

Faith Pulpit

Bonhoeffer: Approaching His Life and Work

Many evangelical Christians today seem fascinated with the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and hold him up as a hero of the faith. Others, however, do not hold him in such high regard. Who was Dietrich Bonhoeffer? Is he someone Bible-believing Christians should look to as a hero or ideal? In this article Prof. Andy Stearns of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary examines the life and work of Bonhoeffer. In the second article Stearns evaluates Bonhoeffer's teachings and his view of the Scriptures.

Bonhoeffer's Life

Early Years and Education Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Breslau, located in modern-day Poland. He was a twin and the sixth of eight children.¹ Bonhoeffer grew up in a household that was not particularly religious. Rather, "the predominant atmosphere was one of tolerant empiricism."² His father, a renowned professor of psychiatry and neurology, was more at home with science and empirical data than myth and religion. His mother, however, had grown up a pastor's daughter and therefore gave her children three years of religious education in the home.³

The Bonhoeffers were a scientifically inclined family, though Dietrich would not become a scientist or a doctor. Rather he made the unexpected decision to become a theologian. Ferdinand Schlingensiepen explained the family's reaction:

For a young person from an academically inclined upper middle-class family, which was 'Christian, but no longer in the church', to decide to study theology was as rare then as it is nowadays. . . . His father was surprised, and his brothers could be openly scornful. It didn't fit the family image. The children had lots of other opportunities open to them.⁴

Bonhoeffer, however, would remain determined and followed this course, entering the University of Tübingen in 1923 and transferring a year later to the University of Berlin. There he would learn from the giants of theological liberalism, foremost among them the legendary Adolf Von Harnack.⁵

Bonhoeffer completed two theology degrees by his 25th birthday. In 1927 he wrote *Sanctorum Communio*, a doctoral thesis in which he engaged philosophers and sociologists regarding the nature of the church. In 1930 he completed *Act and Being*, his habilitationsschrift.⁶ In this second work Bonhoeffer interacted with two views on the form of knowledge.⁷ Both of these papers dealt heavily in the philosophical and sociological realm. Neither relied significantly on Scripture.⁸

From September 1930 to June 1931 Bonhoeffer studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He greatly disliked the American liberal theology he encountered.⁹ During that year he also made trips to Cuba and Mexico. When he returned to Germany in July of 1931, he spent two weeks in Bonn meeting the neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth. Bonhoeffer had been an avid reader of Barth and had interacted with his works in *Act and Being*.¹⁰

In Bonn he attended lectures given by Barth as well as discussion groups in the evening. At one point Bonhoeffer offered a quote from Luther which Barth greatly enjoyed.¹¹ This exchange led to a personal invitation for Bonhoeffer to visit the theologian's home. Bonhoeffer, already an admirer of Barth, began a close relationship with the theologian who would become a mentor of sorts.¹² Barth's influence can be seen and felt in Bonhoeffer's later writings.

Teaching and Writing For the next few years Bonhoeffer served in the ministry, while at the same time working in the University of Berlin. During this time Bonhoeffer gave a series of lectures on the first three chapters of Genesis and on Christology. Both of these lecture series turned into books: *Creation and Fall* (1932) and *Christ the Center* (1933). These writings were works of a scholarly nature and more fully showcased Bonhoeffer's theology.

From 1933 to 1935 Bonhoeffer pastored a church in London. In 1934 Mahatma Gandhi personally invited Bonhoeffer to visit him. Bonhoeffer had been trying to make a trip to India for some time to visit Gandhi and to learn about community life and spiritual techniques that could be applied to the church in the West.¹³ In a letter to his grandmother he confessed that it seemed "there's more Christianity in their 'paganism' than in the whole of our Reich Church. Of course Christianity did come from the East originally."¹⁴ Bonhoeffer was unable to make this visit, which grieved him.

Rather than traveling to India, in April of 1935 Bonhoeffer accepted a position to lead a new seminary to train preachers. Bonhoeffer wrote of this experience in his work *Life Together* (1938). His purpose, in contrast to his earlier works, was not to discuss a philosophical system but to detail the methods of preparing for ministry and living in community with others. During these years Bonhoeffer began to think through his next work, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Stephen Haynes noted the devotional writing

style in both *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*, calling these works “homiletic” and “inspiring” compared to Bonhoeffer’s later works.¹⁵

From its inception, the seminary was illegal under German law at the time. Though the classes were small, the seminary was full of men training to go into the pastorate. It, however, survived for only two years before the Nazis found it and shut it down. After its closing, Bonhoeffer wrote what was perhaps his most widely read work, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937). Countless Christians have read this work, and some think it is one of the most influential books for Christians in the twentieth century.¹⁶

With the Nazi threat increasing every day, Bonhoeffer began to work with a secret resistance group. Eventually he lost his teaching position and was banned from speaking in Germany. After a Jewish safe-house was discovered by the Nazis, Bonhoeffer was implicated as one of the collaborators. He was arrested and spent the next two years in prisons and prison camps.

Imprisonment During this time Bonhoeffer corresponded with his closest friend, Eberhard Bethge. These letters had to be smuggled in and out of the prison. Bethge saved the letters and eventually published them as a book, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (1943–1945, published 1951). We can learn much about Bonhoeffer’s final days in these letters.

