

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

---

School of Theology and Seminary Graduate  
Papers/Theses

School of Theology and Seminary

---

5-4-2007

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Prophet & Martyr

Fr. Michael Calhoun OSB

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers)



Part of the [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Calhoun, Fr. Michael OSB, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Prophet & Martyr" (2007). *School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses*. 10.

[https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot\\_papers/10](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers/10)

This Graduate Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Theology and Seminary at DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: PROPHET & MARTYR

by

Fr. Michael Calhoun, OSB

St. Bede Abbey  
Peru, Illinois 61354

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Theology.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
Saint John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota

May 4, 2007

This Graduate Paper was written under the direction of

---

Signature of Director

---

## DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: PROPHET &amp; MARTYR

## Description of the Project:

The decade of the 1920s for the German people was marked by political, social, and economic turmoil. This trend continued with the rise of Adolph Hitler and his Nazi party to power in Germany. It is with this turmoil in mind that Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived. Most of his adult life would be spent fighting against Hitler and his Nazi party. Seeing the church in his day being hijacked by Hitler and his Nazi party led Bonhoeffer to the belief that a radical break with society similar to the fiery preaching of John the Baptist and John of Patmos would prevent the church from becoming a mere play thing in the hands of secular leaders. True to his Lutheran roots, Bonhoeffer sees the church's complete separation from the secular government as a way to return to an apostolic model of the church. Through his writings Bonhoeffer sounded the prophet's call as he criticized the current status quo and to energized the people for a new future. His convictions ran so deep that he endured what many consider to be a martyr's death.

*This paper may be duplicated.*

---

Signature of Student Writer

---

May 4, 2007

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction... 1

Part I: Bonhoeffer's Biography

A. Family & Early Life...2

B. Bonhoeffer's Education & Travels...3

C. Bonhoeffer as Professor...6

D. Bonhoeffer as Leader of the Resistance Movement...6

E. Bonhoeffer's Imprisonment & Execution...10

Part II: Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship*... 11

A. Historical Context.....11

B. Cheap grace vs. Costly grace...13

C. A disciple's eagerness, faith, & obedience...14

D. The location of the faith community...15

E. Dangers faced by Christian disciples & love of enemies...16

F. The hiddenness of Christian discipleship...17

G. Implications of Christian baptism...18

Conclusion...20

## Introduction

The decade of the 1920s for the German people was marked by political, social, and economic turmoil. Various stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles, which marked the end of World War I, brought foreign occupying troops into the country. This situation led to riots, protests, and boycotts by the German people which only weakened a fledging democracy. By the late 1920s Germany would be in the grips of an economic depression. This economic downturn was not corrected until Adolf Hitler and his party came to power. However, economic improvement occurred as a result of the construction and buildup of military weaponry that would ultimately be used in World War II.

It is with this turmoil in mind that Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived. Most of his adult life would be spent fighting against Hitler and his Nazi party. Seeing the church of his day being hijacked by Hitler and his Nazi party led Bonhoeffer to the belief that a radical break with society, similar to the fiery preaching of John the Baptist and John of Patmos, would prevent the church from becoming a mere play thing in the hands of secular leaders. True to his Lutheran roots, Bonhoeffer sees the church's complete separation from the secular government as a way to return to an apostolic model of the church. Through his writings Bonhoeffer sounded the prophet's call as he criticized the current status quo and energized the people for a new future.<sup>1</sup> His convictions ran so deep that he endured what many consider to be a martyr's death. In order to show Bonhoeffer as both prophet and martyr I will describe the history in which Bonhoeffer is located and then examine one of Bonhoeffer's critical writings.

---

<sup>1</sup> The definition of a prophet indicated above can be found described in Walter Brueggemann's book entitled *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1979).

## **I. Bonhoeffer's Biography**

### **A. Family and Early Life**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his twin sister, Sabine, were born on February 4, 1906 in Breslau, Germany to Dr. Karl and Paula von Hase Bonhoeffer. Dietrich and Sabine's siblings were waiting for their arrival home: Karl-Friedrich (1899), Walter (1899), Klauss (1901), Ursula (1902), and Christal (1903). Three years after the birth of Dietrich and Sabine, the Bonhoeffers would bring home their last child, who would be named Suzanne.

Dietrich's father was a well-to-do, educated professional working in the fields of education, medicine, and psychiatry. His mother stayed at home raising the children, exposing them to religion, and encouraging them to explore their gifts. As an example of this exploration, it ought to be pointed out that Dietrich learned to play the piano with a vocal accompanist at an early age. By the time Dietrich was twelve, the Bonhoeffer family had moved to Berlin.

