

The Tragedy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer



Dietrich Bonhoeffer with confirmants in 1932

It was April 5, 1943 in Berlin, Germany. Dr. Karl Bonhoeffer answered a knock at the door and was surprised when two men asked to speak to his son Dietrich alone in his room. As a result of the conversation, during which he was neither notified of his arrest nor shown a search warrant, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was forced to accompany the men, who were SS agents, to a military prison.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was himself in the service of the Abwehr, the intelligence-gathering agency of the German army. However, his position as a government agent and as a member of a well-respected German family was not sufficient to ward off his arrest when large amounts of money contributed to the relief of Jewish refugees were traced to him.

After Bonhoeffer was in prison for about eighteen months, during which he enjoyed preferential treatment and constant communication with the outside, an attempt to assassinate Hitler occasioned a thorough shakeup within the Abwehr. High-ranking officials were implicated in the plot, and any person remotely connected to the scheme was summarily dealt with. Bonhoeffer was found to be complicit in the plan and fell victim to Hitler's wrath. He was hanged in Flossenburg on April 9, 1945, just three weeks before the Allied Army took the city.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is known throughout the Christian world today as a hero and Christian martyr. "Totally committed to Jesus Christ and to the church, he gave himself both in life and in death for his fellow men, proving that grace and discipleship are indeed costly," says Dallas M. Roark in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.¹

In *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, Richard Pierrard declares, "[Bonhoeffer] decided that the only way to secure peace would be to eliminate Hitler. For him, treason had become true patriotism ..."²

"Any Christian would do well to read the works of one who gave his life in direct connection with his Christian convictions. There have been many martyrs in this century, but few who so vividly recorded the circumstances that led to their martyrdom with both theological astuteness and a vision for future posterity." So says Todd Kappelman in an article for Probe Ministries titled "Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Man and His Mission."³

Even secular sources acknowledge his death as a direct result of his Christian faith. The website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum states: "Bonhoeffer has become widely known as one of the few Christian martyrs in a history otherwise stained by Christian complicity with Nazism."⁴

Bonhoeffer's life is dramatized and eulogized in all forms of media, ensuring along with his extensive literary contributions that he will remain a personality definitive of his time, and influential in ours.

Dare we challenge the view of Bonhoeffer as a Christian martyr? Does our distance from the evils he faced disqualify us from drawing conclusions and holding opinions contrary to those of the world around us?

Are we guilty—as Anabaptists—of cheering from the stands, as Christians with a differing view of the use of violence engage evil in ways we believe are contrary to the teachings of Jesus? Or are we bold enough to point out the contradiction and take the risk of being labeled "pacifist" or "leftist"?

Even Bonhoeffer did not consider himself a Christian martyr. He viewed himself as being imprisoned as a political conspirator. When he became involved in the plot to kill Hitler, he took steps to remove himself from the Confessing Church, the denomination he had helped to found, in protest of mainstream churches that supported Hitler's government.

When in prison, he refused to be put on his church's prayer list, saying that only those who were put in prison for their actions or proclamations on behalf of the church should be on the prayer list. He obviously did not see himself as being punished for acting as a Christian.

Bonhoeffer's death at the hands of the Nazis was a tragedy in many ways; however, it seems most tragic of all that he gave his life for a cause so contrary to the teaching and example of Christ. Not only that, his death seems a tragedy because of the inexplicable contradiction that is evident between the principles he strongly held and clearly articulated in earlier times, and the actions that brought on his end. A brief look at a few of Bonhoeffer's key theological ideas will serve to illustrate this antithesis.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born into a prominent family with a strong academic heritage. He chose the field of theology at an early age and entered the ministry at twenty-four with an impressive resume both in theological training and scholarly work of his own. By the 1930s, he had gained the attention of the international theological community and was developing key ideas such as his concept of discipleship, which ran counter to the popular notion that he termed "cheap grace."

The rise of Hitler and the Nazi party interrupted his career. As German nationalism captured the imagination of the German people, most German Christians were caught in the tide. Bonhoeffer viewed this trend with alarm and became part of a movement that not only criticized the Nazi government, but also the Christian institutions that largely supported Hitler's government. He helped to form a dissenting church, known as the Confessing Church.

