

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: God's Agent of Grace

1906 – 1945



Dietrich Bonhoeffer, born February 4, 1906 (d. April 9, 1945) was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian. He was also a participant in the German Resistance movement against Nazism, and a founding member of the Confessing Church. His involvement in plans by members of the Abwehr, the German Military Intelligence Office, to assassinate Adolf Hitler resulted in his arrest in April 1943 and his subsequent execution by hanging on April 9, 1945, shortly before the war's end. His view of Christianity's role in the secular world has become very influential.

Academic training

Dietrich Bonhoeffer attended Tübingen University in central Germany for a year and visited Rome, where he became conscious of the universality of the church. Before he matriculated at the University of Berlin in 1924 Bonhoeffer was

exposed to Liberal Theology under leading theologians of the movement such as Adolf von Harnack (7 May 1851–10 June 1930).

Adolf Von Harnack was a German theologian and prominent church historian who produced many religious publications from 1873-1912. Adolf von Harnack studied the influence of Hellenistic philosophy on early Christian writing and called on Christians to question the authenticity of many doctrines that arose in the early Christian church. He rejected the gospel of John in favor of the synoptic gospels, criticized the Apostles' Creed, and promoted the social gospel all of which became part of Liberal Theology.

Liberal Theology

Liberal theology has its roots in the Enlightenment era which emphasized free will, reason, and the ability of human beings to make progress in all things including religion. As a result, individuals began to stand in judgment upon God, Christ, the church, and especially the Bible as a source of divine revelation.

Liberal theology is also rooted in romanticism which insisted on feeling and intuition as essential to human life. Objective revelation and study of the Bible was replaced by subjectivity in understanding its content and meaning.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 - 1834), is often called the "father of liberal theology." He identified religion as a feeling of absolute dependence. For him, theology described internal religious experience rather than defining external

religious truth. The main goal of Mr. Schleiermacher was to gain a hearing for religion among people who had previously rejected it.

The Essence of Religion

Schleiermacher argued that the essence of religion is the feeling of absolute dependence on God. This feeling can only be experienced through a profound self-consciousness. Schleiermacher is remembered as "the father of liberalism" because he maintained the essence of religion is not revelation outside of the self but feeling inside of the self. Such religious expression will naturally change with time and circumstance. A practical application of liberal theology is that salvation is not contained to faith in the person and work of Jesus. Rather, there are many ways to salvation and to heaven.

Another contemporary Liberal Theologian, D. F. Strauss, wrote the *Life of Jesus*, which purported to separate the "historical" life of Jesus from the "myths" surrounding it.

In the United States, Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969) popularized Liberal Theology in his preaching at the Riverside Church in New York City



Eternity alone will reveal the harm Mr. Fostick did to the people of God by undermining their faith in the death, burial, and resurrections of Jesus Christ and His atoning work at Calvary.

While at First Presbyterian Church, on May 21, 1922, he delivered his famous sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”, in which he defended the modernist position. In that sermon, he presented the Bible as a record of the unfolding of God’s will, not as the literal Word of God. He saw the history of Christianity as one of development, progress, and gradual change. To the fundamentalists, this was rank apostasy, and the battle lines were drawn.

Later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, biblical criticism would play a large role in Liberal Theology. In biblical criticism the authorship of the Scriptures was brought into question and the miracles of the Bible were rejected. Reason was exalted beyond faith.

Theological Influences

While being exposed to Liberal Theology, Dietrich Bonhoeffer discovered the writings of Karl Barth, an eminent Swiss theologian whose pioneering work in

neo-orthodoxy was a reaction against liberal theology. Karl Barth believed that "liberal theology", which he understood as emphasizing personal experience and societal development, minimized Scripture, reducing it to a mere textbook of metaphysics while sanctioning the deification of human culture.

Being protective of Liberal Theology, Adolf von Harnack cautioned Dietrich Bonhoeffer against dangers posed by Karl Barth's alleged "contempt for scientific theology". However, on his own, young Dietrich Bonhoeffer had become critical of Liberal Theology as too constraining and responsible for the lack of relevance in the church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was won over to Karl Barth's dialectical theology.