Matters were peaceful in the Bonhoeffer home until April of 1918. In that month tragedy touched the Bonhoeffer home when Walter was wounded in World War I and died five days later as a result of the wound. The death of Walter plunged both of Dietrich's parents into grief as they disconnected themselves from the usual family patterns. The shift in behavior of Bonhoeffer's parents would leave a mark on him. Eberhard Bethge, who has written the standard biography of Bonhoeffer, noted the following about this episode in his life: "The figure of his brother and the way in which he died were in Dietrich's mind later, when he talked to his students about the problem of preaching reverently on Memorial Day."<sup>2</sup> Two years after Walter's death, Dietrich announced his intention that he wanted to become a Lutheran theologian and minister. Dietrich's family was not supportive of the idea, pointing out to him the various faults of the Lutheran

---

<sup>2</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 28.

church. They told him that the church was a ‘poor, feeble, boring, petty, bourgeois institution.’ To these accusations Bonhoeffer replied that he would reform the church.<sup>3</sup>

### **B. Bonhoeffer's Education & Travels**

At the age of seventeen, Bonhoeffer began his studies at Tubingen for the 1923-1924 academic year. He would remain at the school for one year. In 1924 Bonhoeffer visited Rome for a three month stay. Visiting the city and the various churches in the city helped Bonhoeffer concretize his vision of the church. Bonhoeffer's biographer notes the importance of the visit to Rome for the young Bonhoeffer:

Bonhoeffer's attention was soon completely absorbed by the phenomenon of the Church. He based his core theological principles upon this ambiguous but concrete structure. His journey to Rome essentially helped him to articulate the theme of ‘the church.’ The motive of concreteness—of not getting lost in metaphysical speculation—was a genuine root of his approach.<sup>4</sup>

After his visit to Rome and sites in N. Africa, Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin to continue his studies. He would attend the University of Berlin for three years beginning in the 1924-1925 school year. While at the university, Bonhoeffer would study under, and be influenced by, some of the shining intellectual lights of German theology at the time. Among these included the following: the church historian Adolf van Harnack, Luther scholar Karl Holl, church historian Hans Leitzmann, and systematic theologian Reinhold Seeburg. It was under the direction of Seeburg that Bonhoeffer wrote his doctrinal dissertation entitled *The Communion of Saints*. The dissertation examined the question of the vocation of the church within history and within society.<sup>5</sup> He used the phrase ‘Christ existing as the church community’ to mean that Christ and no

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, eds., Geoffrey B. Kelly & F. Burton Nelson (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 55.



one and nothing else is the center of the Christian community. This belief would become a standard of judgment for his consideration of whether a given church reflected the spirit of Jesus.

The year 1928 found Bonhoeffer at a church in Barcelona, Spain, serving as a curate under the supervision of the pastor. The church was composed of German-speaking, expatriate business men. His pastoral ministry there was marked by the initiation of a series of programs that included additional worship for the children, teaching, and becoming an advocate for addressing the social ills of the community. Living in the city gave Bonhoeffer the opportunity to see poverty first hand. Not all of the nineteen sermons that he delivered addressed this issue, but he did try to awaken in the congregants a realization of the disparity of wealth among those living in the city and to mobilize the parish to action. Bonhoeffer received glowing reviews for his work in the parish and was offered an invitation to stay an additional year. Bonhoeffer writes the following to his friend Helmut Rössler about his pastoral experience:

I'm getting to know new people every day. here one meets people as they are, away from the masquerade of the 'Christian world,' people with passions, criminal types, little people with little ambitions, little desires, and little sins, all in all people who feel homeless in both senses of the word, who loosen up if one talks to them in a friendly way, real people.<sup>6</sup>

In the end, Bonhoeffer refused the invitation to stay, instead desiring to go to other places.