By 1937, when his work *Nachfolge* (later titled *The Cost of Discipleship* in English) was published, his theology had developed in several ways that seem beyond amazing considering the spirit of the times. Let us peruse his views on the subjects of discipleship and revenge.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of discipleship was a strong critique of modern Christian teaching on salvation. The phrase "cheap grace" that is common today appears to have come from his work. According to Bonhoeffer, this "cheap grace" is defined thus: "an intellectual assent to [the forgiveness and love of God] is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins."⁵ Elsewhere, he says that "cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification

of the sinner [that is, the actual making the sinner to act righteously]." He goes on, with some sarcasm:

"Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before. "All for sin could not atone." The world goes on in the same old way, and we are still sinners "even in the best life" as Luther said. Well, then, let the Christian live like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world's standards in every sphere of life, and not presumptuously aspire to live a different life under grace from his old life under sin. That was the heresy of the enthusiasts, the Anabaptists and their kind. Let the Christian beware of rebelling against the free and boundless grace of God and desecrating it. Let him not attempt to erect a new religion of the letter by endeavoring to live a life of obedience to the commandments of Jesus Christ Instead of following Christ, let the Christian enjoy the consolations of his grace!"⁶

Bonhoeffer countered this idea with a concept he called "costly grace," suggesting that the church no longer stands in the path of true discipleship. "We confess that, although our Church is orthodox as far as her doctrine of grace is concerned, we are no longer sure that we are members of a Church which follows its Lord." In light of this cutting accusation, he concludes that "We must therefore attempt to recover a true understanding of the mutual relation between grace and discipleship."⁷

Speaking of Jesus' call to Levi in Mark 2:14, Bonhoeffer writes,

"According to our text, there is no road to faith or discipleship, no other road—only obedience to the call of Jesus."

"When we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person. The grace of his call bursts all the bonds of legalism. It is a gracious call, a gracious commandment. It transcends the difference between the law and the gospel. Christ calls, the disciple follows; that is grace and commandment in one. 'I will walk at liberty, for I seek thy commandments' (Ps. 119:45)." "Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship."⁸

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He goes on to propose that, in relation to faith and obedience, “only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”

It is quite unbiblical to hold the first proposition without the second. We think we understand when we hear that obedience is possible only where there is faith. Does not obedience follow faith as good fruit grows on a good tree? First, faith, then obedience. If by that we mean that it is faith which justifies, and not the act of obedience, all well and good, for that is the essential and unexceptionable presupposition of all that follows. If however, we make a chronological distinction between faith and obedience, and make obedience subsequent to faith, we are divorcing the one from the other—and then we get the practical question, when must obedience begin? Obedience remains separated from faith. From the point of view of justification it is necessary thus to separate them, but we must never lose sight of their essential unity. For faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience.⁹

Bonhoeffer’s view of discipleship cuts across the grain of modern Christianity which so often separates obedience to Jesus from salvation in Him in such a way as to eliminate the call to actually follow Jesus in life. Coming from a Lutheran, this idea seems particularly refreshing to those of us who have been familiar with its terminology, at least, in our own Anabaptist tradition. He refused to separate faith and obedience even in the sense that one followed the other because of the need to recognize the “mutual relation between grace and discipleship.” Following Jesus in obedience is intrinsic to salvation; any other view cheapens the grace of God.

Summarizing Bonhoeffer’s view of discipleship, Dallas M. Roark writes:

There is only one way of understanding Jesus: He meant it as He said it. All subterfuges based on ‘reason and conscience, responsibility and piety’ stand in the way of complete obedience. The usual type of rationalization of the commands of Christ are dealt with mercilessly. This refers to the reasoning whereby we reinterpret Jesus to mean that we need not leave all, but simply possess the wealth of the world as though we did not possess it. The com-

mand to follow is reduced to developing a spirit of inward detachment.”¹⁰

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s view of discipleship which calls for obedience as intrinsic to salvation directly impacted his interpretation of Jesus in another key area. Like his concept of discipleship, his views about revenge relate well to our Anabaptist heritage and also certainly ran counter to the spirit of the time, both in prewar Germany and throughout the world.

His treatment of the subject involves both what is sometimes called “personal” nonresistance and the Christian view of the role of civil government. He begins by addressing the concept of rights. Followers of Jesus, he says, renounce all personal rights.

This is contrary to the Old Testament, in which personal rights are protected by a system in which all evil is repaid in kind. Not so in the teachings of Jesus. Bonhoeffer then says:

The right way to requite evil, according to Jesus, is not to resist it.

This saying of Christ removes the Church from the sphere of politics and law. The Church is not to be a national community like the old Israel, but a community of believers without political or national ties. The old Israel had been both—the chosen

people of God *and* a national community, and it was therefore his will that

they should meet force with force. But with the Church it is different: it has abandoned political and national status, and therefore it must patiently endure aggression. Otherwise evil will be heaped upon evil. Only thus can fellowship be established and maintained.

At this point it becomes evident that when a Christian meets with injustice, he no longer clings to his rights and defends them at all costs. He is absolutely free from possessions and bound to Christ alone. Again, his witness to this exclusive adherence to Jesus creates the only workable basis for fellowship, and leaves the aggressor with him to deal with.¹¹

He criticizes the Protestant Reformers’ relegation of this principle to “private life.”