Though in time Bonhoeffer would become critical of both Adolf von Harnack and Karl Barth, he remained deeply influenced by both in his own approach to theology. From Karl Barth, Dietrich retained the importance of having a Christ centered theology. From Adolf von Harnack, Bonhoeffer learned the importance of demonstrating the relevance of Christianity to the modern world.

A Brilliant Scholar

Because he was a brilliant scholar, Dietrich Bonhoeffer graduated *summa cum laude* from the University of Berlin in 1927. He earned his doctorate in theology at the age of 21 with a ground-breaking thesis, *Sanctorum Communio* (Communion of Saints), which presented a significantly new way of looking at the

nature of the Christian church. His work was praised by Karl Barth as a "theological miracle."

Preparation for the Pastorate

In order to train further to become a pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent a year in 1928-1929 as a curate in a parish of German community in Barcelona, Spain, and found that he enjoyed the art and drama of bull-fighting. At this same time, Bonhoeffer witnessed social chaos and decline of traditional values amid international financial crisis and became critical of the church as being insensitive to evident needs of the world around it and instead burying Christ in the heap of religious symbols and ceremonies.

In Pursuit of Academic Excellence

In 1929, Bonhoeffer then returned to the University of Berlin to work on a habilitation (ha-bil-i-ta-tion) thesis titled *Act and Being*, in which he traced the influence of transcendental philosophy on Protestant and Catholic theologies.

If you are not familiar with the term "habilitation", it refers to the highest academic qualification a person can achieve by his or her own pursuit in certain European and Asian countries. Earned after obtaining a research doctorate, the habilitation requires the candidate to write a professorial thesis based on independent scholarly accomplishments, reviewed by and defended before an

academic committee in a process similar to that for the doctoral dissertation. However, the level of scholarship has to be considerably higher than that required for a Ph.D. thesis.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Harlem

Still considered by the Lutheran Church too young to be ordained at the age of 23, Dietrich Bonhoeffer went to the United States in 1930 for postgraduate study and a teaching fellowship at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Dietrich found the American seminary beneath the level of his demanding German standards. "There is no theology here", he exclaimed, but he did have life-changing experiences and formed some deep and lasting friendships.

While in New York, Dietrich studied under the American theologian Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr (June 21, 1892 – June 1, 1971). A powerful speaker and lucid author, Niebuhr was the most influential minister of the 1940s and 1950s in public affairs. Niebuhr battled with the religious liberals over what he called their naïve views of sin and the optimism of the Social Gospel, and battled with the religious conservatives over what he viewed as their naïve view of Scripture and their narrow definition of "true religion." He was a leader of liberal intellectuals and supported many liberal causes, but his ideas were often too religious for secular liberals, while his view that the Bible could not be taken literally was too liberal for the Fundamentalists. Thus he was too secular for many of the religious

and too religious for the secular, but just right for those who appreciated the irony of history.

His long-term impact involves relating the Christian faith to "realism" in foreign affairs, rather than idealism, and his contribution to modern "just war" thinking. Niebuhr's perspective had a great impact on many liberals, who came to support a "realist" foreign policy. His influence has been acknowledged by such recent leaders of American foreign policy as former president Jimmy Carter, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, President Barack Obama, and Senator John McCain of Arizona.

Dietrich also met Frank Fisher, a black fellow seminarian who introduced him to Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where he taught a Sunday school and formed a life-long love for African-American spiritual, a collection of which he took back to Germany.

Bonhoeffer heard Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. preach the Gospel of Social Justice and became sensitive to social injustices experienced by minorities and the ineptness of the church to bring about integration. He began to see things "from below", from the perspective of those who suffer oppression. He observed,

"Here one can truly speak and hear about sin and grace and the love of God...the Black Christ is preached with rapturous passion and vision." Later Bonhoeffer was to refer to his impressions abroad as the point at which "I turned from phraseology to reality."

Dietrich also learned to drive an automobile although he failed the driving test three times. He traveled by car through the United States to Mexico, where he was invited to speak on the subject of peace. His early visits to Italy, Libya, Spain, United States, Mexico, and Cuba opened Bonhoeffer to ecumenism.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer on a weekend getaway with confirmands of Zion's Church congregation (1932).

