

Dietrich bonhoeffer: a pastor's response to nazism.

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



Scholar, theologian, professor, pastor, visionary, double agent, conspirator, and martyr are some of the attributes associated with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The manner in which Dietrich was reared lent a hand to the path he took as a young man, his family having the means to properly educate him and his siblings gave him a thirst for knowledge. That thirst led him to pursue an academic career as a theologian, and later his work as a theologian led him to be a pastor.

Bonhoeffer lived in the midst of a severe moral and political ineptness yet he continued to hold to the truths of Scripture while his fellow countrymen were walking the slippery slope of Nazism. The ideals Bonhoeffer held to heart were constantly under attack from the oppressive government under which he lived. The result of this oppression was at first productive in the development of Dietrich's theology and his resolve to teach the next generation of pastors to hold true to the gospel in the midst of oppression.

Later this oppression led Bonhoeffer to leave Germany for the United States this trip was short lived as Dietrich soon resolved he must return to Germany upon his return he joined a conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

Bonhoeffer's decision to conspire against Hitler ultimately led to his imprisonment and death. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in February 1906 to Karl Bonhoeffer and Paula von Hase Bonhoeffer. Karl Bonhoeffer was an esteemed professor of neurology and psychiatry at the University of Berlin and also served at Charité Hospital in Berlin serving in the psychiatric unit.

The Bonhoeffer family consisted of eight children including Dietrich, there were four boys and four girls. There were 3 older boys, Karl-Friedrich, Walter

(who perished in World War 1) and Klaus. The older girls were Ursula and Christine, Dietrich had a twin sister Sabine and to complete the family was Susanne. Karl Bonhoeffer was an agnostic while Paula came from a family of theologians. " The household was not notably religious. The conventional Bible-story Christian nurture was supplied in the children's early years, the two governesses were pious young women, a simple blessing was always asked at table- and that was it.

Dr. Bonhoeffer and the older children were all of scientific or legal bent; an unaggressive agnosticism prevailed among them. "[1] Coming from the environment stated above made things interesting when as a young teenager Dietrich informed his parent that he wanted to study theology. This came as a shock to his family as they thought he would pursue music due to his abundant skills in this area. His father thought the sedentary life of a pastor was not a good fit for his son, but after seeing how he lived he knew that it was the right path for him.

Paula Bonhoeffer was trained as a teacher at the university and home-schooled all her children until they were ready to enter the German Gymnasium which was a college preparatory school. Dietrich started his study of theology at Tübingen at age seventeen. He excelled in his studies to the point that he finished his dissertation, titled *Sanctorum Communio*; " The Communion of Saints," by the time he was twenty-one years of age. Over the next few years Dietrich would travel to Barcelona, Spain back to Berlin, and then to the United States. While in the United States he studied and taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

He did all this traveling because he was too young to be ordained. This gave Dietrich the ability to pursue his studies more and focus his career on teaching and not pastoring a church. While in New York he made a habit of worshipping with an African-American congregation and teaching Sunday School. While in the United States he also was introduced to many ideas such as pacifism, social justice, and ecumenism. " He (Dietrich) encountered a pacifism that was rooted in the Sermon on the Mount- personified in the French theologian and friend Jean Laserre. [2] The idea of pacifism is one that Dietrich accepted whole heartedly he believed that man could not justify war. His pacifism lead to an internal struggle when the Nazis came to power and started to persecute and kill the Jews. During his years of study Bonhoeffer became acquainted with the teachings of Karl Barth. Barth and his writings influenced young Bonhoeffer to pursue theology to it's fullest and not be boxed into the liberal theology taught at the University of Berlin. Bonhoeffer struck up a friendship with Barth that lasted until the end of his life.

Dietrich would spend time with Barth at his home in Bonn and they would talk theology, they would criticize each others work and challenge each other in their views of what it means to be a Christian and a part of the church. These meetings continued even after Barth moved to Switzerland in the face of Nazi persecution. These meetings and letters helped Bonhoeffer explore his theology outside the bounds of the university. Upon returning from his year of sabbatical in New York Dietrich continued his teaching position and the University of Berlin.

This was all happening about the same time Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime was slowly gaining power in the government and in popularity among the people. When Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany things were started to change but the full extent of the Nazi's plan was not yet revealed. Dietrich saw that trying times were ahead for those who were God seekers, this was due to the fact that shortly after the political election there was a call for church elections. Among the churches in Germany there were conflicts over the rise of the Nazi party.

