

The Life and Ministry of Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Union University Chapel
October 12, 2005

During most chapel services we study texts of scripture and hear sermons based on those texts. But today we do something a little different. We will study a life, the life of German Theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died at the hands of the Nazis in 1945. This approach to a worship service may be a bit unfamiliar to us, but closely studying the life of a significant Christian leader is a part of the tradition of the church. The insight embedded in this tradition is that sometimes we learn best what it means to follow Jesus by studying someone who did it very well. That is what three faculty will be considering today.

Nazi Germany at the time of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

1. **Introduction:** Much of what we know about German resistance to Nazi power came from Martin Niemoeller, a contemporary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and a German pastor who was imprisoned for much of World War II for his own resistance activities. Convinced that Christians should never abandon their principles, Niemoeller consistently chided believers who supported Nazi causes. Such was the case when he questioned the motivations of a particular prison chaplain who was working in a Berlin jail. The chaplain, a man Martin Niemoeller recognized from his naval days and now knew as a Nazi stooge, initiated this particular exchange when he approached Niemoeller one day and asked in an accusatory tone: "Why Pastor Niemoeller, what are you doing in here?" Without missing a beat, Niemoeller stared back at the man and stated: "No, sir. The question is not 'why am I in here,' but 'why are you out there.'"
- a. This story raises several important questions:
 - i. Why did the German people support Hitler's rise to power?
 - (1) Remember that there was only a fourteen-year gap between the completion of the supposed peace of World War I and Hitler's rise to power.
 - (2) We must also keep in mind that Hitler came to power through legal means.
 - ii. Why did so many Christians either remain silent during Hitler's rise to power or actively support his ascension?
 - iii. What made Niemoeller, Bonhoeffer, and their fellow Christian resisters different from German Christians who either embraced the Nazi's rise to power or remained silent in the face of the Nazi's immoral policies?
2. **Germany in the Inter-war Years:**
 - a. It is easy for us to pass judgment upon the Germans, but a simple condemnation of them that does not take into account the context of the 1930s robs us of the opportunity to learn from their mistakes.
 - b. In fact, even a brief synopsis of German life in the inter-war years provides some explanation for why Hitler was able to rise to power. The main elements of this include:
 - i. Germany's national humiliation following its defeat in World War I.
 - (1) Germany was in ruins politically, economically, and even emotionally.

- (2) In the midst of all of this, Germans had to deal with the problem of “war guilt.” Much of this was forced upon them by the Allies, who wrote a clause into the Treaty of Versailles that stated that the Germans were solely responsible for the aggression that led to World War I.
 - (3) In the same way, the Allies forced the Germans to bear the burden of the cost of the war.
 - (4) When added to the humiliation that the Germans felt following their defeat in World War I, the psychological and economic stresses placed upon them by the Allies made many Germans desperate to find a strong leader who could restore their national honor.
- ii. The instability and weakness of imposed Weimar Republic.
 - (1) Since the Allies forced this government upon them, the Germans never trusted its leaders.
 - (2) The situation worsened when it became clear that the officials of the Weimar Republic had no answers for the major problems of high inflation and high unemployment that developed in Germany during the inter-war years.
 - (3) To be sure, most of Europe and even the United States dealt with similar economic problems in the 1930s.
 - (4) Even so, the problems in Germany were severe. Bonhoeffer, for example, once estimated that seven million German men were unemployed in the early 1930s. This meant, he explained, that fifteen to twenty million German women and children were either hungry or starving.
 - (5) Since desperate people look for strong leaders who promise to solve their problems, it makes sense that many Germans would support Hitler after he persuaded them that he could solve the problems that the anemic Weimar Republic could not fix.
- iii. Hitler provided the facade of strong leadership.
 - (1) In fact, he promised that he could return Germany to its former position of glory.
 - (2) He also seemed to provide an explanation for the suffering of the German people.
 - (3) He did this largely by the use of scapegoating, especially by blaming the Jewish people for the downfall of German culture.
 - (a) In Hitler’s racial theory, the Jews were the source of all evil, the “culture-destroying race” that gave the world both capitalism and Marxism.
 - (b) He also saw the “culture-creating” Aryan race as locked into a life-and-death struggle for survival. Indeed, he averred that the eradication of the Jewish race would be an act of social purification that would restore the uncorrupt past of the Germans.
 - (c) Such ideas, of course, set the foundation for the horrors of the Holocaust.