After his return from America in 1931, Bonhoeffer became a lecturer of systematic theology at the University of Berlin. Deeply interested in ecumenism, he was appointed by the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches, a forerunner of the World Council of Churches, as one of their three European youth secretaries. At this time he seems to have undergone something of a personal conversion from a theologian primarily attracted to the intellectual side of Christianity to a dedicated man of faith, resolved to carry out the teaching of Christ as he found it revealed in the Gospels. In November 15, 1931, he was ordained at the old-Prussian united St. Matthew's Church (German: *St. Matthäikirche*) in Berlin at the age of 25.

Confessing Church

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's promising academic and ecclesiastical career was dramatically altered with Nazi ascension to power on January 30, 1933. From the first Bonhoeffer was a determined opponent of the regime. Two days after Adolf Hitler was installed as Chancellor, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio address attacking Hitler, in which he warned Germany against slipping into an idolatrous cult of the *Führer* (leader), who could very well turn out to be *Ver-führer* (mis-leader, or seducer). He was cut off the air in the middle of a sentence.

In April, Dietrich raised the first and virtually lone voice for church resistance to Hitler's persecution of Jews when he declared that the church must not simply,

"bandage the victims under the wheel, but jam the spoke in the wheel itself."

The thoughtful use of forceful resistance by Christians to evil was openly articulated.

Congregational Civil War within Christendom

On July 23, 1933, at the insistence of Adolf Hitler's ruling party, new elections were held by all the German Protestant church bodies. This was an informal attempt by the Nazis to find a way to control the church by filling its leadership with individuals sympathetic to the Nazis objectives which included

anti-Semitism and racism. Such an election could be forced upon the church in Germany because there was division among God's people.

Even before the Nazi seizure of power, there had been struggle within the Evangelical Church. The nationalistic *German Christian* movement had already clashed with the Young Reformers in the constitutional church election in November 1932. The unity of the German church was to be tested again in 1933, instigated by the new regime's lust for power and desire to control every facet of life including the religious life of the nation.

The German Christians

Despite Dietrich Bonhoeffer's efforts, an overwhelming majority of Nazi-supported *German Christians* won key church positions in the rigged July election. The *German Christians* won a majority of church leadership positions with some notable exceptions in Bavaria, Hanover, and Wurttemberg. These few uncorrupted assemblies became regarded as the "intact churches", in contrast to those who embraced Nazis ideology. Those congregations were called the "destroyed churches."

Imposition of an Interdict

In the faithfully few congregations where he had influence, Dietrich Bonhoeffer urged an interdict upon all pastoral services such as baptisms,

weddings, funerals, etc. in opposition to Nazification, but Karl Barth and others advised against such a radical proposal. An interdict is the official refusal by the church to perform religious duties for the people in a specific location in order to bring them to repentance and into conformity with church dogma and practice.

A New Statement of Faith

In August 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse were officially appointed by opposition church leaders to the Nazi regime to draft the Bethel Confession, a new statement of faith in opposition to the *German Christians*. Notable for affirming God's faithfulness to Jews as His chosen people, the Bethel Confession was however so watered down to make it more palatable that later Bonhoeffer himself refused to sign.

The Emergency Covenant of Pastors

On September 11, 1933, Bonhoeffer helped form the *Pfarrernotbund* [the Emergency Covenant of Pastors] with his colleague Martin Niemöller. The objective was to unite German evangelical theologians, pastors and church officeholders against the introduction of the Aryan paragraph into the 28 Protestant regional church bodies and the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche (DEK, the German Evangelical Church). Officially opposed to Bonhoeffer and Niemöller the Reichsbishop Ludwig Müller and the *German Christians* who had helped to merge the

German evangelical churches into one "Reich's church" that would embrace Nazi ideology and lack any Jewish or Christian origins.

As a Christian resistance to National Socialism the *Pfarrernotbund* [the Emergency Covenant of Pastors] became the forerunner of the Confessing Church, founded the following year in May 1934 at Barmen. The Confessing Church would be in direct opposition to the Nazi-supported German Christian movement.