After he refused the Barcelona church's invitation, Bonhoeffer traveled to America for further study. The year 1930 and into 1931 would find him at New York's Union Theological Seminary. He found the study of theology to be shallow compared with his academic experience in Germany. Nevertheless, while in America he fostered friendships that would remain with him for life. Chief among these friends was Reinhold Niebuhr who influenced Bonhoeffer to think about the church's involvement in issues of social justice. Other friends that Bonhoeffer found would help him both academically and personally. The first of these is Erwin Sutz. Sutz himself

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 380.

had studied under Karl Barth, and so Sutz convinced Bonhoeffer to attend two weeks of lectures by Karl Barth in Bonn in 1931. Although Bonhoeffer had read some of Barth's writings he had not the opportunity to meet Barth. The conclusion of the two weeks of lecture led to a lifelong friendship between Barth and Bonhoeffer, both of whom would be the shining lights influencing the shape of theology in Germany. A second person that Bonhoeffer met was a Frenchman, Jean Lassere. Lassere challenged Bonhoeffer to examine more closely Jesus' teaching in the Sermon of the Mount, particularly its teaching on peace. This challenge would bear fruit throughout the 1930s as Bonhoeffer became an outspoken critic of the Nazi regime.

In addition to encountering the people mentioned above, Bonhoeffer formed friendships with two Americans. Paul Lehmann and his family often invited Bonhoeffer to their home for conversation. Paul influenced Bonhoeffer to think about the church's role in the cause for civil rights and economic justice. Finally, Bonhoeffer befriended a black student from Harlem named Frank Fisher. Fisher was assigned to a Harlem church named Abyssinian Baptist Church for his field education. Feeling drawn to this church, Bonhoeffer often accompanied Fisher on his field education experiences at the church. While there Bonhoeffer taught Sunday school, led weekday religious school and Bible studies, and often engaged in sports activities. Bonhoeffer's biographer notes the following concerning Bonhoeffer's experience serving the Baptist Church in Harlem:

What was so impressive was the way in which he pursued the understanding of the problem [of racial antagonism in America] to its minutest detail through books and countless visits to Harlem, through participation in Negro youth work, but even more through a remarkable kind of identity with the Negro community so that he was received there as though he had never been an outsider at all.<sup>7</sup>

By 1931 Bonhoeffer had returned to Berlin. At this time Bonhoeffer completed further formal education by writing a professional dissertation (a second dissertation, called a

---

<sup>7</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 155.

*Habilitationsschrift*, is required to teach in German universities) entitled *Act and Being*. In this dissertation he argued that God's revelation transcends all categories. The final place where God's revelation is to be found was the church community. Bonhoeffer reflected on salvation and the way individuals and communities "can be locked into self-deceiving, idolatrous substitutes for God's own gift of God's self."<sup>8</sup>

### **C. Bonhoeffer as the Professor**

His year of study over Bonhoeffer began a brief teaching career. At the University of Berlin, he taught subjects on systematic theology. In addition to inspiring his students to academic excellence, Bonhoeffer inspired loyalty by getting to know them and by spending time with them on outings. The students most loyal to Bonhoeffer would become the core group of resisters when Hitler came to power. The summer of 1933 marked the end of Bonhoeffer's teaching career, just at the time when Hitler was made chancellor of the country.

### **D. Bonhoeffer as Leader of Resistance Movement**

From the beginning of Hitler's rise to power, Bonhoeffer was a member of the resistance movement against Hitler. Bonhoeffer and Professor Hermann Sasse of Erlangen were commissioned to draft a faith statement called the Bethel Confession. This document repudiated Hitler's ideas of Aryanism and the genocidal elimination of the Jewish people. However, after the Lutheran theologians examined, discussed, and debated the statement, it became so diluted that Bonhoeffer refused to sign it. Disappointed at the lack of commitment on the part of his fellow churchmen, Bonhoeffer left Germany for London in 1933 and would spend 18 months as pastor of the two Lutheran churches until 1935. His decision to leave Germany was met with severe criticism. Bonhoeffer's friend Karl Barth implored him in a letter with these words: "You are a German..the house of your church is on fire..you must return to your post by the next ship.

---

<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, 9.

As things are, shall we say the ship after next?<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the pastoral experience was profitable for him and was full of preaching and teaching. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer came into contact with George K.A. Bell, the Bishop of Chichester. Bishop Bell would be of great help to Bonhoeffer in the coming years.

In 1935 Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin. Bonhoeffer would become, in the course of time, a leader in the resistance to Hitler, become a champion in defending the Jews, and the director of the Confessing Church. The Confessing Church was introduced in 1934 as a counterpart and resistance church to the Reich church established by Hitler. Bonhoeffer had many connections with church men through his work in two groups: the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches and the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work.