There were some pastors and Bishops who would not preach Nazi propaganda, so Hitler called for church elections to fill the offices with his supporters. There was some resistance to just letting them take over but this small remnant did not have control over the mob. With the church now under control of the Nazis, those who saw a great contradiction between Nazi Christianity and true Christianity were left with no option but to start their own church. This was allowed by the Nazis but they kept a close eye on them.

This new group was called the Confessing Church they were an evangelical remnant that had not been persuaded by the masses. On the day of the church election Dietrich preached this, " of you who have lost your church, ... let us go together in search of the eternal church. "[3] This group of believers who opposed the Nazis were trying to speak reason and the truth of Scriptures to the German people. Dietrich was among the founding members of the Confessing Church and helped pen the Bethel Confession which was their statement of belief.

He used the formation of the Confessing Church to push his passion for ecumenism among the churches. In 1933 while the Confessing Church was forming Dietrich decided to take a post in London. Some of his colleagues like Karl Barth accused him of leaving his church while it was burning, but Dietrich thought he needed some time away because his thoughts were not well received even among friends. While in London he pushed for ecumenical relationships between the churches in England and elsewhere to condemn the German Christian Movement which allowed the Nazis to take control of the church. To this end he was not very successful.

He also caught the ire of church leaders in Germany who sent Theodor Heckel the foreign affairs minister to London to instruct Bonhoeffer to not engage in ecumenical activity not authorized by Berlin, a warning not heeded by young Dietrich who was just twenty-seven years of age in 1933. After two years in London Dietrich returned to Germany, the Confessing Church had lost its momentum. The Confessing Church was still going and since it was not recognized as a state church it had to train its pastors in an underground seminary. The church invited Dietrich to lead their seminary called Finkenwalde.

It was here that Dietrich wrote the books *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*. The former came from his time as the leader of Finkenwalde Seminary. The latter is a study of the Sermon on the Mount. In 1936 Dietrich was declared a pacifist and an enemy of the state by Theodor Heckel. For the next few years Dietrich lived in the community of Finkenwalde with his students and taught them monastic and communal living as they open the

Scriptures together to prepare these men for the ministry in the true church that was opposing the counterfeit church of the German Christian Movement.

They had a few years of great ministry that was funded by benefactors who believed in the ideals of the Confessing Church. In 1938 Bonhoeffer was banned from Berlin, two years later the Gestapo came and closed down the seminary and arrested some of its pastors. At this time Dietrich was offered a position to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York, an offer he initially accepted. Dietrich was trying to escape in to the safety of the United States to avoid serving in the military and having to deal with living under the oppressive Nazi regime.

Upon arriving in the U. S. Dietrich worked with German refugees and emigrants, a job that posed my challenges for him. Bonhoeffer wrote in the Cost of Discipleship, "'Costly grace is the sanctuary of God,' he writes. And, 'faith is only real when there is obedience. '[4] These words tugged at Dietrich's heart because he knew where he should be and what God had called him to do but choose the easy road. " on June 30, 1939, Dietrich wrote these words to Paul Lehmann, 'I can hardly find it in my heart to tell you that ...

I have had to decide to return to Germany,'"[5] The words here seem to echo the actions of Jesus in John 4: 4 " and he must needs go through Samaria" (KJV). This has the same idea as Dietrich and his return to Germany. Jesus could have gone around Samaria as all the Jews did, but he had a divine appointment with that woman at the well and the people of Samaria. Dietrich

was having the same feeling that he must return to Germany but he did not have to.

He was living what he had written " faith is only real when there is obedience. "[6] The following was written to Dietrich's friend Reinhold Neibuhr in a farewell note, " 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 thereconstructionof Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people. "[7] This shows God's call for Dietrich to follow him.

Dietrich and his friends knew he was returning to a hostile place where he would be either be drafted into the military or face severe persecution. Upon his return to Germany Dietrich made contact with his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi who was a member of the military counterintelligence service called Abwehr. The Abwehr was the center of a small German resistance whose goal was to assassinate Hitler and overthrow the government.

Dietrich was given a role as a double agent in the Abwehr in 1940, from that point he was fully integrated into what was called the German Resistance.