- (d) During Hitler's rise to power, however, few Germans foresaw the consequences of following a man who espoused such ideas. This is because his words provided the Germans with the salve that they needed to heal their wounded national ego even as they seemingly confirmed that Hitler was a strong leader who was determined to rescue Germany from its social and economic problems.

3. **Why were so many Christians compliant toward Hitler and his policies?**

- a. Hitler promised freedom to them.
 - i. Even as Hitler convinced the public at large that he had Germany's best interests in mind, so he persuaded German Christians that he cherished the principle of religious liberty.
 - ii. After all, Hitler claimed, he was only concerned about the political affairs of the state. (This was, of course, later proven to have been a lie).
 - iii. Perhaps the best example of a religious body formally acknowledging Hitler after he promised to remain out of church affairs occurred when the Vatican signed a concordat with Hitler in July 1933.
 - (1) In return for official recognition of his regime, Hitler promised the Roman Catholic Church in Germany the right to educate students without any interference from his government.
 - (2) Hitler also swore that he would not disrupt communications between the German bishops and the Holy See of Rome.
 - (3) Finally, he promised that he would not censor the Catholic press in Germany as long as the priests swore loyalty to the state and left politics out of their sermons and other forms of public communication.
- b. Hitler's civil religious rhetoric was effective (at least in the early years of his political career).
 - i. After seizing power in 1933, Hitler consistently injected references to God and religion into his speeches. In doing so, he promoted the idea that the history and destiny of Germany were intertwined with the Will of God.
 - ii. Despite the fact that Hitler's rhetoric was too general and too vague to reflect genuine Christianity, many German Christians who were desperate to gain a voice in their society overlooked the flaws of his religious rhetoric.
 - iii. They did this in large part because they believed that Hitler's acknowledgments of God signaled that he was open to the views of religious people.
- c. German churches (especially Protestant churches) were desperate to return to the mainstream of German life.
 - i. The wholehearted support that these religious bodies expressed for World War I backfired on them. Indeed, many Germans who became disillusioned with the conflict blamed the churches for failing to warn the German people about the dangers associated with militarism.
 - ii. It is also worth noting that much of the content of the Christian faith had already been diluted in German Protestant churches by a theological liberalism that stripped away the core doctrines of the faith. (As a result, many Germans saw the churches as void of both theological content and

- moral direction).
 - iii. Thus, it appears that on some level many church leaders were eager to earn state recognition because they believed that this would help them regain their cultural significance.

4. **What made Bonhoeffer, Niemoeller, and their fellow resisting Christians so different from other German Christians?**
 - a. They knew that immediate concerns should never supersede eternal principles.
 - b. Unlike the Old Testament character Esau and the compliant German Christians, they refused to sell the birthright of their faith for the stew of civil religious platitudes.
 - c. In short, they were unwilling to surrender the principles of their faith for the promise of a better future in their earthly kingdom because they believed that they should always subordinate their national associations to their identity as Christians.

- Keith Bates, Department of History, Union University

The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau, Germany along with his twin sister, Sabine, on February 4, 1906. His parents were Karl Bonhoeffer and Paula von Hase Bonhoeffer. Their family genealogies included professors, theologians, and other professional people for many generations. The family was literate, highly educated, and solidly middle-class. They were not noted for their regular church attendance.

Young Dietrich was musically gifted, and became a good pianist. After failing to win a music scholarship to the university, he announced to his family that he had decided to study theology which was a great surprise to them. In 1927, Dietrich completed his doctoral dissertation on "The Communion of the Saints." He was only 21 years old. Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian, proclaimed Bonhoeffer's dissertation, "a theological miracle."

