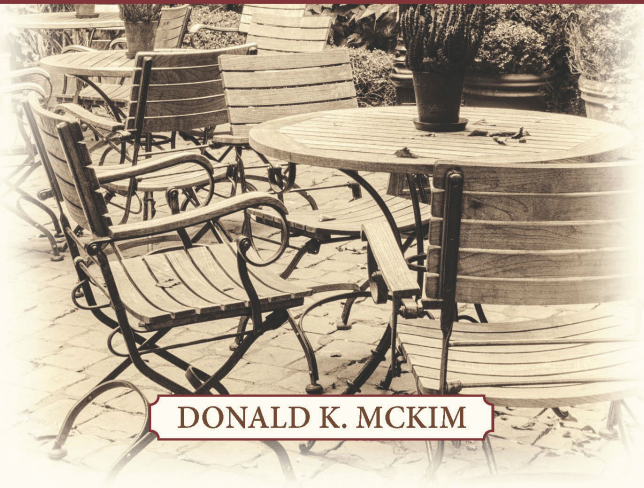
MORNINGS WITH BONHOEFFER

100 REFLECTIONS ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE



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The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Supplement to *Mornings with Bonhoeffer: 100 Reflections on the Christian Life*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) was an important twentieth-century theologian. In 1945, he was hanged by the Nazis for participating in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. This occurred less than a month before the end of World War II.

But Bonhoeffer's writings have had an ongoing impact and have been significant in many ways for a variety of people. His influence has transcended his German Lutheran church background and moved into the wider theological world. Bonhoeffer's writings have been appealed to by a variety of theologians—from theological conservatives to liberation theologians. But beyond this ecumenical interest, Bonhoeffer has impacted a larger culture. As Stephen Haynes has written, "In post-Christian societies with an abiding interest in 'spirituality,' Bonhoeffer is increasingly cast as a teacher of enduring 'values,' and there is little hesitation in interpreting him apart from the concerns of Protestant theology or the institutional church."[1]

Yet Bonhoeffer was a Protestant theologian. He studied under some of the leading scholars of his time and wrote two significant books as part of his academic route to a doctoral degree. The theology Bonhoeffer developed through his life provided insights and innovations for theologians. But his life, during which he opposed the Nazi state, and his death, which occurred just days before the Flossenburg concentration camp was liberated by Allied forces, have captured the imaginations of many who see Bonhoeffer as a theologian who lived his faith through costly sacrifice.

Both Bonhoeffer's theology and his life are important today. His belief and behavior are inextricably related. The "values" Bonhoeffer embodied were grounded in his theology. His theological emphasis on Jesus Christ led him to ask not only, Who is Jesus Christ? but also to move beyond this question to insisting the primary question in his own time (and our own) is, Who is Jesus Christ for us today? Theology must impact daily life in the world. Life in the world, in community with other people, must be lived on the basis of theological understandings of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Theology gives a vision for God's will and draws us into meaningful service and sacrifice for others based on the suffering God who has come into the world in Jesus Christ. As Haynes puts it, "What continues to make Bonhoeffer so widely known, admired, read, and studied is his unique *combination* of innovative theology and committed living."[2]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his twin sister, Sabine, were born in Breslau, Germany (now Poland), on February 4, 1906. His father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was a psychiatrist. His mother, Pauline, was the great-granddaughter of Karl August von Hase, a professor of church and dogmatic history at the University of Jena. In 1912, the Bonhoeffers moved to Berlin, where Karl became head of the psychiatric department in a prestigious hospital.

From an early age, Dietrich decided to be a theologian. A number of his ancestors had been pastors and theologians, and at age thirteen, Dietrich announced he would study theology. He went on to become exceedingly well trained academically, even studying Hebrew.

In 1923, Dietrich began his theological studies at the University of Tübingen. Due to the pressures of inflation, Bonhoeffer transferred to the Friedrich Wilhelm (later Humboldt) University in Berlin after a time spent exploring Italy with his brother, Klaus. Bonhoeffer progressed rapidly through the university and began his doctoral dissertation at the end of 1925. Dietrich's professors included world-renowned scholars Reinhold Seeberg, under whom he wrote his dissertation; Adolf von Harnack, his neighbor and the world's most prominent historian of Christian dogma; and Karl Holl, a leading Luther scholar. These teachers significantly shaped Bonhoeffer's theological thought.