He would have secret meetings with pastors and leaders from other countries as he pretend to be gathering information for the Nazi government, while really plotting against them. It is at this point where people have trouble following Bonhoeffer's theology and reconciling his beliefs with his actions. There are a couple of ways to deal with this portion of his life.

Looking at these two seeming seemingly incompatible thought processes

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one could assume that Bonhoeffer had fallen off his rocker but it helps us to see how he reconciled this. Bonhoeffer precisely advocates patience when he puts forth as a concrete command of God the saying 'resist not evil.' By this he means: struggle against the enemy, but avoid idolizing him. Keep him unimportant. Failure to struggle is submission to the enemy and not to God. "[8] As Bonhoeffer looked at the situation he must resist the evil that was surrounding him, and to do that he would have to go to extreme measures and challenge the ideals he came to hold so dear in the midst of such moral depravity. He saw resisting evil as a command in the loose sense.

Dietrich wrote about a religionless Christianity in which a mature Christian steps outside the structure of the church and enters the world to enact change through the things he has been taught and learned from Scripture and the church. Woelfel writes the following about Bonhoeffer: "As the integrated man that he was Bonhoeffer pioneered 'religionless- Christianity' indeed as well as in word. His full secular involvement in the German Resistance during the war is the supreme example, but throughout his life he was a vigorously world affirming Christian. [9] This idea of religionless Christianity lets a follower of Christ fully engage his world while leaving the confines of the church. This was one thing that Bonhoeffer had lived at as well as wrote in his final years. Many look at Bonhoeffer's writings in Prison and his work titled Ethics and see the man who was deeply committed to his faith and also a man who was torn by what was an ethical Christian to do in the midst of such atrocities that were being committed by the Nazis.

A look back at Bonhoeffer's life brings this into full view as stated thusly, “ for it was while Bonhoeffer was trying to explain his own participation in the lying and double dealing of traitors that he developed the beginnings of what has since become known as situational and contextual ethics: the right and the good and the true seen not as immutable objectives, but as qualities of any action which is appropriate to the loving will of God as the particular possibilities of the immediate situation permit. [10] The argument here is that of when one looks at the situations that they are faced with and think to themselves what is right in the eyes of God. Bonhoeffer was living and arguing that as a Christian we should act in a way that is appropriate for a Christian living in the will of God. Bonhoeffer's was face to face with one of the most reprehensible political regimes in the history of the world, you choose one of two camps, there were those who just threw up their hands and said there is nothing I can do. The other group were those who said this is unacceptable and do whatever is in their power to fight for what is right in God's eyes.

Dietrich was arrested on April 5, 1943 after the documents were discovered that he and his brother-in-law were illegally helping Jews. He would never be a free man again for his part in the German Resistance. He was imprisoned at Tegel military prison for a year and a half to await trial in that time more documents came out that pointed to Bonhoeffer as part of the conspiracy to kill Hitler. In light of this evidence he was transferred from Tegel to a house prison and eventually to Buchenwald concentration camp in February 1945.

Approximately two years after his initial arrest information from the chief of Abwehr journals were read by Hitler who in a rage said that all conspirators should be killed. On April 9, 1945 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hung at Buchenwald concentration camp. He left behind in his legacy his letters to friends and family from prison, and his work Ethics which had yet to be published before his death. When one looks at the life and times of Dietrich Bonhoeffer they see a complex man whose thirst for knowledge and truth were fostered from a young age. As a young man he set his feet on the path of a theologian to open the Bible and pull out the truths laid there in. His study of theology was intellectual yet practical he sought to open the Scriptures and pull Jesus out of them. Bonhoeffer came of age in the pre-third Reich era, but as a young man he came face to face with the Nazis and their oppressive ways. Dietrich used this time in his life to expand his study of theology to grow more mature in his faith to blaze a trail for himself among his peers. He fought with the social and political issues of his day and sought to fight injustice with truth and intellect but these proved to be ineffective.

His work as a theologian was well known among the Confessing Church and its followers. As Dietrich tried to fight for what was right and true he saw the moral compass of his country go askew. After he had tried all he could he became convinced that the only way to free Germany from this slippery slope was to overthrow the government by assassinating Hitler. His writings have opened the door to the study of ethics when faced with moral depravity, what it means to be and live as the church, and what it costs to follow Christ.

His teachings and theology have had an impact from the time they were published into the present. His thought helped usher in a new generation of theologians and how one can see their relationship to the church, culture and community and live and teach in such a way that Christ is on display.

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