In 1928, Dietrich accepted an appointment as assistant pastor of a German congregation in Barcelona. In 1929, he completed a second dissertation, "Act and Being" as a requirement for an academic appointment at the University of Berlin. With his academic appointment secure, he was free to accept a Sloane fellowship to study at Union Theological Seminary in 1930. He learned from his professor, Reinhold Niebuhr, the relationship between the gospel and social action. From his Union professors, he incorporated pragmatism and emphasis on responsible action that would later animate his anti-Hitler activities.

Bonhoeffer's good friend at Union Seminary was Franklin Fisher, an African-American student with whom he attended the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Of much of American preaching, Bonhoeffer said that; "one can hear sermons about almost everything except sin, forgiveness, and redemption." It was at the Abyssinian Baptist Church that Bonhoeffer heard the gospel preached with rapturous passion, and, I believe, became born again. From Jean Lassere, a French seminarian, he gained a deeper commitment to the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. Lassere pinpointed the turning point in Bonhoeffer's pacifism to a Saturday afternoon when they viewed the film, All Quiet on the Western Front. They were saddened to the point of

tears at the lighthearted reaction of the children in the theater to the killing portrayed on the screen.

In 1931, Bonhoeffer went back to Berlin and resumed university lecturing. He was a very popular teacher, particularly with those students who did not gravitate toward Nazism. On January 30, 1933, Adolph Hitler was made chancellor of Germany. Two days later on February 1, 1933, Bonhoeffer made a radio address in which he warned against the cult of the Fuhrer (leader) who might very well become a mis-leader. His radio program was cut short by the Nazis, which may be the first restriction on the freedom of speech by them.

On September 21, 1933 B. along with three other pastors formed the Pastor's Emergency League whose aim was to fight for a Christ-honoring confession of faith within the church. This was necessary because already on September 4, 1933 at the so-called Brown Synod, the Nazification of the church had begun with pastors being required to take a personal oath of allegiance to Adolph Hitler.

On October 17, 1933, B began a pastorate of two German congregations in London where he became friends with George Bell the Bishop of Chichester. On May 29 – 31, 1934 the Confessing Church was organized at Barmen. This produced the famous Barmen Confession of Faith which had practically been written by Karl Barth. "No other Lords but Jesus Christ" was the theme. The weakness of the document was in not being outspoken enough on behalf of the Jews.

In October, 1934, the Dahlem Synod of the Confessing Church took the radical step of organizing their own training for pastoral candidates. This training school was to be funded by the freewill offerings of the parishioners. B was invited to form this seminary. He writes to Erwin Sutz; "I am struggling over the decision on whether I should go back to Germany as director of the New Preacher's Seminary still to be established or whether I should remain here [England] or go to India [to visit Gandhi and study passive resistance]. I no longer believe in the university, and never really have believed in it---a fact that used to rile you. The entire training of young theologians belongs today in church, monastic-like schools in which the pure doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount, and worship can be taken seriously which is really not the case with all three things at the university and, in present-day circumstances, is impossible."

On August 2, 1934 President Hindenburg died and Hitler was made President and Chancellor of Germany. In April, 1935, the Preacher's Seminary under Bonhoeffer's tutelage opened and eventually settled in Finkenwalde. Here he met Ruth von Kleist-Retzow a strong Christian from an old Prussian family who became a close friend. B also became acquainted with the granddaughter of Mrs. Kleist-Retzow, Maria von Wedemeyer. The Finkenwalde seminary was closed by the Gestapo in 1937.

Kristallnacht, or the night of broken glass, occurred on November 9, 1938. Only a few pastors from the confessing church raised a voice of protest. Because of this deteriorating situation in the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer began to be more aware of the activities of his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi who with a group of military men in the Abwehr, or counter-intelligence movement, were planning an overthrow of the Hitler regime.

Bonhoeffer avoided the military draft through a visiting lectureship at Union Theological Seminary in June, 1939. However, he stayed only a month. He returned to Germany on July 8,

1939 on one of the last ships before the outbreak of World War II. “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 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 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 our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security.”

