

The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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The Way of Jesus Christ

Scripture

Ephesians 3:16–19 This passage assures us that God strengthens us to know Christ and to follow him faithfully.

Prayer

Lord, you have called us to follow you, but we confess that we do not see clearly where you lead. Often we are confused; sometimes we are afraid and even want to run away. Bear us up, and assure us that in life and in death we belong to you through your Son, Jesus Christ. Strengthen us through the example of those who have walked the way of discipleship before us, including your servant Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We thank you for his witness that nothing in heaven or on earth can ultimately separate us from you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Introduction

This session introduces readers to the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), the German Protestant theologian who was hanged by the Nazis at the end of World War II and who is honored by many Christians today as a twentieth-century martyr. Bonhoeffer's life story is filled with drama and intrigue. He was a larger-than-life personality who immediately impressed others not only with his brilliant intellect but also with his deep spirituality.

As Bonhoeffer was led to execution, he fell on his knees in fervent prayer. Witnesses later reported that he submitted peacefully to what he believed was God's will. But during his lifetime, Bonhoeffer also went through periods of deep anguish and doubt. He wanted more than anything to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, yet he was not always sure what faithfulness to Jesus required. Again and again he had to discover that what sustained him was not his own sense of holiness or peace but rather the crucified Christ, who was always beside him and who carried him, despite his weak faith.

Bonhoeffer once asserted that the central question for the church is "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" The answer that came to

Bonhoeffer whenever he tried to make sense of his life was that Jesus is the living Lord who bears each of us up, freeing us to act more responsibly in a broken, sinful world. Bonhoeffer had a profound sense of God's guidance in his life, beginning with his decision to become a theologian, then his decision to give his life to the church, and finally his decision to return to Germany from the United States to participate in a conspiracy against Hitler, which led to his arrest and death.

Bonhoeffer teaches us that Christian spirituality will always be grounded in the way of Jesus Christ. We must listen ever again for Jesus' voice and discover the strength that he gives us to act faithfully, even in the midst of tragic uncertainties and failures.

Bonhoeffer's Way to Theology

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Breslau, Germany (now in Poland). His father, Karl, was one of Germany's leading psychiatrists and neurologists. In 1912, the family moved to Berlin, where Bonhoeffer's father assumed a teaching post at the University of Berlin, one of Germany's most prestigious academic institutions.

Bonhoeffer's family valued education and the fine arts but not religious faith. Officially, his parents belonged to the Protestant church (primarily Lutheran in theology), but they never attended church, even on big holidays. For them, as for many upper-middle-class Germans of that era, membership in the church was simply part of one's civic identity. Respectable Germans were married in the church, had their children baptized and confirmed, and received a church burial. The nation guaranteed the church had money and social prestige, and in turn the church supported the nation and its political interests.

Most German theologians and church leaders accepted the entry of Germany into war against France and Britain in 1914. German soldiers even wore belt buckles emblazoned with the words "Gott mit uns" (God with us). Germans were confident they would achieve a quick victory. Similar enthusiasm for war broke out among the other European nations, but what began as a regional conflict between Serbia and the Austrian-Hungarian empire soon engulfed the continent. War dragged on. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers dug into trenches along long battle lines; one side would push forward a few hundred feet only to be pushed back again.

What would later be called World War I, or even "the war to end all wars," deeply shook the middle-class, intellectual world in

which Bonhoeffer was growing up. Before the war, Germans could assert that they stood at the forefront of world civilization. They saw themselves as a cultured, refined people who were making the world a better, more comfortable place. They took pride in having the world's greatest composers, philosophers, and scientists. The war, however, confronted them with their capacity for brutality and evil. Historians estimate that 20 percent or more of a generation of young men were casualties of the war, either killed or maimed. Bonhoeffer himself lost an older brother. Europe, and especially Germany, would never be the same.

When the war finally ended in 1918, Germany was on the losing side. The Treaty of Versailles stripped it of its military machine and some of its territory, and it demanded that Germany make huge financial reparations. In 1919, Germany established for the first time in its history a democratic, constitutional government, but these years of the Weimar Republic were marred by runaway inflation and political and social chaos.

This was the world into which Bonhoeffer's parents, true to German tradition, sent their fourteen-year-old son to confirmation classes. To their surprise, he soon decided that when he grew up, he wanted to become a theologian. He had found something in the church's heritage and language they had not, or perhaps he did not yet know what.

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Bonhoeffer's Way to the Church

In 1923, at age seventeen, Bonhoeffer began his university studies in theology. He proved to be a brilliant student. Normally, students needed five years just to complete the basic degree in theology, but within four years Bonhoeffer had completed not only the equivalent of a bachelor's degree but also a master's degree and a doctorate.