In August, 1934, at a small island called Fanø near Denmark, an ecumenical meeting of churches and other Christian groups took place. The meeting was composed of members of the various groups in which Bonhoeffer was involved. His friend Bishop Bell presided over the deliberations. Bonhoeffer tried to impart to his fellow pastors the urgent need for the churches to align themselves with the Confessing Church and to present one voice in opposition to Hitler. By the mid 1930s Bonhoeffer's vision was that the Christian Churches would be at the forefront of calling for peace. A second dimension of that vision included the belief that the Christian Churches would be a voice in solidarity with the marginalized Jewish people. At a sermon delivered at the conference entitled 'The Church and the Peoples of the World' Bonhoeffer said the following:

---

<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, lectures and notes 1928-1936 from the Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Edwin H. Robinson, trans. Edwin H. Robinson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 239.

The hour is late. The world is choked with weapons, and dreadful is the distrust which looks out of every human being's eyes. The trumpets of war may blow tomorrow. For what are we waiting? Do we want to become involved in this guilt as never before? We want to give the world a whole word, not a half word—a courageous word, a Christian word. We want to pray that this word may be given to us today. Who knows if we shall see each other again another year?<sup>10</sup>

As time progressed, Bonhoeffer began to realize that the pastors were less than zealous in partnering with the Confessing Church in resisting Hitler. In 1935 he wrote an essay entitled "The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement." This article appeared in the journal *Evangelische Theologiae*. The point that Bonhoeffer wanted to make was that the struggle of the church "puts demands both on the ecumenical movement, to live up to the spirit of Fanø and so live up to its promise to be the Church of Jesus Christ, and on the Confessing Church, to see the struggle as one for the very life of Christianity."<sup>11</sup>

By the mid 1930s, it became clear that a radical break with the German National Church would be necessary. Therefore, the Confessing Church established five underground seminaries to be funded by free-will offerings. Bonhoeffer was the director of one of these seminaries at Finkenwalde in Pomerania. For the next three years 1935-1937 the influence of R. Niebuhr, J. Lassere, and his pastoral experiences in Barcelona, London, and New York would bear fruit in his teaching and his association with his students. While serving as director, Bonhoeffer wrote *Life Together*, which expounded on the basics of communal life: prayer, meditation, Bible study, and fellowship. It comes as no surprise that the seminary community stressed these communal aspects. A second book written at this time was *Discipleship*. This book is a collection of the lectures that he delivered to his students on the topic of the Sermon on the Mount. Before long, though, the Gestapo began pursuing the illegal seminaries and their participants. The seminary

---

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, 229.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

that Bonhoeffer directed met in a farmhouse in its last days. By 1940 all the participants were drafted into military service and so the string of seminaries was closed.

The late 1930s found Bonhoeffer increasingly disappointed about his fellow pastors' lack of resolve. He decided to go to America to, in a sense, escape reality. The prospect of a visit delighted his American friends, especially, R. Niebuhr, who organized a lecture tour for Bonhoeffer. As inviting as the prospect may have been for Bonhoeffer, he decided against such a proposal. Bonhoeffer told Niebuhr by letter that staying in America while his German church was in turmoil would give him no standing in reconstructing the church when the war was over.<sup>12</sup>

When Bonhoeffer returned to Germany he was given the opportunity to operate as a sort of double agent. For four years he worked as a civilian operative for the resistance movement called the *Abwehr* from 1939-1943. The *Abwehr* had many operatives working in the German counterintelligence offices. In addition to passing along critical intelligence to the Allies, the *Abwehr* plotted to assassinate Hitler, an act that was unsuccessful. It was during this time that Bonhoeffer wrote the work known as *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer hoped that this work would be his life's major work. Among other things, Bonhoeffer attempts to reflect on the means "to address the great moral dilemmas posed by war and the need to resist a blatantly evil government."<sup>13</sup>

### **E. Bonhoeffer's Imprisonment and Execution**

As the 1930s came to a close, Bonhoeffer was now a full member of the underground resistance movement. His life as a double agent was full of danger. Amazingly enough, it was at this time that Bonhoeffer fell in love with Maria von Wedemeyer. Bonhoeffer had come into contact with the family during his time as director of the underground seminary. The family

---

<sup>12</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 655.