Bonhoeffer at this point, obviously through his own decision, was brought into the group of Abwehr conspirators. He was declared to be indispensable to their work and given liberal traveling privileges. During this time as a traveling double agent, he spent some time at the monastery in Ettal in Bavaria where he began work on his book Ethics.

On January 17, 1943 at the age of 37, Bonhoeffer became engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer, aged 17. Their growth in heartfelt love for each other is amazing, particularly during Dietrich's prison days. On April 5, 1943 Dietrich was arrested and imprisoned in Tegel Prison in Berlin. From this time until his death in 1945, Dietrich wrote many letters to Maria, family, friends, and Eberhard Bethge. From this correspondence we have the volume Letters and Papers from Prison which forms another rich source of theological insight for the church.

During his last days, B. met Payne Best, a British Secret Service officer. He writes of Bonhoeffer; “he always seemed to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and a deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive....He was one of the very few men I have ever met to whom his God was real and ever close to him. Bonhoeffer was different from the other prisoner's, just quite calm and normal, seemingly perfectly at his ease...his soul really shone in the dark desperation of our prison.”

B. conducted a prayer service and meditation for his fellow prisoners on April 8, 1945. His texts were from Isaiah; “with His stripes we are healed,” and 1 Peter; “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By God's great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Payne Best states that B. “reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment, ...” Two evil looking men immediately entered and said, “Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us.” This, of course, meant the death penalty. Bonhoeffer spoke to Payne Best, “This is the end—for me, the beginning of life.” The next day Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged at Flossenburg Concentration Camp.

The prison doctor said; “I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his 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 steps to the gallows, brave and composed....In the almost 50 years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.”

- Walton Padelford, McAfee School of Business Administration, Union University

The Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In a sense, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and writings can be seen as a commentary on this text.

As you have heard, Bonhoeffer was born into comfort. He came from money, class, and status. There was no question that he would have the resources and the ability to make a successful and comfortable life for himself in whatever his chosen field.

He initially decided to become a theologian mainly because it interested him, but also because it was a quiet way of rebelling against his largely secularized family. He was heading toward a comfortable life among the German intelligentsia, as Doctor Professor Bonhoeffer. He himself said that he decided to study theology even before he became a Christian.

But the times intervened. The Nazis rose to power at just about the same time that Bonhoeffer was launching his career. By this time Bonhoeffer had well and truly committed himself to Christ. He didn't do anything half way, so this presented a problem for him. Because in Germany professors are employees of the state; therefore in 1933 Germany professors were employees of the Nazi state. This meant that for a brief time Doctor Professor Bonhoeffer actually worked for Adolf Hitler.

Many professional people in Nazi Germany found a way to go along with Hitler, even if they found him personally quite distasteful. They wore the Nazi armbands, made the Hitler salute, joined the Nazified professional associations, perhaps even joined the Nazi Party if they wanted to be especially careful. After all, a man has to feed his family, right? Of such considerations are deadly moral compromises born.

But Bonhoeffer did not do this. "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" Bonhoeffer was unwilling to exchange his soul for the world as it was defined by Adolf Hitler.

And so both his life and his work came to be acts of resistance to Hitler and Hitlerism, and to the spread of this poison in the life of the German people—especially the German church.

Bonhoeffer saw more clearly than almost anyone in Germany that the church was woefully unprepared for the moral challenge presented by Nazism. And so he turned his intellectual energies to fighting for a relevant, biblical, and resistant Christianity and Christian Church.

He noticed for example, that many Protestants in Germany understood the Gospel to consist entirely of the good news of salvation by grace through faith, and that all that Christians need to do is believe this good news and receive this salvation. This posture had turned Germany's Christians into passive grace-receivers rather than active disciples. They had been trained to think that being Christian did not require any particular moral commitments or social involvements. One could be a Christian and a Nazi, or a Christian and completely disengaged from a deteriorating cultural situation. Instead, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer (working with the Sermon on the Mount) said that Christian faith requires costly obedience to Jesus Christ. He also said in this and other works that the church must move from a sleepy irrelevance to culture right into the center of culture, where it can then be readied to follow Jesus wherever he may lead—not to take over culture, but to serve it at its greatest points of need. This certainly speaks to us today.

