active part in that struggle. □

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# EXPLORING BONHOEFFER'S WRITINGS

*Some of his works are little known. Some are fictional.  
But all are provocative. Here's a brief guide.*

CLIFFORD GREEN

Phrases like *cheap grace*, *costly grace*, and *religionless Christianity* are common coin, because they come from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's two best-known books, *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

But what about the rest of Bonhoeffer's writings, now being republished in sixteen volumes in German? What else might today's reader find stimulating and helpful?

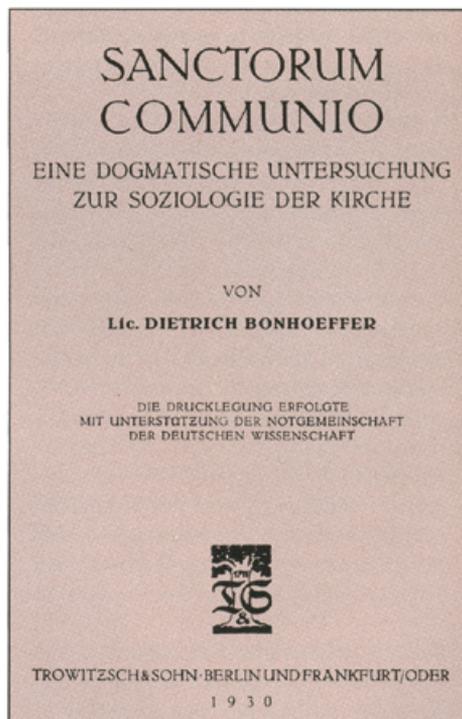
Here are brief introductions to Bonhoeffer's books, including many that deserve to be more widely known.

## THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS (1927)

His first two works, both academic dissertations, lay the foundations of his theology. Because of their technical character, they will never become best-sellers, but readers with specialized interests in theology, sociology, and philosophy are urged to tackle them.

In *The Communion of Saints* (Harper & Row, 1963)—which Karl Barth called "a theological miracle"—Bonhoeffer explores what it means to say that the church is "Christ existing as community." To Bonhoeffer, the church is simultaneously (1) a reality of revelation, established in Christ, and (2) a human, social community amenable to socio-

logical analysis. But not any sociology will do. In fact, one of the aims of this ambitious book, completed at age 21, is to articulate a "Christian social philosophy."



The title page of Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation. He had trouble finding a publisher for the book, and in order to secure publication, he had to pay for the printing costs. The book was hardly noticed and did not sell well. In fact, the publisher complained about Bonhoeffer's lack of interest in publicizing the book.

For Bonhoeffer, all Christian doctrines have a "social intention" as well as a meaning for individuals. This book explores the social intention of the Christian doctrines of person, creation, sin, and revelation. Especially important is his view that individuals represent, and bear ethical responsibility for, their various communities: family, ethnic group, nation, and church. This belief undergirded his commitment to the Confessing Church and the resistance movement.

## ACT AND BEING (1930)

*Act and Being* (Harper & Row, 1962) qualified Bonhoeffer as a university lecturer. A tour de force, this most difficult and most ignored work of Bonhoeffer shows that the theologian is a sophisticated philosophical thinker. In it, he explores the subjects of his first book, but in dialogue with two major philosophical traditions—idealistic philosophies, and philosophies of being.

Above all, Bonhoeffer wants to show that philosophical systems presuppose particular views of human nature. And he engages the problem of the modern person who tries to reach self-understanding apart from God—a problem that was part of his own spiritual struggle. In contrast, he writes, a Christian self-understanding comes from hearing the Word of God.

Full of intellectual and personal passion, the book also yields some beauti-

ful theological passages. "God is not free from human beings but free for us," he writes. "Christ is the Word of God's freedom." Here is the deepest root of the famous phrase in Bonhoeffer's later prison letters—the Christian life as "being for others."

### CREATION AND FALL (1932–33)

In the winter of 1932–33, Bonhoeffer gave lectures at the University of Berlin on the theological interpretation of the Genesis creation stories. These were published as *Creation and Fall* (Macmillan, 1966, now issued together with *Temptation*). This book is the most accessible entry into Bonhoeffer's early theology. Many basic ideas from his two dissertations were presented here in a form that undergraduates could grasp.