<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, 354.

afforded him some peace in which to complete his books, first, on *Discipleship*, and, then, *Ethics*. He also served as pastor for the family—conducting the funeral service of first, Maria's father when he was killed in Stalingrad and then, for Maria's brother. Although she was eighteen and he was thirty-six they were engaged on January 13, 1943. Sadly, Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5, 1943 on charges of espionage. Bonhoeffer's arrest prevented the couple from marrying. After his arrest, Bonhoeffer lived for a time in Tegel Prison in Berlin. At the prison, Bonhoeffer would frequently receive Maria as a guest, which only made their relationship grow. From this prison, Bonhoeffer wrote Maria many love letters.<sup>14</sup> In October, 1944, Bonhoeffer was transferred to the Gestapo prison at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse in Berlin. A month or so before, the Gestapo had found documents describing Bonhoeffer's espionage work. From February of 1945 until April of that same year, Bonhoeffer was housed in the concentration camp of Buchenwald. An eyewitness, Payne Best, an officer of the British Secret Service arrested in 1939, offers this description of prisoner Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer

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.<sup>15</sup>

On April 3, 1945, Bonhoeffer was moved again, this time to the extermination camp at Flossenberg. Once at the Flossenberg a brief trial occurred, pronouncing a sentence of high treason on Bonhoeffer. On April 9, 1945, Bonhoeffer was hanged.

The prison doctor who was an eyewitness to Bonhoeffer's execution described the event in the following words:

---

<sup>14</sup> These letters have been organized, translated, and published. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Love Letters from Cell 92: The Correspondence Between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria Wedemeyer 1943-1945*, ed. Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and Ulrich Kabitz, trans. John Brownjohn (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Payne Best, *The Venlo Incident*; (London: Hutchison, 1950), 200, quoted in Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 33, n. 97.

Through the half-open door in one of the huts 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 loveable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer.<sup>16</sup>

The doctor added this comment:

At the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps of the gallows, brave and composed. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.<sup>17</sup>

It would be Payne Best who would hear Bonhoeffer's last words, asking Payne to tell Bishop Bell that he was certain of the victory of goodness and that he had not forgotten the Bishop's words to him at their last encounter.

## **II. Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship***

We have seen thus far how the spiritual perspectives of Dietrich Bonhoeffer led to his death in his effort to resist the demeaning aspects of the Nazi regime. In this section of the paper we will look more closely at one of Bonhoeffer's works, *The Cost of Discipleship*, and tease out a few major themes from that work. First, however, let us put the book into an historical context.

### **A. Historical Context**

*The Cost of Discipleship* was written in 1937. However, the contents of the book are lectures given to students while he was an instructor in Berlin in the early 1930's and lectures given to seminarians when he was the director of the Confessing Church underground seminary of Finkenwalde in Pomerania. By the time the book was published, there were two churches that need mentioning here. The first church is the National Church led by Adolf Hitler. As supreme leader of this Reich Church Hitler placed bishops and pastors who were sympathetic to the Nazi

---

<sup>16</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, 927-928.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 928.



cause. Some mainline Christian churches aligned themselves with the National Church and its Nazi ideology.

In 1934, a second church was created which was in opposition to the National Church. This was the Confessing Church, for which Bonhoeffer was the leading theologian. It was the opinion of the Confessing Church that those Christian churches that were part of the National Church had accommodated the Christian message and been seduced by Nazi power. The charter document creating the Confessing Church—called the Barmen Declaration—points out in part that the pastors repudiate “the false doctrine, as though there were areas in our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.”<sup>18</sup> Thus the Confessing Church rejected Hitler’s attempt to assimilate the Christian message for his own purposes.

While the Confessing Church was armed with only declarations of faith created at synods, the Nazi party had far more weapons at the disposal for those pastors of the Confessing Church. Some pastors were considered unpatriotic and endured economic hardship, while still others endured imprisonment. Using these means and others at their disposal, the Nazis were able to control the Confessing Church. In Bonhoeffer’s view, if the churches wished to retain a Christian identity and be able to preach Christ’s word in a credible way, then a radical break with the National Church was necessary. In other words, the German Christian Churches had to snap themselves out of the accommodation and compromise into which they had been habituated. In order to snap the Christian Churches and the average Christian out of their collective slumber, Bonhoeffer used the radical words Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount.

---

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession Under Hitler* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1976), 240.