The Barmen Declaration

The Confessing Church was not large, but it represented a major source of Christian opposition to the Nazi government. The Barmen Declaration, drafted by Karl Barth and adopted by the Confessing Church, insisted that Christ, not the Führer, was the head of the church. However, most streamlined Protestant church bodies and the newly established Nazi-submissive German Evangelical Church, shaped by long traditions of nationalism and obedience to state authority in their functions as state churches (until 1918), for the most part acquiesced to Nazification of the church.

In September 1933, the church Aryan paragraph prohibiting non-Aryans from taking parish posts was approved by the national church synod at Wittenberg. When Bonhoeffer was offered such a post in eastern Berlin, he refused it in protest of the racist policy.

London Ministry

Disheartened by the German Churches' complacency with the Nazi regime, 27-year-old Dietrich Bonhoeffer accepted in the autumn of 1933 a two-year appointment as a pastor of two German-speaking Protestant churches in London, St. Paul's and Sydenham. He explained to Karl Barth that he found little support for his views, even among friends, and that "it was about time to go for a while into the desert", but Karl Barth regarded this as running away from real battle. He sharply rebuked Bonhoeffer that

"I can only reply to all the reasons and excuses which you put forward [to ask]: 'And what of the German Church?'"

Karl Barth accused Bonhoeffer of abandoning his post and wasting his "splendid theological armory" while "the house of your church is on fire". Dietrich Bonhoeffer was encouraged to return to Berlin "by the next ship."

In all fairness, Bonhoeffer had not gone to England simply to avoid trouble at home; Dietrich hoped to use the ecumenical movement to advance the interest of the newly formed Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer continued his involvement with the Confessing Church, running up a staggeringly high telephone bill to maintain his contacts in Germany, especially with Martin Niemoller (14 January 1892 – 6 March 1984). Like Bonhoeffer, Pastor Niemoller tried to warn the German intellectuals that the rise of the Nazi to power would be the death of all. But they did not listen.

After the war, on January 6, 1946, Martin Niemoller was to stand before the representatives of the Confessing Church in Frankfurt and deliver his most chilling condemnation of those who had let the Nazis come to power without protest.

"THEY CAME FIRST for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.

THEN THEY CAME for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.

THEN THEY CAME for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

THEN THEY CAME for me
and by that time no one was left to speak up."

While living abroad, Dietrich Bonhoeffer moved in the international gatherings. He was able to rally many people to an opposition to German Christian movement and its attempt to amalgamate Nazi racism with the Christian gospel. Bishop Theodor Heckel, the official in charge of German Evangelical Church foreign affairs, traveled to London to warn Bonhoeffer to abstain from any ecumenical activity not directly authorized by Berlin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer refused to listen to the dire warning.

Finkenwalde Seminary

In 1935, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was presented with a much-sought after opportunity to study non-violent resistance under Gandhi in his ashram, which is a religious hideaway for prayer and meditation. Perhaps remembering Karl Barth's stinging rebuke, Dietrich decided to return to Germany in order to head an underground seminary for training Confessing Church pastors in Finkenwalde.

As the Nazi suppression of the Confessing Church intensified, Karl Barth finally fled to Switzerland in 1935, Martin Niemöller was arrested in July 1937, and Bonhoeffer's authorization to teach at the University of Berlin was revoked in August 1936 after he was denounced as "pacifist and enemy of the state" by Theodor Heckel.

A Generous Benefactor

Denied the opportunity to teach openly Bonhoeffer went underground to teach to find funds for the underground seminaries. He found a great benefactor in Ruth von Kleist-Retzow. In times of trouble, his former students and their wives would take refuge in her majestic Pomeranian estate within the confines of Germany. Dietrich himself was a frequent guest. Later he would fall in love with Kleist-Retzow's granddaughter Maria von Wedemeyer, to whom he was engaged three months before his arrest.

The Closing of the Seminary

By August 1937, the Reich's SS Minister, Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945) decreed the education and examination of Confessing ministry candidates illegal. In September 1937, the Gestapo closed the seminary at Finkenwalde and by November arrested 27 pastors and former students. It was around this time that Bonhoeffer published his best-known book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, a study on the Sermon on the Mount in which he attacked "cheap grace" as a cover for ethical laxity and preached "costly grace".

Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent the next two years secretly travelling from one eastern German village to another to conduct a "seminary on the run" while supervising his students, most of whom were working illegally in small parishes. He was not without allies in this endeavor. The von Blumenthal family hosted the underground seminary in its estate of Gross Schlönwitz. The pastors of Gross Schlönwitz and neighboring villages supported the education of the young seminarians by employing and housing the students as vicars in their congregations. In the summer 1939 the underground seminary could move to Sigurdshof, an outlying estate (Vorwerk) of von Kleist family in Wendisch Tychow. It was there that the Gestapo was able to shut down the seminary completely after the outbreak of World War II in March 1940.

Potential Military Service

It was in February of 1938 that Dietrich Bonhoeffer made his initial contact with members of the German Resistance. His brother-in-law Hans von Doh-nan-yi introduced him to a group seeking Hitler's overthrow at Abwehr, German military intelligence. Bonhoeffer also learned from Doh-nan-yi that war was imminent. He was particularly troubled by the prospect of his own draft status. As a committed pacifist opposed to Nazi regime, Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew he could never swear an oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler and fight in his army. To refuse military induction was potentially a capital offence for non service was viewed as cowardly and unpatriotic.

Dietrich was also worried about consequence of refusing military service for Confessing Church, a move that would be frowned upon by most Christians and their churches at the time. By refusing to serve Bonhoeffer knew that others might suffer on his behalf.

Return to the United States

It was at this juncture that Bonhoeffer left for the United States in June 1939 at the invitation of Union Theological Seminary in New York. Amid much inner turmoil, he soon regretted his decision despite strong pressures from his friends to stay in the U.S. He wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr:

"I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the 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... Christians in Germany will have to 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 civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from security." He returned to Germany on the last scheduled steamer to cross the Atlantic.

A Change of Heart

Back in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was further harassed by the Nazi authorities. He was forbidden to speak in public and was required to regularly report his activities to the police in 1940. In 1941, he was forbidden to print or to publish.

It was all too much. A change had come into the heart of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He who was an avowed pacifist and pastor, joined the Abwehr (a German military intelligence organization) which was also the center of the anti-Hitler resistance. Simply put, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began to advocate Hitler's assassination.

Through his brother-in-law Doh-nan-yi, Dietrich came to know about the various plots in 1943 to kill the Fuehrer. He knew who was actively involved in the planning and he knew why Hitler had to die. In the face of Nazi atrocities, the full scale of which he learned through the Abwehr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer concluded that

"the ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to live."

The Acceptance of Guilt

Bonhoeffer did not justify his murderous intentions and disloyal actions against the state but accepted that he was taking guilt upon himself. He wrote,

"when a man takes guilt upon himself in responsibility, he imputes his guilt to himself and no one else. He answers for it...Before other men he is justified by dire necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience, but before God he hopes only for grace."

In this connection, it is worthwhile to recall a sermon Bonhoeffer had preached in 1932 in which he said:

"the blood of martyrs might once again be demanded, but this blood, if we really have the courage and loyalty to shed it, will not be innocent, shining like that of the first witnesses for the faith. On our blood lies heavy guilt, the guilt of the unprofitable servant who is cast into outer darkness."

Double agent of Abwehr

Under cover of Abwehr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began to serve as a courier for the German resistance movement to reveal its existence and intentions and secure possible peace terms for a post-Hitler government with the Allies through his ecumenical contacts abroad. His visits to Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland were camouflaged as legitimate intelligence activities for Abwehr.

In May 1942, Dietrich met Anglican Bishop George Bell of Chichester, a member of the House of Lords and an ally of the Confessing Church. Once in England political feelers were sent to Anthony Eden, then British foreign minister. However, the British government ignored these overtures, like all other approaches from the German resistance.

In another area, Doh-nan-yi and Bonhoeffer became involved in an Abwehr operation to help German Jews escape to Switzerland. It was during this time that Bonhoeffer worked on his book *Ethics* and wrote letters to keep up the spirits of his former students. He intended *Ethics* as his *magnum opus*, but it remained unfinished due to his arrest.