In a meditation on the first three chapters of Genesis, Bonhoeffer asks this question: What do we learn if we read Genesis neither from the perspective of Darwin, nor from the perspective of creationists, but from the New Testament perspective of Christ? Bonhoeffer argues that being created in the image of God means we are created to live in co-humanity, as expressed in the relation of man and woman. God has covenanted to be free for us, so we reflect God's freedom in being free for others. "Freedom is not a quality of a person, nor is it an ability, capacity, or attribute. . . . Freedom is not a possession, a thing, or an object. Freedom is a relationship and nothing else—a relationship, indeed, between two persons."

Bonhoeffer further understands from creation that human beings are both spirit and body. "Flight from the body is as much flight from humanity as is flight from the spirit." Here is a strong corrective to any unbiblical spirituality, important for a whole range of ethical issues from ecology to sexuality.

### CHRIST THE CENTER (1933)

Hitler became chancellor in January, 1933, and Bonhoeffer's lectures that summer were his last at the university. His subject was Christology. Carefully reconstructed from sets of student notes, these lectures were published as *Christ the Center* (Harper & Row, rev. translation, 1978).

Bonhoeffer insists that Jesus Christ is God "for me." He is present in Word, sacrament, and congregation.



The young and popular university lecturer in 1932, surrounded by his students. The photo captures the caring and sense of humor that Bonhoeffer's friends saw in him, yet a sense of humor is hardly noticeable in his many writings. Bonhoeffer's university lectures gave rise to his books *Creation and Fall* and *Christ the Center*.

But this Christ who is present in the most personal way is also Mediator of all human existence, of history, and of nature.

Bonhoeffer also saw Christ as mediator of the political history of the state. Bonhoeffer's reflections on false messiahs was a direct challenge to Hitler. His meditation on Jesus, the humiliated and crucified Messiah, was a call to himself to walk the way of the cross, to take up political resistance for the sake of a better state more truly reflecting God's rule.

### THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP (1937) LIFE TOGETHER (1938)

Bonhoeffer's next major work was *The Cost of Discipleship* (in German, simply *Nachfolge*, "following after"; English translation, Macmillan, 1963). This extended meditation on the Sermon on the Mount reflects his commitment to personal discipleship. It also captures the struggle of Christians in Germany to remain faithful, rather than become followers of a religion that legitimized Hitler.

In *Life Together* (Harper & Row, 1954), written the following year, Bonhoeffer theologically interprets the daily life of the seminary he directed. "The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes," he writes, "the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become

the one and only thing that is vital between us."

### ETHICS (1943)

*Ethics*, on which Bonhoeffer worked from 1940 to 1943, was intended to be a magnum opus. But it was never finished.

Bonhoeffer composed its manuscripts during the time of his political resistance activity. Portions were even temporarily confiscated by the Gestapo when he was arrested and imprisoned in April 1943. Thus, questions remain about how the manuscripts are to be ordered. The second English edition (Macmillan, 1965) rearranges the order of the manuscripts; the new German edition will present yet a third arrangement. But such technical problems are for scholars to worry about. The reader looking for insights on living the Christian life will find plenty.

To begin with, Bonhoeffer repudiates the idea that Christian ethics is concerned with the knowledge of good and evil. One must reject the questions "How can I be good?" and "How can I do good?" and instead ask "the utterly and totally different question, 'What is

the will of God?" "The God who is incarnate, crucified, and resurrected in Jesus Christ is the ultimate reality. Thus, Bonhoeffer argues, Christian ethics is about the formation of human life into the form of Christ.

For Bonhoeffer, Christians do not live in a separate divine, holy, and supernatural sphere. Rather, they must seek and do God's will in the natural, historical, public world—in work, marriage, government, and church. As a theologian involved in political resistance against tyranny, Bonhoeffer asked, What does it mean to act responsibly for nation and church? A free and responsible life, he concluded, means acting on behalf of others, in accordance with reality, and being willing to accept guilt. In other words, doing the will of God is finally rooted only in the grace of God.

*Ethics was intended to be a magnum opus. But it was never finished.*

#### FICTION FROM PRISON (1944)

In his first year in prison, Bonhoeffer tried to take stock of his life with attempts at a play and a novel. These were published as *Fiction from Prison* (Fortress, 1981).