## B. Cheap grace vs. Costly grace

The opening passage of Bonhoeffer's book draws a distinction between cheap grace and costly grace. The distinction between these two religious phenomena is linked with Bonhoeffer in many scholars' minds. In any case, in Bonhoeffer's view, the churches had watered down Jesus' message and by doing so also had misled their members. For Bonhoeffer, cheap grace is described as follows:

Cheap grace is that grace which we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living incarnate Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Bonhoeffer believed that this cheap grace was killing the church and its message of Jesus Christ. In a vivid description of the churches and cheap grace, Bonhoeffer writes: "Like ravens we have gathered around the carcass of cheap grace. From it we have imbibed the poison which has killed the following of Jesus among us."<sup>20</sup>

While cheap grace was sapping the life out of the church, Bonhoeffer realized that costly grace was needed. Costly grace can only be found in the obedient following of Jesus. The following of Jesus is no set program or principle or law. Christian discipleship is the following of Jesus only. Bonhoeffer describes costly grace in this way:

It is costly because it calls us to discipleship; it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their lives; it is grace because it gives them their lives. It is costly because it condemns sin; it is grace because it justifies the sinner.<sup>21</sup>

For Bonhoeffer discipleship is the following of Jesus solely which makes no room for anyone or anything else.

---

<sup>19</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, vol. 4 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly & John D. Godsey (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 44.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

### C. A disciple's eagerness, faith, and obedience

In order to help his readers better understand Jesus' call to discipleship Bonhoeffer used the example of the first apostles. The eagerness of the first apostles is set in contrast with other would-be disciples who make excuses not to take the radical step into discipleship.<sup>22</sup> Peter, on the other hand, best represents that step into discipleship in the scene in which he attempts to walk on water as recorded in Matthew 14:22-33. Bonhoeffer admits that from a human perspective such an act is irresponsible.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer points out that followers of Christ need to take that step into the unknown just as Peter had done. To step into the unknown requires both faith in Jesus and obedience to Jesus' summons.

In another example of obedience, Bonhoeffer compares two scenes. The first is that of the encounter of Jesus with the rich young man described in Mark 10:17-22. The second is that of the lawyer's question in Luke 10:29-37 which gives rise to the Good Samaritan parable.<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer points out that it does not matter what the people in each scene may ask. The answer will be the same: Jesus Christ. It does not matter what Jesus is asking of a person, our obligation is to follow.<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer urged his readers to recover a vibrant and true communion with Jesus. Bonhoeffer describes it this way: "Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship; and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ."<sup>26</sup>

Bonhoeffer is well aware that one's obedient and faithful following of Christ is a call to endure suffering. This summons is patterned after Jesus' own rejection and cross. Bonhoeffer uses Jesus' words found in Mark 8:34 to remind his readers that Jesus indeed calls them to that

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 59-61

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 63

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 73-76.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 109.

kind of suffering. Bonhoeffer asserts the following: “Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads to death.”<sup>27</sup> This death can take many forms: patient endurance, forgiveness, daily struggle against sin, and, for those who are called to it, martyrdom. As Bonhoeffer points out: “Discipleship is being bound to the suffering Christ.”<sup>28</sup> Because the Christian is bound to the suffering Christ, the Christian’s personal suffering takes on a new meaning, even joy, because the Christian is suffering in Christ.

#### **D. The location of the faith community**

Bonhoeffer considers the question of where such a faith-filled and obedient community can be located. Bonhoeffer answers his own question when he explains that the community can be found in “only one place...namely, where the poorest of the poor, the most tempted, the meekest of all are to be found, at the cross of Golgotha.”<sup>29</sup> The kind of spirituality that Bonhoeffer offers to his Christian readers is one that exposes them to slander and persecution. The slander and persecution arise out of the faithful and obedient following of Jesus, which necessarily becomes a negative critique of what society has to offer. This negative critique can be spoken but, more often than not, it is implied in the lives of Christians. Bonhoeffer concedes that the persecution of Christians and their negative critique of society could not be otherwise. He writes: “Things cannot go any other way than that the world unleashes its fury in word, violence, and defamation at those meek strangers.”<sup>30</sup> In effect, the example of obedient Christians is threatening to those in the power structures of the world. The Christians’ witness is “too threatening, too loud,..too strong a witness to the injustice of the world.”<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 109-110.

### **E. Dangers faced by Christian disciples & love of enemies**

Despite the dangers of persecution, Bonhoeffer encouraged his Christian readers. He counseled them to be “salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.”<sup>32</sup> It was Bonhoeffer’s hope that the church would be a powerful critic of the Nazi ideology that advocated racist and nationalistic policies. It is from faithful and obedient discipleship that God’s word will go forth from the church to the world.