Arrest

On April 6, 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his faithful brother-in-law Doh-nan-yi were arrested, not because of their conspiracy but because of a long-standing rivalry between the SS and Abwehr for intelligence fiefdom. One of the informers of Abwehr, Wilhelm Schmidhuber, was arrested by the Gestapo for involvement in a private currency affair. In the subsequent investigations the Gestapo uncovered Doh-nan-yi's operation in which 14 Jews were sent to Switzerland ostensibly as Abwehr agents. However, it was discovered they had received large sums of money in foreign currency as compensation for confiscated properties.

The Gestapo, which had been looking for any dirt to discredit Abwehr, sensed that they had a corruption case against Doh-nan-yi and searched his office at Abwehr, where they discovered notes revealing Dietrich Bonhoeffer's foreign contacts and other documents related to the anti-Hitler conspiracy. One of the documents was a note that discussed plans for a journey by Bonhoeffer to Rome, where he would explain to church leaders why the assassination attempts on Hitler in March 1943 had failed.

Initially, Bonhoeffer's involvement in the assassination plots was not known by the Gestapo as Abwehr succeeded in explaining away the most damning documents as official coded Military Intelligence materials. Doh-nan-yi and Bonhoeffer were, however, suspected of subverting Nazi policy toward Jews and

misusing Abwehr for inappropriate purposes. Bonhoeffer was, for instance, suspected of evading military call-up, using Abwehr to circumvent Gestapo injunction against public speaking and staying in Berlin, using Abwehr to further Confessing Church works, etc.

Imprisonment

For a year and a half, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned near Berlin at the Tegel military prison while awaiting trial. There he continued his work in religious outreach among his fellow prisoners and guards. Sympathetic guards helped smuggle his letters out of prison to Eberhard Bethge and others, and these uncensored letters were posthumously published in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. A guard named Corporal Knobloch even offered to help him escape from the prison and "disappear" with him. Plans were made for that end. But Bonhoeffer declined it fearing Nazi retribution on his family, especially his brother and brother-in-law, who were then also imprisoned.



A memorial to members of German resistance executed on April 9, 1945.
Flossenbürg concentration camp was located in Bavaria, Germany.
96,000 prisoners passed through Flossenbürg. About 30,000 died there
The camp was liberated in late April, 1945.

After the failure of the July 20 Plot on Hitler's life in 1944 and the discovery of additional secret Abwehr documents relating to the conspiracy by the Gestapo in September 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's connections with the conspirators were discovered. He was transferred from the military prison in Berlin Tegel, where he had been held for 18 months, to the detention cellar of the house prison of the Reich Security Head Office, the Gestapo's high security prison.

In February 1945, he was secretly moved to Buchenwald concentration camp, and finally to Flossenbürg.

On April 4, 1945, the diaries of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of Abwehr, were discovered. In a maniacal rage upon reading the diaries, Adolf Hitler ordered that the Abwehr conspirators be destroyed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was led away just as he concluded his final Sunday service and asked an English prisoner Payne Best to remember him to Bishop George Bell of Chichester if he should ever reach his home:

"This is the end — for me the beginning of life."

Execution

Bonhoeffer was condemned to death on April 8, 1945, by SS judge Otto Thorbeck at a drumhead court-martial without witnesses, records of proceedings or a defense in Flossenbürg concentration camp. He was executed there by hanging at dawn on April 9, 1945, just three weeks before the Soviet capture of Berlin and a month before the capitulation of Nazi Germany.

Like other executions associated with the July 20 Plot of 1944, the execution was particularly brutal. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was stripped of his clothing and led naked into the execution yard, where he was hanged with thin wire for strangulation. Hanged with Bonhoeffer were eight fellow conspirators:

- Admiral Wilhelm Canaris,
- Canaris' deputy General Hans Oster,

- military jurist General Karl Sack,
- General Friedrich von Rabenau,
- businessman Theodor Strünck,
- and German resistance (anti-Nazi) fighter Ludwig Gehre.
- Bonhoeffer's brother, Klaus Bonhoeffer,
- and his brothers-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi
- and Rüdiger Schleicher were executed elsewhere later in the month.

The camp doctor who witnessed the execution wrote:

“I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer ... kneeling on the floor praying fervently to 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 short prayer and then climbed the few 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.”