This highly autobiographical book gives an intimate glimpse into the Bonhoeffer family. It expresses through characters and conversation some of Bonhoeffer's most distinctive theological ideas.

#### LETTERS & PAPERS FROM PRISON (1944)

Anyone who has not read *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Macmillan, 1972) has an intellectual feast in store. The book electrified theological debate in this century.

These letters ask the provocative question: Who is Jesus Christ for modern people who have "come of age" and outgrown religion? What may sound like the much-dreaded "secular humanism" is, on the contrary, a profoundly Christocentric theology of the cross.

If that sounds paradoxical, begin with the letter of July 21, 1944, the day following the failed assassination at-

tempt on Hitler. Bonhoeffer wrote that "the church is the church only when it exists for others. . . . The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving." In a letter of August 21, he wrote, "If we are to learn what God promises, and what he fulfills, we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings, and death of Jesus."

#### OTHER WRITINGS

Finally, several works contain shorter writings of Bonhoeffer. Their titles are self-explanatory:

- *Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible* (Augsburg, 1970)
- *Prayers from Prison* (Fortress, 1978)
- *Spiritual Care* (Fortress, 1985)
- *Meditating on the Word* (Cowley, 1986).

Works by Bonhoeffer are also contained in John D. Godsey's *Preface to Bonhoeffer: The Man and Two of His Shorter Writings* (Fortress, 1965) and Clyde Fant's *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching* (Thomas Nelson, 1975).

Selections from Bonhoeffer's collected writings were edited and published by Edwin Robertson as *No Rusty Swords, The Way to Freedom, and True Patriotism* (Harper & Row, 1965, 1966, and 1973).

#### TWO RECENT ANTHOLOGIES

Fortunately, two recent anthologies (with helpful introductions and notes) make a selection of Bonhoeffer's writings readily available.

The first is John de Gruchy's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ* (Augsburg Fortress, 1991), part of the excellent series "Makers of Modern Theology."

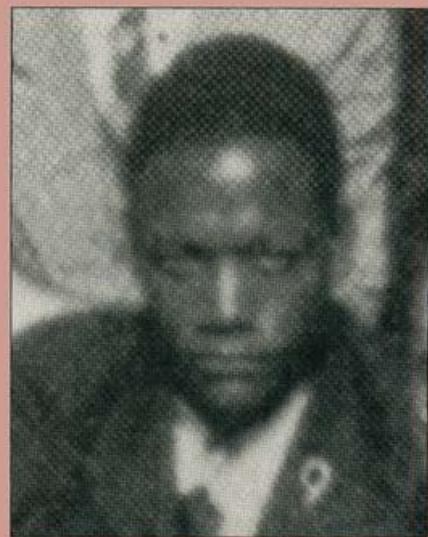
Even more comprehensive is *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (Harper-Collins, 1990). An anthology of nearly six hundred pages, it contains selections from all Bonhoeffer's major books and from about thirty sermons. In addition, it offers selections from ecumenical addresses, occasional essays, and important letters. □

*Dr. Clifford Green is professor of theology and ethics and director of the public policy center at Hartford Seminary. He is author of The Sociality of Christ and Humanity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Early Theology, 1927-1933 (Scholars Press, 1975).*

#### FRANKLIN FISHER (1906-1960).

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer arrived for the 1930-31 academic year at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he had encountered few blacks during his life. Early in his Union days, he met Franklin Fisher, a black student from Birmingham, Alabama. Fisher was assigned to the Abyssinian Baptist Church for his field work, and Bonhoeffer accompanied him there. During the spring term, Bonhoeffer helped teach a Sunday school class.

Through Fisher, Bonhoeffer gained



"a detailed and intimate knowledge of the realities of Harlem life," according to Eberhard Bethge. On one occasion Bonhoeffer and Fisher were together in a restaurant, and it became clear that Fisher would not be extended the same service. In disgust, Bonhoeffer led the party outside in protest.

After 1931, the two friends did not meet again, but Bonhoeffer spoke of Fisher to his Finkenwalde students, to his family, and others. Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, one of those students, reports that after an evening of playing Negro spirituals, Bonhoeffer said: "When I took leave of my black friend, he said to me: 'Make our sufferings known in Germany, tell them what is

# FRIENDS HE MET IN AMERICA

## Three colleagues from Union Theological Seminary who deeply influenced Bonhoeffer

happening to us, and show them what we are like.' I wanted to fulfill this obligation tonight."