Bonhoeffer spent the rest of his days in German concentration camps under difficult conditions. Eventually Hitler was apprised of new information implicating Bonhoeffer and others in an assassination attempt. As Schlingensiepen reported, Hitler, having worked himself into a “frenzied rage,” gave the order to liquidate the conspirators. On April 9, 1945, Bonhoeffer was hanged, a mere two weeks before the Allied forces arrived.¹⁷

Bonhoeffer’s Recent Popularity

Bonhoeffer was raised in the typical theological liberalism of the time. He turned to Barth’s teachings and accepted much of his neo-orthodoxy. Bonhoeffer spent a long time secretly working against the German government, even playing a role in an assassination attempt on Hitler. In the end, many believed that he died on account of his belief in Christ. Bonhoeffer wrote a book on the cost of being a disciple of Jesus, and then almost prophetically lived what he likely thought was the direct outworking of that teaching. Ultimately, the cost of being a disciple of Christ was his death in a Nazi prison camp.

Bonhoeffer’s writings and manner of death are inspirational to many Christians today. Who would not be stirred to hear a story of a man who lived out his belief in Christ to the point of death? We desperately want to hear a story to inspire us to stay the course as Christians.

Some Evangelicals, when they read Bonhoeffer’s writings and learn of his manner of death, cast him as a hero, an icon, and an archetype for the church today. They ask, “Would you like to see what a committed Christian looks like? Look to Bonhoeffer. Would you like to know what it’s like to follow

Christ and resist the political machine of the day? Look to Bonhoeffer. Do you want to become a disciple of the Savior? Look to Bonhoeffer.”

Perhaps the best example of this excitement about Bonhoeffer was the recent biography by Eric Metaxas. In *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* Metaxas offered a vision of Bonhoeffer as a present day evangelical hero.¹⁸ His biography has received praise from evangelicals¹⁹ and even held the top position on the New York Times’ best-seller list.²⁰

Bonhoeffer’s Critics

In spite of Bonhoeffer’s recent popularity, some scholars, who have spent their lives reading and studying him, offer a strong voice of dissent. While agreeing that Bonhoeffer was a noble and courageous man who stood up to the Nazis, these scholars point out that Bonhoeffer’s theology was not evangelical.²¹

Some scholars not only deny Bonhoeffer was evangelical, but they even find in his works the basis for their own variant, left-leaning theology. For example, in 1966 Harvey Cox authored a book titled *The Secular City*. In this work he set forth a Christianity which was wholly secular. He based his work in part on comments Bonhoeffer made while in prison regarding the world that had “come of age.” Cox saw Bonhoeffer as accepting the belief that religion is just a myth and that we must continue our lives without it. In essence, Cox reinterpreted the Bible based on Bonhoeffer’s themes.²² For this reason, at the very least, the Bible-believing Christian should use great care in reading Bonhoeffer’s works. Cox is not alone in his use of Bonhoeffer.²³

What to Do with Bonhoeffer?

So in the end, what are we to do with Bonhoeffer? First, we should take a cautious and critical approach to reading his works. If you want to read a biography, start with Eberhard Bethge’s work. It is long, but he was Bonhoeffer’s closest friend, and his perspective is most reliable. If this book is too daunting, then pick up Ferdinand Schlingensiepen’s biography. He worked with and was asked by Bethge to make Bonhoeffer more accessible to the masses and has written an excellent biography.

Second, remember that noble actions do not equal Christian behavior. Many noble people are not believers. Just because people perform noble deeds does not mean we ought to assume they are Christians. Rather, remember that while Bonhoeffer did courageously resist the Nazis, he also said some shocking things that people from various theological perspectives have taken to support their own positions.

In the next article we will look specifically at how Bonhoeffer used and interpreted Scripture. Such an examination reveals the true nature of his theology. Evangelicals have always been a “people of the

book.” The question of the next article is whether this statement was also true of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Works Cited

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4. *Ibid.*
5. Bethge, 45–91.
6. A habilitationsschrift was a postdoctoral dissertation written to qualify as a university lecturer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928–1931*, ed. Clifford J. Green, vol. 10 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 46–47.
7. Schlingensiepen, 56–58.
8. Bonhoeffer’s use of Scripture will be discussed in the following article.
9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, *The Making of Modern Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 10–11.
10. Schlingensiepen, 38–75.
11. *Ibid.*, 76–77. Bonhoeffer noted that Luther said, “For God, the cursing of a godless person can be more agreeable than the hallelujahs of the pious!”
12. Bethge, 175–177.
13. *Ibid.*, 406–409. Note especially Karl Barth’s response to Bonhoeffer’s plans.
14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelley and F. Burton Nelson (HarperCollins, 1995), 23.
15. Stephen R. Haynes, “Between Fundamentalism and Secularism: The American Love Affair with Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theologie Heute: Ein Weg Zwischen Fundamentalismus Und Säkularismus?*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, Stephen Plant, and Christiane Tietz (Gütersloher Verl.-Haus, 2009), 221.
16. *The Cost of Discipleship* was listed as the second most influential book in Christianity Today’s list of the top 100 books of the last century (“Books of the Century,” *Christianity Today*, April 24, 2000), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/april24/5.92.html> (accessed January 7, 2013). It was also the nineteenth book on its list “The Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals” (*Christianity Today*, October 2006), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/october/23.51.html> (accessed January 7, 2013).
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22. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*. (New York: Macmillan, 1966).
23. For another example of this use, see John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). Stephen R. Haynes offers an especially helpful work which looks at Bonhoeffer from various theological perspectives in *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

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