Bonhoeffer's years spent leading a Confessing Church seminary were an effort to reform a deeply compromised and even Nazified church by radically altering the training of its ministers. His book *Life Together*, which was a reflection on this experience, explores the nature of disciplined Christian community. The impulse behind both this seminary and the book was that a national community that was turning evil could only be resisted by a church community that was stronger, more disciplined, more knowledgeable about both the times and the scriptures, and ready to do what it had to do to resist evil in the name of Christ. It is not a coincidence that many of the young ministers who studied with Bonhoeffer in this seminary ended up resisting the Nazis, some dying in the effort.

Bonhoeffer was remarkably Christ-centered in his thought. In both his early book, *Christ the Center*, and his wartime essays, *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer focuses relentlessly on Jesus Christ; incarnate, crucified, and risen. He says that Christian morality is not an abstract set of principles to be applied but instead the reshaping of the Self so that it conforms to the Self of Jesus Christ. He emphasized as well the suffering of Jesus Christ on the Cross, his solidarity with humanity in our suffering and his vicarious sacrifice on our behalf. He said that any faithful Church will be found among the suffering and the humiliated, because that is where Christ was to be found; indeed, it was who Christ was. Bonhoeffer also noted that the desire for a Messiah, a redeemer, a deliverer, is a permanent part of human history. If people do not accept the real Messiah they will embrace a false one. Clearly he was thinking of Hitler and the ecstatic response of Germans to this false messiah.

It sounds like a meditation on Jesus saying to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must take deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." As Hitler seduced his millions (many of them supposedly Christians) Bonhoeffer focused ever more relentlessly on Christ. And in doing so he noticed that Christ stood with the victimized and entered into suffering on their behalf. It is not a coincidence that Bonhoeffer was among the few German Christians to stand up for the Jews, then being victimized and eventually annihilated by the Nazis. And it is also not a coincidence that he concluded that standing with the victims meant doing something concrete to resist their persecutors. And so, when given the opportunity, he joined an influential resistance cell and conspired with them to bring down Hitler and his regime.

And this, of course, eventually sent him to prison and to the gallows. He spent two long years in prison, from which he offered some of his most profound writings, including parts of *Ethics* and then letters collected under the title *Letters and Papers from Prison* and published some years after his death.

These documents marked the climax of Bonhoeffer's effort to craft a Christian faith of costly obedience in the midst of a pagan culture. He wrote about the church, lamenting its impotence in resisting Hitler, calling for it to confess its sin and to lead the way in confessing the sins of Germany and the western world, and suggesting that it should form alliances with morally concerned non-Christians who had given their lives resisting Nazism. He tried to establish once and for all the permanent significance of ethics in the life of the church; yes, justification by grace is the ultimate word, Bonhoeffer said, but ethics is the penultimate, the next to ultimate. We must participate actively in the struggles that take place in this world for justice and mercy and human dignity and human rights. He emphasized that all of reality is under the lordship of Christ and that we are not free to bracket off any area as somehow not under Christ's rule. Christ is Lord of all states not just of the church, and so this means the state does not have the freedom to do just whatever it wants to do, like for example, genocide. And when the state does turn evil

like this, the church must resist, standing with the victims and seeing reality from the underside of history, where the suffering live.

And finally, Bonhoeffer emphasized that the Christian moral life is about following Jesus. He said that while there are objective moral standards, there is a dimension of our discipleship that involves our own interpretation of what Jesus Christ requires US (you and me, as individuals) to do. While sitting in a Nazi jail, Bonhoeffer was saying that the path that had taken him there was the path of discipleship. He had obeyed Christ's commands as he understood them. He went to his death believing that, not in pride but in humble self-assurance.

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it...For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done."

- David Gushee, School of Christian Studies, Union University