Fisher served as pastor of the West Hunter Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, and then as dean of the National Baptist Sunday School and Baptist Training Union Congress. He also taught in the School of Religion at Morehouse College. Unfortunately, at his death in 1960, he did not leave any written record about his friendship with Bonhoeffer.

When **JEAN LASSERRE** (1908–1983), a pastor of the French Reformed Church, met Dietrich Bonhoeffer, neither spoke the other's language, so they communicated in English. They shared deep theological conversation as well as social experiences.

Especially significant for Bonhoeffer, the friends grappled with the claims of Christ's peace commandments, along with the Sermon on the Mount. With-



out question this provided motivation for Bonhoeffer to write *The Cost of Discipleship*.

In the spring of 1931, Bonhoeffer, Lasserre, and two other Union friends set out for Mexico in an old car. Lasserre commented later: "We shared the

same things and hours and hours of driving together and looking for the hotel room and making our own cooking very often. So I have seen him and known him on a very human level. . . . He would never forget his high thoughts. And it was very easy to come back to theology and philosophy."

After returning to France, Lasserre served several congregations in the Reformed Church. He became deeply involved in battles against racism, alcoholism, prostitution, and militarism. His book *War and the Gospel* (Herald Press, 1962, 1974) is a classic statement of Christian pacifism.

The two friends met briefly in 1932 and in 1934 at the ecumenical conferences in Fanø, Denmark. They exchanged many letters. Unfortunately, Bonhoeffer's letters were all burned; Lasserre was a member of the French resistance, and it was too dangerous to retain his friend's correspondence.

Bonhoeffer remembered Lasserre for posterity when he wrote from Tegel Prison: "I remember a conversation that I had in America thirteen years ago with a young French pastor. We were asking ourselves quite simply what we wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint (and I think it is quite likely that he did become one). At the time I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith."

Later, Jean Lasserre could not remember this conversation. Moreover, he denied emphatically that he ever became a saint.

When **REINHOLD NIEBUHR** (1892–1971) died, *Time* eulogized him as "pre-eminent in his field, the greatest Protestant theologian in America since Jonathan Edwards."

After a thirteen-year pastorate at the Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, Niebuhr arrived at Union Theological Seminary in New York where he

taught for more than thirty years as professor of applied Christianity. His *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, and other writings made an indelible impact on the church.

As a "German fellow," Dietrich Bonhoeffer sat in Niebuhr's classroom. They mutually respected and criticized each other's perspectives, and they corresponded frequently during the 1930s. Niebuhr was influential in obtaining an invitation for Bonhoeffer to come to the U.S. for teaching and lecturing in 1939. Bonhoeffer, however,



made a decision to return after only a few weeks. His letter of explanation has become a model for following conscience: "I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people."

—Dr. F. Burton Nelson  
North Park Theological Seminary  
Chicago, Illinois



Eberhard Bethge (left) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the summer of 1938.

# MY FRIEND DIETRICH

*His closest companion reflects on the meaning of Bonhoeffer's life for us today.*

EBERHARD BETHGE

Translated by Phillip M. Hofinga

**A** man destined to fail, hanged as a 39-year-old, has now deeply influenced — perhaps troubled — Christianity for half a century. The career in theology for which Dietrich Bonhoeffer was prepared opened with highly specialized works (*The Communion of Saints* and *Act and Being*). But then came books addressed to insiders of the church, who, like he, were fighting on the losing side in Germany (*The Cost of Discipleship*). Later, the Nazis prohibited Dietrich from speaking, printing, and writing. During this time only

fragments of manuscripts, sometimes hardly decipherable, emerged (*Ethics and Letters and Papers from Prison*).

Forty-five years ago, the author of the *Ethics* fragments was prematurely torn away from his work by the Nazis. As one of Bonhoeffer's closest surviving friends, I fulfilled an obligation to make the *Ethics* fragments readable and communicable.

This led to mediating the entire Bonhoeffer literary inheritance. The work almost became the primary occupation of the second half of my life.