The ‘light’ that Bonhoeffer encourages his Christian disciples to display has some important implications. The ‘light’ of Christian discipleship was deemed unpatriotic by the German government, because discipleship led to pacifism. Bonhoeffer would insist that Christians not repay any kind of evil done to them.<sup>33</sup> Injustice done to a person is overcome by non-violence. The gospel evidence, especially Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7, supports Bonhoeffer’s argument in that Jesus does not tolerate the nursing of hateful and vengeful feelings. The Christian attitude towards one’s enemies ought to reflect the extraordinary love Jesus manifested and commanded from his followers. Bonhoeffer writes the following:

But who needs love more than they who live in hate without any love? Who, therefore, is more worthy of my love than my foe? Where is love to be praised more splendidly than amidst love’s enemies.<sup>34</sup>

Insisting that Christian disciples love their enemies may be revolutionary, Bonhoeffer takes his teaching one step beyond. Just as Christians are obliged to share their possessions with their fellows, Bonhoeffer teaches that Christian disciples should likewise share their possessions with their enemies. As a basis for this teaching, Bonhoeffer appeals to Romans 12:20, wherein Paul enjoins the Romans to give food and shelter to those who have made life difficult for a Christian. Doing these actions may not save one from further attacks. However, the witness of

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 139.

patient endurance can only bind the Christian closer to the suffering Christ, and simultaneously win the enemy over as the love the Christian manifests becomes real.

In addition to being interested in the welfare of one's enemies, Bonhoeffer encourages the Christian disciple to pray for them. This is exactly what Jesus expects of his own followers. Praying for one's enemies is one of the markers that set a Christian disciple apart from the rest of society. Bonhoeffer observes the following: "What is unique in Christianity is the cross, which allows Christians to step beyond the world to receive victory over the world."<sup>35</sup> In Bonhoeffer's view the victory of the disciple over the world needs to be public, just as Jesus' rejection, cross, and the victory of the cross were public.

#### **F. The hiddenness of Christian discipleship**

At the same time, Bonhoeffer realizes that there is a certain hiddenness regarding Christian discipleship. Following Jesus' command, Bonhoeffer also teaches that Christian disciples are not to do works of love so as to be seen and admired for these acts. After all, Jesus' own power and divinity were hidden from the wise and powerful of his time. The hiddenness of their loving deeds is for the Christian disciple a death of the "old self" in which "the love of Christ crucified... lives in Christ's follower."<sup>36</sup> Christian disciples always live in Christ and in their fellow brothers and sisters.

Just as Jesus was confident that his Father watched over him, so the Christian can have this same confidence. Confident of the Father's gaze, a Christian disciple can live in that joy and carefree way that Jesus pointed to when he described the lilies of the field and the birds of the air in Matthew 6:25-34. With this joy in mind, Bonhoeffer suggests that Christians cannot merely go uncritically with the flow of society. Bonhoeffer's own critique of his society meant that the

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 152.

Gestapo would descend soon upon him. Bonhoeffer could only echo Jesus' words to his disciples when he counsels them not to be afraid of their enemies. The Spirit stands with the Christian disciple, giving him or her the words to speak and the courage needed in the face of death. Bonhoeffer writes succinctly: "Those who have held onto Jesus in this life will find that Jesus will hold onto them in eternity."<sup>37</sup>

### **G. Implications of the Christian baptism**

Having completed his thoughts on the Christian disciple's estrangement from all things that are not of God, Bonhoeffer considers baptism in the second part of his book. He takes as his basis the teaching of St. Paul on this matter. He tries to answer the question of how the Christian disciple's baptism affects the day-to-day living out of the gospel in a world that offers contrary gods.

Resisting factors in society that demean the dignity of the poorest of the poor is a feature of Bonhoeffer's spirituality. To resist is the only practical way a Christians can confess that "in Christ we no longer live our own lives, but Christ lives his life in us."<sup>38</sup> To suffer on behalf of others is an act of faith; it is a privilege. Bonhoeffer points to St. Paul who teaches his Christian communities that their own sufferings, in every society where Christ has been identified with the weak and lowly, complement the sufferings of Jesus. Bonhoeffer calls this "the miracle and grace we enjoy in the community of the Body of Christ."<sup>39</sup>

Bonhoeffer calls on his Christian disciples to visibly witness to Jesus Christ. Those Christians and their churches, who, in good will and compassion live for one another as Jesus' earliest followers did, recreate the ideal community described in the books of Acts 4:32. This early church community was, in Bonhoeffer's view, "a perfect community...established freely,

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 222.

joyfully, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, a community in which ‘there was not a needy person,’ in which possessions were distributed ‘as any had need’ and in which ‘no one claimed private ownership of any possessions.’<sup>40</sup>