The Reformers offered a decisively new interpretation of this passage, and contributed a new idea of paramount importance. They distinguished between personal sufferings and those incurred by Christians in the performance of duty as bearers of

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an office ordained by God, maintaining that the precept of nonviolence applies to the first, but not to the second. In the second case we are not only freed from obligation to eschew violence, but if we want to act in a genuine spirit of love we must do the very opposite, and meet force with force in order to check the assault of evil. It was along these lines that the Reformers justified war and other legal sanctions against evil. But this distinction between person and office is wholly alien to the teaching of Jesus. He says nothing about that. He addresses his disciples as men who have left all to follow him, and the precept of nonviolence applies equally to private life and official duty. He is the Lord of all life, and demands undivided allegiance. Furthermore, when it comes to practice, this distinction raises indissoluble difficulties. Am I ever acting only as a private person or only in an official capacity?¹²

As Bonhoeffer concludes his chapter “Revenge,” he states, “The cross is the only justification for the precept of nonviolence, for it alone can kindle a faith in the victory over evil which will enable men to obey that precept.”¹³ Christ’s death on the cross was both the supreme example of vanquishing evil through suffering, and the only empowerment we have to follow in the steps of Christ.

But one of the thorny aspects of this concept of “non-resistance” as it is lived out in real life has to do with the relationship of Christians to the state. Bonhoeffer tackles the issue squarely and unequivocally. He declares that there can be no wars of faith, and that Christian love cannot be compatible with patriotism.

He is very specific concerning the nature of Christian interaction with civil government, and it is at this point where the deepest questions arise concerning the relationship between what Bonhoeffer says and what he later does. From Romans 13 he draws the idea that for a Christian to utilize force in order to conquer evil, he must stoop to the world’s standards.

To resist the power is to resist the ordinance of God, who has so ordered life that the world exer-

cises dominion by force, and Christ and Christians conquer by service. Failure to realize this distinction will bring a heavy judgment on the Christian (verse 2): it will mean a lapse into the standards of the world.¹⁴

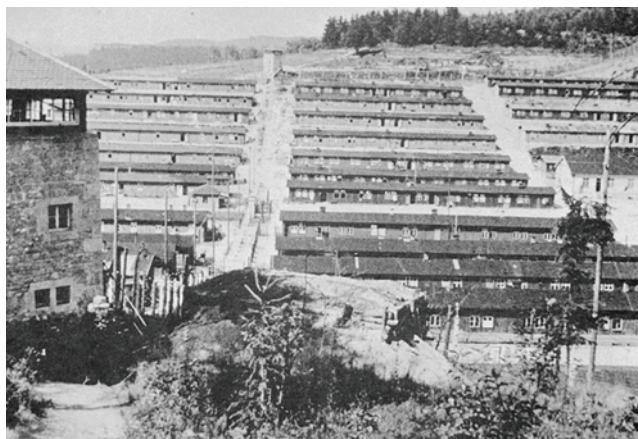
Bonhoeffer eloquently describes the Christian church as a community that is in the world, yet not of it. Christians are “strangers and aliens in a foreign land, enjoying the hospitality of that land, obeying its laws and honouring its government.” Hospitality is not always a word that best describes the sentiments of the government toward Christianity, but Christians are also joyful in times of persecution. “They are patient and cheerful in suffering, and they glory in tribulation. They live their own life under alien rulers and alien laws. Above all, they pray for all in authority, for that is their greatest service.”¹⁵

Christians after all are only in this world temporarily, on their way to heaven. In what might be considered one of the more stunning and beautiful statements in the book, Bonhoeffer rapturously portrays the nature of the church in the world: “Amid poverty and suffering, hunger and thirst, they are meek, merciful, and peacemakers, persecuted and

scorned by the world, although it is for their sake alone that the world is allowed to continue, and it is they who protect the world from the wrath and judgment of God.”¹⁶

How and why on earth could a man so convinced of the power and efficacy of Christian love in the world, and so disparaging of the good that could come of the use of the sword, come to the point of being a conspirator in an assassination? Unfortunately this question remains largely unanswered, and those who attempt to discover the reasoning behind this contradiction admit it is a difficult task.

One of the only clues we have as to Bonhoeffer’s reasoning is the well-known statement he is said to have made to his sister-in-law: “If I see a madman driving a car into a group of innocent bystanders, then I can’t, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe and then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.” The untimely death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Nazi death camps sealed away forever



A view of Flossenburg Concentration Camp, where Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hung for his involvement in a scheme to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Why did he take part in something he earlier condemned?

what more we might have learned about the meaning of this tragedy.

Bonhoeffer decided he could not live with the consequences of putting to practice the idealistic interpretations of the teachings of Jesus as elucidated in *The Cost of Discipleship*. He cut ties to the Confessing Church he had helped to form, which would not, according to Dallas M. Roark, have approved of his actions. His ties to the Abwehr assassination conspiracy are unimpeachable.