Today about forty people are working to edit all of his writings into sixteen volumes. Already six volumes are on the market (at a price too high for most people's pocketbooks), and the English edition is in the works. Intro-

ductions, commentaries, and painfully precise evidences by experts!

This scholarly output means that today's readers of Bonhoeffer face a new challenge: they must examine their interpretation of him in light of firm sources. Some explorers of the religious Bonhoeffer must see if they have overlooked the political Bonhoeffer. Others, explorers of the worldly Bonhoeffer, must see if they have not devalued his spirituality.

## Toning down his significance?

Now a new generation, with firm source material, examines the assertive strength of Bonhoeffer's work, life, and death.

This man has forever become a monument—glorified, risen to the unreal

as thinker, prayer, and doer. There seems to be a new tendency to bring him back to earth. Some seek to dismantle his possible overvalue, to tone down his significance.

Why? From my observation, two factors may contribute to this tendency.

The first comes from responsible theological teachers. Their students may show hasty enthusiasm for Bonhoeffer as a "doer" among theologians, someone who will release them from hard theological thinking and learning. Thus, teachers defend themselves against someone like Bonhoeffer who too quickly and too easily makes students into critics of old traditions.

Another contributing factor: Protestants have lacked for centuries the tradition, conception, and teaching about "martyrs." Without this understanding, the phenomenon of Dietrich Bonhoeffer can be downplayed. We lack convincing works about the place and function of modern martyrs—and martyrs have been multiplied over all the earth in this century! Studies of contemporary martyrdom may shed light on the fragmented work of Bonhoeffer.

### What Bonhoeffer can't teach us

I must now state, however, that the language, concepts, and thought paradigms of this man are a half century old and older. Their environment, motivations, and challenges are long past. Bonhoeffer was not even familiar with entire fields of language and experience that occupy our thinking today. We find in him no answers to many of our most pressing questions.

For example, he did not yet know the problems that nuclear physics has brought us. He was murdered before Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Ecology, ozone holes, climate shifts, and dying forests had not yet entered his mind. Genetic technology in agriculture and the breeding of humans touched no one then. Vietnam, the Gulf, and modern Israel all came afterward. Feminism did not disturb any level of his life and thought.

Some statements of his even sound odd, if not outright silly, coming to us today. In these specific dimensions, and probably some others, we are left to our own understanding. A look at Bonhoeffer helps us indirectly, at most.

### What Bonhoeffer can teach us

Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer's thought remains unusually fruitful. Even after fifty years there are new discoveries in his life, even for me. His reactions to life situations, both typical and extraordinary; his observations of people in good and bad circumstances; his critique of himself and of church structure—they still help and stimulate.

Let me give one short example of a recent discovery I made. I am truly familiar with Bonhoeffer's letters to me from Tegel [*a military interrogation pris-*

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer  
remains one of the  
greatest inspirers  
of the century.*

*on in Berlin where Bonhoeffer was held from April 1943 through October 1944]. However, in some places, whether from instinct or fear, I had perhaps long overlooked things.*

His letter on July 21, 1944, the day after the failed uprising, is perhaps my favorite. [*On July 20th, a group of German officers, some connected to Bonhoeffer, attempted to assassinate Hitler. That evening, Bonhoeffer heard over a radio in the prison's sick ward that the attempt had failed. He knew his fate was sealed.*] It contains a kind of account by Bonhoeffer about his life—which was to end by impending execution, an act of revenge by Hitler meant to be a death of disgrace. I had never really pondered what Bonhoeffer wrote there: "For this reason I thankfully and peacefully reflect on things past and things present." For a long time I overlooked the words, "and things present"! This "things present" was, of course, the failure of that uprising the day before. "Things present" meant the shattering of all hope for himself, for the church, and for Germany. It meant the gallows, in shame. Why then did he write, "I thankfully and peacefully reflect on . . . things present"?

Because only when the July 20 assassination attempt failed was it revealed to all the world that Bonhoeffer and his friends, in any case, did not stand on

the side of the murdering Devil. They stood rather on the side of the God-forsaken victims. As a German, Bonhoeffer had felt guilt-laden connections to his nation's murder of the Jews. At last the terrible time of increasing guilt was over. The time of complicity with the perpetrators had ended. That is why Bonhoeffer could write "I thankfully and peacefully reflect on . . . things present."