To be a part of this perfect community is a call from Jesus Christ. Christian disciples who experience the rejection Jesus himself experienced make manifest this perfect community, the communal form of the Body of Christ. Christ’s community is intended to assume ‘a ‘form’ that is different from that of the world.’<sup>41</sup> The form is different because, first of all, Christ inspired the community into being, and secondly, because Christ continually transforms it into ‘the form of Christ himself,’ who, ‘came into the world and in infinite mercy bore us and accepted us. And he did not become conformed to the world, but was actually rejected and cast out by it. He was not of this world.’<sup>42</sup> Clearly for Bonhoeffer, Christian disciples, like their Lord, are attacked because their actions are seen by the enemies of God for what they are: solidarity with the underclass of society and a protest against the mistreatment of the most vulnerable.

Christians are to act differently from the world’s way. Separating oneself from the evil aspects of society may lead to being hated by one’s society. Yet, in an ironic twist, alienation from godless ways and that suffering one endures at the hands of the godless may be the thing that shields society from God’s punishment. Bonhoeffer explains:

Christians are poor and suffering, hungry and thirsty, gentle, compassionate and peaceable, persecuted and scorned by the world. Yet it is for their sake alone that the world is still preserved. They shield the world from God’s judgment of wrath. They

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



suffer so that the world can still live under God's forbearance. They are strangers and sojourners on this earth.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, Christian disciples can vicariously suffer for the world just as their Master did.

Bonhoeffer closes his book with a plea. He asks that all Christians be conformed to the image of Jesus. We cannot do this entirely on our own, but rather it is God working in us.

Bonhoeffer explains:

In Christ's incarnation all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ, who took on human flesh and who in himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance.<sup>44</sup>

Here Bonhoeffer makes a subtle reference to the Jewish people who were enduring the genocidal practices of Hitler's regime. The Christian conformity to Jesus is an exterior sign of Christ dwelling in their hearts.

### **Conclusion**

In the introduction to this paper I likened Bonhoeffer to a prophet and martyr, comparing him to biblical figures John of Patmos and John the Baptist. John of Patmos, the author of the apocalyptic book Revelation introduces the book with seven letters written to seven churches in Asia Minor. In John's view some of these churches have become seduced by Roman power and the privileges that power gave them that the preaching of the Christian message by those churches was ineffective. Bonhoeffer saw the Christian churches of his day seduced and manipulated by Nazi power and thus lose their effectiveness in preaching the Word. John of Patmos describes our Lord standing among the seven candles which symbolize the seven churches (Revelation 1:12-16) to express that Christ is the center and guardian of the churches. Bonhoeffer used the intellectual and theological expression of "Christ existing as the church

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 287.

community' as his standard that the church was acting authentically. Furthermore, like John the Baptist who encouraged those who questioned him to break with their former behavior (Luke 3:10-14), Bonhoeffer would preach to his people, again and again, to break from their ideological gods, and resist an evil government and take up true apostolic discipleship of Christ. In terms of martyrdom Bonhoeffer was persecuted like all the great prophets before him. His role as martyr is disputed because the Protestant church does not have a well-established theology of martyrdom as does the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the description supplied by the prison doctor of a prayerful, peaceful, and resolute Bonhoeffer at the time of his death only evokes memories of earlier martyrs beginning with St. Stephen whose death is described in Acts 7:55-60. Dying a martyr's death was his destiny, the logical conclusion of his life. Bonhoeffer himself pointed out that costly grace costs people their lives. Costly grace is hard won because it is the following of Jesus, who, in Luke 9:51-52, is described as determined to set his face toward Jerusalem, the place of the cross. Bonhoeffer hoped and worked to inspire his fellow country men to these high standards and thus alter society's direction.

**WORKS CITED**

- Best, Payne. *The Venlo Incident*. London: Hutchison, 1950, 200. Quoted in Geoffrey B. Kelly & F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 33, n. 97, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003.
- Bethge, Eberhard. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly & F. Burton Nelson. New York: Harper Collins, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly & John D. Godsey. Vol. 4, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Love Letters from Cell 92: The Correspondence between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer 1943-1945*. Edited by Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and Ulrich Kabitz. Translated John Brownjohn. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *No Rusty Swords: Letters, lectures and notes 1928-1936 from the Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by Edwin H. Robinson. Translated by Edwin H. Robinson and John Bowden. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1979.
- Cochrane, Arthur. *The Church's Confession under Hitler*. Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1976.