



Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906, son of a professor of psychiatry and neurology at the University of Berlin. He was an outstanding student, and at the age of 25 became a lecturer in systematic theology at the same University. Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Bonhoeffer was condemned for his involvement in "Operation 7," a rescue mission that had helped a small group of Jews over the German border and into Switzerland. He expressed vocal opposition to Hitler's euthanasia program and genocidal persecution of the Jewish people.

Bonhoeffer became a leading spokesman for the Confessing Church, the center of Protestant resistance to the Nazis. He organized and for a time led the underground seminary of the Confessing Church. His book *Life Together* describes the life of the Christian community in that seminary, and his book *The Cost of Discipleship* attacks what he calls "cheap grace," meaning grace used as an excuse for moral laxity. He had been taught not to "resist the powers that be," but came to believe that to do so was sometimes the right choice.

In 1939 his brother-in-law introduced him to a group planning the overthrow of Hitler, and he made significant contributions to their work. He was arrested in April 1943 and imprisoned in Berlin. After the failure of the attempt on Hitler's life in April 1944, he was sent first to Buchenwald and then to Schoenberg Prison. His life was spared, because he had a relative who stood high in the government; however, this relative was himself later implicated in anti-Nazi plots.

It's interesting to note that Bonhoeffer had safely escaped the troubles of Europe and gone to teach in New York in June, 1939. He abruptly returned less than a month later saying: "I have had time to think and to pray about my situation, and that of my nation, and to have God's will for me clarified. I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of the Christian life in Germany after the war if I did not share the trials of this time with my people. Christians in Germany face the terrible alternative of either being willing the defeat of their nation in order that civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which one of these alternatives I must choose. But I cannot make that choice in security."

Bonhoeffer, even while in prison maintained his pastoral role. Those who were with him spoke of the guidance and spiritual inspiration he gave not only to fellow inmates but to prison guards as well.

In a letter smuggled out of prison Bonhoeffer showed no bitterness but rather explained how, "We in the resistance have learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the excluded, the ill treated, the powerless, the oppressed and despised . . . so that personal suffering has become a more useful key for understanding the world than personal happiness."

On Sunday April 8, 1945 he had just finished conducting a service of worship at Schoenberg, when two soldiers came in, saying, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, make ready and come with us," the standard summons to a condemned prisoner. As he left, he said to another prisoner, "This is the end – but for me, the beginning – of life." He was hanged the next day, less than a week before the Allies reached the camp.

Bonhoeffer went calmly to his death. This morning as he was led out of his cell, he was observed by the prison doctor who said: "Through the half-open door I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer still in his prison clothes, kneeling in fervent prayer to the Lord his God. The devotion and evident conviction of being heard that I saw in the prayer of this intensely captivating man moved me to the depths." The prisoners were ordered to strip. Naked under the scaffold, Bonhoeffer knelt for one last time to pray. Five minutes later, he was dead.

Bonhoeffer's Christ-centered theology has had world-wide influence and has been documented in 16 books, authored by him over his years of ministry in the Lutheran churches of Europe, working with underground churches in Germany, and his time of imprisonment in Nazi Germany.