Suddenly this new insight opened up still other lines from Dietrich's letters from those days. Even the world changed by half a century has not diminished, but rather expanded, the question of whether and how we are responsible citizens. Are we mature members of our society, states, corporations, and churches? We set embarrassing or helpful examples for those who follow. Unavoidably, we corrupt or renew the Christian claim and faith. Even in the nuclear, ecological, and feminist age, no one eludes the demands of citizenship with which Bonhoeffer struggled.

### Disturbing treasures

In this way Bonhoeffer's theology and decisions continue to prove themselves treasures. They still come to us as disturbing critiques, but with persuasive power. They deal with individual and corporate piety; with theology and church; with political ethics.

Here it becomes clear how and why Bonhoeffer, among others, says something of value to today's situation in South Africa. And he will trouble us further, if we in Europe and in the United States do not manage responsible analyses and decisions. How decisively he criticizes and motivates church renewal. How he urges us on to seek a biblically-oriented church and theology in the era after Auschwitz.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer remains one of the greatest inspirers of the century. As a martyr he testifies to God's "no"—Christ cannot endorse slave holders in brutal societies. And he testifies to God's "yes" to people who are victims of false imperial gods. □

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*Dr. Eberhard Bethge is author of the definitive biography Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage (English edition: William Collins and Harper & Row, 1970).*

# DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

### QUESTIONS FOR TODAY

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has attracted both admiration and controversy. Which aspects of his life and writings do you most admire? Which do you find the most disturbing or controversial?

2. Bonhoeffer experienced the view "from below" in Harlem and the slums of Berlin. Have you had experiences that gave you insight into what it's like to be oppressed? What did you learn from them? How did they change you?

3. What is the church's responsibility in the face of government-sponsored oppression? What kinds of actions could you support, and why? Would you ever be willing to break the law in order to limit or halt oppression? If so, under what circumstances?

4. Bonhoeffer came to the point of advocating killing Hitler. He joined the resistance movement to bring down the Nazi government, a movement that repeatedly tried to assassinate its country's leader. (See "Radical Resistance," page 30.) Can his actions be reconciled with Scripture's commands to "submit . . . to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1) and to not murder (Exodus 20:13)? If so, how?

5. Some Christians have compared America's treatment of the unborn to Nazi Germany's treatment of the Jews. Would you agree with this comparison? Why or why not? What does Bonhoeffer's life have to say, if anything, to the current issue of abortion? To race relations in America and South Africa? To other social problems?

6. Bonhoeffer opposed "cheap grace." How would you explain what he meant by "cheap grace?" (See excerpt from *The Cost of Discipleship* on page 28.) Is "cheap grace" preached in the church today? In what ways? What does it look like? What does "costly grace" look like today?



Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the courtyard of Tegel Prison the summer before his death.

### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

For information about Bonhoeffer's own writings, see "Exploring Bonhoeffer's Writings" on page 34. Here Dr. Clifford Green, professor of theology and ethics at Hartford Seminary, recommends books about Bonhoeffer. For a comprehensive bibliography, see *Bonhoeffer Bibliography: Primary Sources and Secondary Literature in English* by Wayne W. Floyd and Clifford J. Green (Evanston: American Theological Library Association, 1991). For information about scholarly publications and conferences, write: *The Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, c/o Dr. Geoffrey B. Kelly, Secretary, La Salle University, 1950 West Olney Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19141.*

►Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). The standard biography, by Bonhoeffer's closest friend and editor; unrivaled.

►Eberhard Bethge, *Costly Grace: An Illustrated Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979). A short biography, written about a decade after the previous one.

►Eberhard Bethge, et al., eds., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Life in Pictures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). An informative historical presentation through photographs—a great gift.

►Keith Clements, *A Patriotism for Today: Love of Country in Dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Collins, 1986). Written by a British scholar in the wake of the Falklands War, it addresses a perennially vexing question.

►Geoffrey B. Kelly, *Liberating Faith: Bonhoeffer's Message for Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984). A fine introduction to Bonhoeffer's thought.

►Larry Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972). A scholarly examination of the theology and ethics informing Bonhoeffer's role in the anti-Hitler plot.