As Anabaptists, who believe that following Jesus means loving our enemies, we see the decision Bonhoeffer made as being a tragic manifestation of weakness rather than strength. Despite the heroism and courage he displayed, he experienced what might be called, using his own words, heavy judgment as a result of lapsing into the standards of the world. "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." (Mt. 26:52)

What might be learned by this tragedy?

A story such as this can leave one shaken in terms of confidence that one can remain faithful to Jesus and his will in sorely trying times. Certainly our attitude toward those who suffer dilemmas of this sort must be merciful; who is to say how we would respond were we to walk through similar difficulties? However we do know that we are not ordered to carry burdens that cannot be borne. With the temptation there will be a way of escape, we are promised.

How can escape be possible when one seems to be faced with a choice between two evils? Bonhoeffer felt there was none, and he chose what he viewed as the lesser of the two evils. Corrie ten Boom, a well-known contemporary of Bonhoeffer, was caught between revealing the presence of Jewish fugitives in her home and lying to the authorities; she chose to tell the untruth. Quakers prior to the Civil War in the United States struggled with being truthful to the authorities in relation to assisting runaway slaves. There are stories of their refusal to speak when questioned, and of their justifying apparent lies by saying that no man could really be a slave.

We live in the real world with real ethical and moral dilemmas. We also serve a real and indwelling Christ with real answers to the complexities and the evils we face. And we can be certain from Scripture that evil is not to be overcome with evil. We can also be sure both from the promises of Scripture and the example of Christian martyrs through-

out history that it is possible to face death and not capitulate to evil or become evil ourselves.

From prison, about nine months before his execution, Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend about his desire to have faith. He said, "I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. I suppose I wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* as the end of that path. Today I can see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by what I wrote."

The dangers of radical discipleship are real. However, as Bonhoeffer's story shows, compromise of the radical teachings of Jesus has its own dangers. The path he took led him from the one sort of danger to the other.

In conclusion, let us enjoy a short but insightful moment from Bonhoeffer's earlier days. Dallas M. Roark tells the story:

[Bonhoeffer] became student pastor at the Technical College in Berlin, and at the same time was requested to take over a confirmation class of fifty rowdy boys who lived in one of the roughest areas of Berlin. As the elderly pastor and young Dietrich ascended the stairs of the multi-storied building where the boys were, the children dropped rubbish on the two men below. At the

top of the stairs, the pastor tried to gain attention by shouting an introduction of Bonhoeffer. Some of the children only heard the word "Bon" and began to chant it, until the bewildered, frustrated old pastor left.

At first Dietrich stood in silence against the wall while the boys chanted. Then he began to speak softly to those near him. Out of curiosity the others began to be quiet. When the noise had subsided, he told them a story about Harlem and promised more next time if they behaved. Not only did he win their attention for class instruction, but he moved into their neighborhood for two months to live among them. This most "hopeless" class was carried to its completion, and many of the boys remained long-time friends.

This is the kind of love that we are promised will overcome evil. First we must make sure we are not the ones who pour rubbish on other people's heads, and then we must reach out to the rubbish-dumpers. There is plenty of rubbish-dumping going on in this world, to be sure, and there is no doubt that as followers of Jesus we will have a little rubbish dumped on us before it is all said and done.

Bonhoeffer decided he could not live with the consequences of putting to practice the idealistic interpretations of the teachings of Jesus as elucidated in "The Cost of Discipleship."

This wonderful anecdote illustrates both the dangers and the abundant rewards of radical discipleship. Following the word of Christ is dangerous; but its rewards are real and the suffering it might cause is not to be seen a tragedy.

In contrast, the suffering that comes from deviating from the path of Christ is truly a tragedy. Although there is much about this dedicated student of the gospel that we can admire, it is in this way that we must see the end of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

(Endnotes)

¹ Dallas M. Roark, *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind: Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Waco: Word Inc., 1972) Dust jacket.

² Richard V. Pierard, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: the Struggle against Hitler." Article in *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, John D. Woodbridge, Ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988) 353.

³ Todd Kappelman, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: the Man and His Mission" <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/bonhoeffer.html>.

⁴ "Dietrich Bonhoeffer." Online exhibition by website of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <http://www.ushmm.org/exhibit/online/bonhoeffer/>.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1963), 45.

⁶ *Ibid.* 46,47.

⁷ *Ibid.* 60.

⁸ *Ibid.* 62,63.

⁹ *Ibid.* 69.

¹⁰ Dallas M. Roark, *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind: Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Waco: Word Inc., 1972), 79.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1963), 156, 157.

¹² *Ibid.* 160.

¹³ *Ibid.* 161.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 293.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 303.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 303,304.



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