Bonhoeffer's dissertation was based on a phrase from the Apostles' Creed, "the communion of saints" (*Sanctorum Communio*). It was a topic that would occupy him for the rest of his life. He wanted to know what it meant for the church truly to be the church—not just a social institution, not just a protector of national values, but also the abiding presence of Jesus Christ on earth.

After completing a required church internship in 1929 (at a

German Protestant church in sunny Barcelona, Spain), Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin. Despite all his accomplishments, the German church would not ordain him. He was only twenty-three years old, and the church required ministers to be at least twenty-five. Instead, he became a lecturer at the university, completed a postdoctoral dissertation (later published as *Act and Being*), and traveled to New York City to study at Union Theological Seminary and observe American church life. He later wrote that he had been especially impressed by the vitality of the African American churches in Harlem.

In 1931, Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin, once again offered lectures at the University of Berlin, was ordained, and became chaplain to students at the technical university. He was already winning a reputation as an outstanding, creative theologian and impressed even the great Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth, who at that time was teaching in Germany and was already on his way to becoming the most important Protestant theologian of the twentieth century.

As mysteriously as he had been drawn into the world of theology, Bonhoeffer suddenly found himself drawn not only to think about but also to give his life to the church. He would later say,

Then [in 1932] something happened, something that has changed and transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible. . . . I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, spoken and preached about it—but I had not yet become a Christian. . . . It became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the church.¹

Bonhoeffer had a conversion experience. He would continue to read widely in literature, philosophy, and theology, but it was above all the Bible to which he now turned. From this time on, his life would belong to the church, and he would serve wherever the church called him. Little could he yet know where that road would take him.

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1. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 205.

Bonhoeffer's Way to the Cross

On January 30, 1933, Hitler became chancellor of Germany. Bonhoeffer was one of the few church leaders who immediately expressed concern and publicly criticized the government when it passed laws discriminating against Jews.

At the same time, Bonhoeffer became so discouraged about the new developments in Germany that he left the country to become pastor of two German-speaking congregations in London. There he made ecumenical contacts with Protestant church leaders in other parts of Europe. Even though he had helped to found the Confessing Church (those German pastors and congregations that were resisting Hitler's efforts to control the church), he was not present at the synod of May 29–31, 1934, at which Karl Barth took the lead in drafting the Theological Declaration of Barmen.

In 1935, leaders of the Confessing Church asked Bonhoeffer to return to Germany to direct a preachers' seminary. These seminaries were a second level of theological education, under church control, for students who had completed university studies and fieldwork in a church. Because the theological faculties at the state universities were increasingly aligned with the so-called German Christians (that part of the church that actively supported Hitler and Nazi ideology), the Confessing Church founded several of its own preachers' seminaries in an effort to train and protect its candidates for ministry.

Bonhoeffer had to organize almost everything from the ground up, including room and board. The seminary was briefly located in a hut along the Baltic Sea before it was moved to an abandoned schoolhouse in the village of Finkenwalde. Each group of students, approximately twenty young men at a time (women were not yet being ordained), lived together for six months and practiced daily prayer, theological reflection on ministry (led by Bonhoeffer), and life in Christian community.

In 1937, the Gestapo closed the seminary. From that time on, Bonhoeffer was a man on the run. He “never again had a permanent residence.”² He wrote his books *Discipleship* (also called *The Cost of Discipleship*) and *Life Together* and tried to apprentice candidates for ministry in their fieldwork churches since he could no longer gather them at the seminary. Finally, as it became clear that Hitler was preparing for war, Bonhoeffer traveled to England and the United States, uncertain what to do next.

2. *Ibid.*, 594.

Friends at Union Seminary pleaded with him to remain and continue his theological work. He finally chose to return home, later writing to American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, “I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany.”³

In 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Less than a year later, France had surrendered as well. Bonhoeffer threw in his lot with a group of military officers plotting to overthrow Hitler. In 1943, he was arrested, although his connection to the conspirators was not yet clear. Only after the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944, did the plot unravel. On April 9, 1945, less than one month before the German capitulation, Bonhoeffer was hanged.

God had called Bonhoeffer to become a theologian and to give his life to the church. In prison, he wondered again, “Who am I?” Despite his doubts and fears, he could nevertheless confess, “Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.”⁴ He knew that he belonged to Christ.

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Spiritual Practice

Part of the life of prayer is practicing regular self-examination and asking whether we are being faithful to God’s call. Take some minutes today to remember how God has guided you in the past, and ask God to guide you into the future, no matter what problems you face.

Questions for Reflection

What is the difference between reading the Bible for information and experiencing it as God’s living Word?

What does it mean to you to give your life to the church?

What do you see to be the most important influences on Bonhoeffer’s life and theology?

3. Ibid., 655.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enl. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 348.