►Larry Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: His Significance for North Americans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990). A collection of recent essays relating Bonhoeffer to contemporary issues; contains an essay on Bonhoeffer's family by his niece, Renate Bethge.

►Benjamin Reist, *The Promise of Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969). An early but useful study.

►Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith, eds., *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reminiscences by His Friends* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). Brief, interesting portraits by friends remembering different stages of his life.

# DVDs on the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

## Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace

What is a moral person to do in a time of savage immorality? That question tormented Dietrich Bonhoeffer who actively opposed Hitler and the Nazis. His convictions cost him his life. The Nazis hanged him on April 9, 1945, less than a month before the end of the war. Bonhoeffer's last years, his participation in the German resistance and his moral struggle are dramatized in this DVD. More than just a biographical portrait, *Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace* sheds light on the little-known efforts of the German resistance. It brings to a wide audience the heroic rebellion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a highly regarded Lutheran minister who could have kept his peace and saved his life on several occasions but instead paid the ultimate price for his beliefs. Drama, 90 minutes.

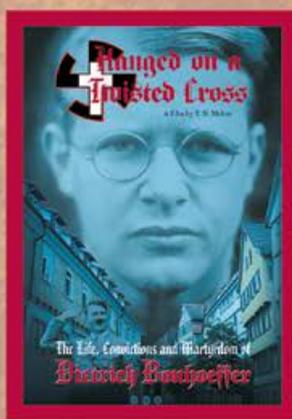
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## Hanged on a Twisted Cross

Biblical theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis just days before the Allies defeated Germany in World War II. This gripping documentary, narrated by Ed Asner, captures the life, times, and thought of Bonhoeffer. Using rare archival footage, documents, and visits to original locations, it provides an intimate portrait of a man whose life and writings grow in their influence and speak powerfully to issues of our own day some 50 years later. How does a man of peace come to assist violence in combating unrestrained evil? Documentary, 120 minutes.

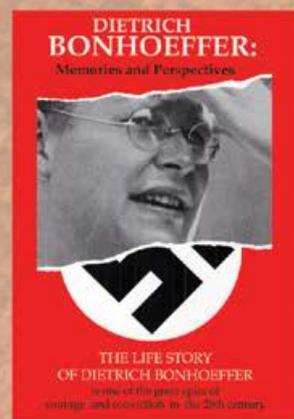


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## Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Memories and Perspectives

This documentary provides a close and intimate portrait of Bonhoeffer. It follows the life of the martyred theologian as vividly recalled by those closest to him: his friends, family, and students. Included are Bonhoeffer family photographs that have never been shown before. An emotionally wrenching documentary that probes the struggles and motivations of Bonhoeffer in a way that makes one ask anew, "What does it mean to be a Christian in the 20th-century world?" Documentary, 90 minutes.

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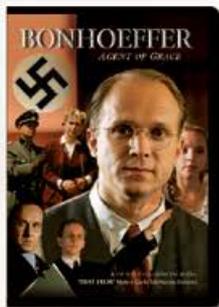
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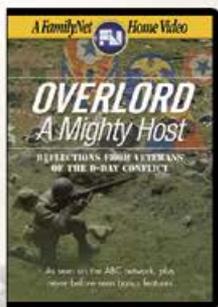
# DVDs to Commemorate WWII



## Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace

The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German clergyman of great distinction, who actively opposed Hitler and the Nazis. His convictions cost him his life. Drama, 90 minutes.

\* DVD - #4638D, \$14.99



## Overlord: A Mighty Host

Seventy years ago, 150,000 Allied troops landed on the beaches of northern France. This awesome military event is examined from the point of view of those who survived that extraordinary conflict. Documentary, 58 minutes.

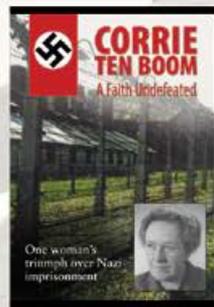
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## The Reckoning

Remembering the Dutch Resistance... This documentary captures the compelling story and eyewitness account of six survivors in war-torn Netherlands during World War II. Documentary, 96 minutes.

\* DVD - #501177D, \$19.99



## Corrie ten Boom: A Faith Undeclared

When Nazi forces invaded Holland in 1940 and began rounding up Jews, Corrie ten Boom and her family risked their lives to save as many as possible. This is their story. Documentary, 55 minutes.

