

## **Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his Legacy**

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born on February 4, 1906 in Breslau, Germany. He was the sixth of eight children born to Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer. The Bonhoeffer family was fairly high in the German social order. Paula's mother was a countess, and her grandfather worked for Kaiser Wilhelm II. Karl was a respected neurologist and psychiatrist.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer decided in his early teens to be a theologian. This surprised and disappointed his parents, who were not particularly pious. They had expected him to pursue music, since he was a very good pianist, or to follow his father into a psychiatric career.

Bonhoeffer studied theology as well as several other subjects at Tübingen University starting in 1923. However, the Weimar Republic was experiencing skyrocketing inflation and a plummeting economy in the aftermath of World War I. This made studying in Berlin very difficult, and the following year Dietrich and his brother Klaus spent two months studying abroad in Italy. Dietrich was most interested by the Catholic Church in Rome, and worshiped at St. Peter's Basilica during Holy Week. When he returned, he continued his studies in Berlin under Reinhold Seeberg, who focused Bonhoeffer on the social aspect of the Church. In 1927, Bonhoeffer completed his dissertation titled *Sanctorium Communio*, which focused on theological revelation and social beliefs. *Sanctorium Communio* pleased Seeberg and brought Bonhoeffer early attention in the German Evangelical Church.

Upon finishing his theological exams, Bonhoeffer traveled to New York to study at Union College. During his studies there, he attended the First Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, and was surprised by the highly spiritual worship style of the African-Americans there. He also noticed the racial discrimination there and would later on compare it to the plight of European Jews under Hitler.

Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin in July of 1931. Shortly afterwards he attended a lecture from Karl Barth, a fellow theologian whose "dialectical theology" interested him. He had a chance to meet him in person after the lecture, and they maintained correspondence with each other for years.

Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. Bonhoeffer was almost immediately at odds with Hitler, and despised his growing anti-Semitism and glorification of the Aryan race. Two days later, on February 1, Bonhoeffer gave a lecture through the radio with the title "The Younger Generation's Altered View of the Concept of Fuhrer". In it he outlined Hitler's potential for corruption and misguidance of Germany. Publication of the "Aryan Paragraph" later that month created a schism in the German Evangelical Church. A group called the *Deutsche Christen* supported the Nazis and advocated for the Church to create their own "Aryan Paragraph" barring non-Aryans from holding positions in the Church. Many church leaders protested such an idea on grounds that it contradicted Christian doctrine. They supported the conversion of Jews to the Christian faith.

Bonhoeffer joined other anti-Nazi Protestants in forming the Confessing Church. He concluded that there are three things the Church needs to do if the State is acting in a corrupt and

discriminatory manner: first, to determine whether the State's actions are "legitimate and in accordance with its character as state", second, to help the victims of the State's actions, and third, to rectify the State's tyranny.

Over the next few years, Bonhoeffer traveled to Sofia, Bulgaria for a World Alliance conference and to London, England to serve at a German congregation there. All the while he professed his disagreement with the *Deutsche Christen*, anti-Semitism, and Nazism in general.

In the spring of 1935, Bonhoeffer opened an underground seminary for the Confessing Church, originally located on the Baltic port city of Zingst, but moved after a few months to the town of Finkenwalde. Local congregations and benefactors financed the seminary. Bonhoeffer would lead the seminary until September of 1937, when the Gestapo closed Finkenwalde and arrested 27 of Bonhoeffer's aspiring preachers.

Bonhoeffer spent the next two years secretly meeting with his students throughout eastern Germany, while hiding from increasing Gestapo attention. There he learned of the events of Kristallnacht in November of 1938. It was about this time that Bonhoeffer that the Church and anyone resisting Hitler needed to take "responsible action" by relieving Hitler of power, killing him if necessary.

On June 2, 1939, Bonhoeffer left Germany for America in order to escape compulsory military service. However, after only a month in New York, he found himself homesick and decided that he could not return to Germany after the war if he did not live through the war in his own country with his own people. He returned home to Germany in July.

Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, had approached Bonhoeffer a few months earlier about his willingness to take part in a resistance plot against Hitler. He had early declined, since he was planning on leaving Germany, but when he returned he contacted von Dohnanyi again, becoming involved with his conspiracy group. Their first operation was the smuggling of fourteen Jews to Switzerland. Unfortunately, the Gestapo discovered that money was missing and arrested von Dahnanyi and Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer spent his years in prison writing essays, poetry and letters to family and fellow theologians; many of them smuggled out through books. During this time, the Gestapo was realizing that Bonhoeffer was involved in more than just the corruption charge for which he was arrested. They soon charged him with assisting the escape of Jews and abuse of his intelligence position in the Abwehr. By late 1944, the Gestapo finally discovered the full extent of his involvement in conspiracies against the Reich. On April 9, 1945, Bonhoeffer was hung under direct orders from Hitler.

Some of Bonhoeffer's best-known writings include his first thesis *Sanctorium Communio*, as well as *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Ethics*, and *Life Together*. Some of his enduring theological ideas are "Stellvertretung," best translated as "vicarious representative action," which supports acting on behalf of, or for, someone else, much like Christ dying on the cross for all Christians. Bonhoeffer also concluded that Christ exists as a community, rather than a figure or a god. He

also believed that the Beatitudes mentioned during the Sermon on the Mount are guidelines for people to live out, not just a hypothetical image of what Heaven will be like.

Bonhoeffer was used on many sides of issues during the Cold War, and even as recently as the War on Terror. However, since there is not a single completely trusted biography of him (the one written by his friend Eberhard Bethge is considered to be the best), it is impossible to know for sure what his opinion would be on most issues.

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