Legacy

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life as a pastor and theologian of great intellect and spirituality who lived as he preached and his martyrdom in opposition to Nazism

exerted great influence and inspiration for Christians across broad denominations and ideologies including figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu of Cape Town, South Africa.

Overshadowed by his life and death, the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer has also remained very influential although interpretations are necessarily often based on speculations and projections. Because of its unsystematic and fragmentary nature due to his early death, his theology was subject to diverse and often contradictory interpretations. His Christocentric approach appealed to conservative, confession-minded Protestants while his commitment to social justice as a cardinal responsibility of Christianity appealed to liberal Protestants.

A Theology of Christ

Central to his theology is Christ, in whom God and the world are reconciled. To Dietrich Bonhoeffer, God is a suffering God, whose manifestation is found in this-worldliness. He believed that the Incarnation of God in flesh made it unacceptable to speak of God and the world "in terms of two spheres," an implicit attack upon Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms.

Rather, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stressed personal and collective piety and revived the idea of an imitation of Christ. He argued that Christians should not retreat from the world, but have a duty to act within it. He believed that two elements were constitutive of faith:

First, the implementation of justice and second, the acceptance of divine suffering. He insisted that the church, like the Christians, "had to share in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world" if it were to be a true church of Christ.

In his prison letters, Dietrich Bonhoeffer also raised tantalizing questions about the role of Christianity and the church in a "world come of age", where human beings no longer need a metaphysical God as a stop-gap to human limitations, and mused about the emergence of a "religion-less Christianity", where God would be unclouded from metaphysical constructions of the last 1900 years.

Influenced by Karl Barth's distinction between faith and religion, he had a critical view of the phenomenon of religion and asserted that revelation abolished religion which he called the "garment" of faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who witnessed the complete failure of the German Protestant church as an institution in the face of Nazism, saw this challenge as an opportunity of renewal for Christianity.

Years after Bonhoeffer's death, some Protestant thinkers developed his critique into a thoroughgoing attack against traditional Christianity in the "Death of God" movement, which briefly attracted the attention of the mainstream culture in the mid-1960s. However, honest critics, such as the French philosopher Jacques Ellul (January 6, 1912 – May 19, 1994) and others, have charged that those radical interpretations of Bonhoeffer's insights amount to a grave distortion, that Dietrich

Bonhoeffer did not mean to say that God no longer had anything to do with humanity and had become a mere cultural artifact. More recent Bonhoeffer interpretation is more cautious in this regard, respecting the parameters of the neo-orthodox school to which he belonged.

Practical Lessons from the Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

1. It is not easy to live out the ethics of the Christian life. The gospel of love and grace, humility and service is challenged by the evil which men do. It is not easy to be consistent in the service of the Savior.

In a desire to be a person of nonviolence, is it right to allow others, like the Nazis, to rape wives and daughters, confiscate wealth, and take away ever freedom in the name of the state?

Good people struggle for the right answer as to the mind of Christ on this matter.

2. No sin can be performed in isolation. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer decided to oppose the Nazis regime, work for the Abwehr, and actively seek to assassinate Adolf Hitler, he entered into a life of lies and deceit with murder in his heart. The longing to kill Germany's Dictator led to other behavior that can only be called "works of the flesh" according to biblical passages. In a series of cynical interviews, the interrogator of Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not miss the irony of the situation.

The Bible teaches, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. 2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation" (Romans 13:1-2). Was Mr. Bonhoeffer willing to be damned?

The Bible says to speak the truth, why then was Mr. Bonhoeffer lying about what he knew of the active resistance to the Fuehrer by members of the Abwehr?

Jesus taught His follower to love others. "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. 44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44). Did Mr. Bonhoeffer love the Fuehrer? Was trying to assassinate him not violating the ethical teaching of Christ?

3. It is necessary for Christian leaders in particular to study the place of evil in the plan of God and the proper response to it. God's people need an answer to the question, "How then should we live?"

- Is it true that, "Being evil is worse than doing evil"?
- Is Dietrich Bonhoeffer correct when he wrote, "Better for a lover of truth to tell a lie, than for a liar to tell the truth"?
- Should Christians be taught, "Escapism may be the ultimate guilt"?

The church wants to know.