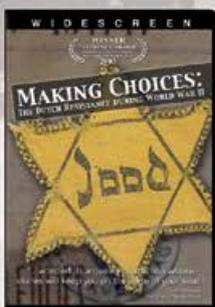
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## Hidden in Silence

Przemysl, Poland, WWII. While some stand silent, Catholic teenager Stefania Podgorska sneaks 13 Jews into her attic. This is the true story of a young woman's selfless commitment in the face of war. Drama, 90 minutes.

DVD - #93839D, \$12.99



## Making Choices

A moving firsthand account of four Dutch survivors of the 1940 Nazi invasion of Holland who helped protect total strangers from certain death. Hear their stories of fear and courage, danger and faith as they put their lives on the line to do what they thought was right. Documentary, 57 minutes.

\* DVD - #500873D, \$14.99



## The Scarlet and the Black

This film tells the thrilling true story of an Irish priest in the Vatican who organizes an underground network in Rome to hide the Jews and others from the Nazis during World War II. Starring Gregory Peck, Christopher Plummer, and Sir John Gielgud. Drama, 165 minutes.

DVD - #1395D, \$14.99



## The Hiding Place

In wartime Holland, Corrie ten Boom and her family quietly sheltered Jews in their small house—until Nazis discovered the "hiding place" and arrested them all. This is the gripping, true story of Corrie and her sister's endurance in the horrors of the Ravensbruck death camp. Drama, 145 minutes.

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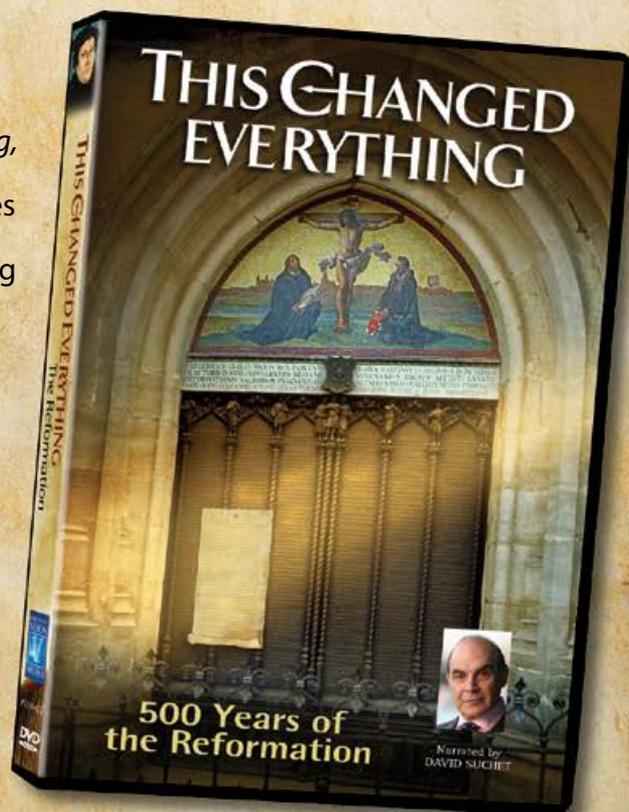
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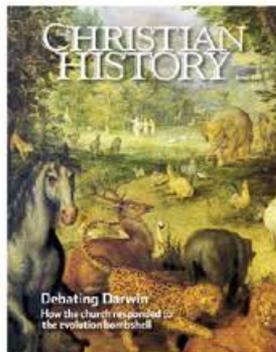
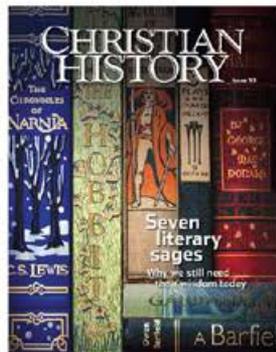
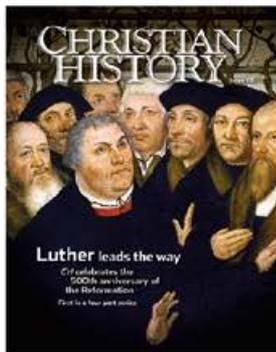
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