Bonhoeffer's dissertation was completed in eighteen months and later published as *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (1930). It spoke of God's revelation in social form—the church, which Bonhoeffer described as "Christ existing as community."

Bonhoeffer learned much from studying the teachings of Martin Luther, including an emphasis on salvation or justification by faith. He also imbibed Luther's emphasis on the "theology of the cross," where God is revealed in the suffering and weakness of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, through which we are saved. The Swiss Reformed theologian Karl

Barth came to play an important role in Bonhoeffer's developing thought, known as dialectic theology. Barth's view of God's revelation—focused on Jesus Christ—was especially important for Bonhoeffer.

In 1928, Bonhoeffer went to Spain, where he was a pastor's assistant for a Lutheran congregation of German families. There he worked with the youth and preached. When he returned to Berlin after a year, he decided to continue postdoctoral work. But he was also attracted to parish life. During that time, German nationalism was growing, and the National Socialist (Nazi) party was having electoral successes. Bonhoeffer wrote a second dissertation, required for those seeking a teaching career, called *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, which would be published in 1931.

Bonhoeffer continued to pursue a path to ordination in the church. Since at age twenty-four he was not old enough to be ordained, the church's general superintendent suggested he spend some time in the United States. So Bonhoeffer traveled to Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1930. Union was a leading American seminary and featured an outstanding faculty, which included Reinhold Niebuhr and John Baillie among others. Bonhoeffer did not find the curriculum very rigorous. But it did introduce him to courses with a distinctly social and cultural focus.

Most significantly, Bonhoeffer got involved in African American churches in Harlem. He became friends with a black Union student, Frank Fisher, and taught Sunday school at

the Abyssinian Baptist Church, where he heard the powerful preaching of Adam Clayton Powell Sr. He also enjoyed listening to records of "Negro spirituals." In America, Bonhoeffer learned about the Social Gospel and found himself spiritually stimulated by this immersion in the "real world."

When Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin in 1931, he worked as a lecturer at the University of Berlin, did pastoral work as a student chaplain, and launched into ecumenical church work. Two important books emerged from his four semesters of university teaching: *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3* (1933) and *Christ the Center* (published posthumously), based on student notes from his 1933 course on Christology.

At noon on January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler became leader of the German government. Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher said, "This means war!"[3] Bonhoeffer realized Nazi ideology was antithetical to Christian faith. On February 1, Bonhoeffer gave a radio address in which he warned of the dangers of a *Führer* (leader) with mounting authority. But mysteriously, Bonhoeffer's microphone was shut off before he could speak his forthright warning.

Hitler consolidated power after the Reichstag fire and issued a law stipulating that "non-Aryans" (those with three or four Jewish grandparents) could be immediately dismissed from the country's civil service. Those who became known as "German Christians" applied this "Aryan paragraph" to the church, thus dismissing pastors with Jewish backgrounds. Bonhoeffer wrote against the "Aryan paragraph." He indicated

one thing the church could do was to try to stop the state—or resist it—when the state's actions are contrary to God's will.

This led to Bonhoeffer's becoming allied with opposition groups that became active in the church struggle. These included the Pastor's Emergency League, begun by Martin Niemöller, and the Confessing Church movement. Bonhoeffer saw clearly what he expressed in a letter to his grandmother on August 20, 1933: "The question really is: Germanism or Christianity?"[4]

Bonhoeffer was ordained on November 15, 1933 and spent a practicum year as a chaplain to students at a technical college. While his successes with the colleges were minimal, Dietrich did conduct an important confirmation class in a working-class parish in eastern Berlin. He established a flourishing "youth club" and took the group on outings to his weekend cottage outside Berlin.

Growing German interest in ecumenism was being met by resistance from emerging nationalism and anti-international sentiments. This led Bonhoeffer to a deeper commitment to ecumenical ventures. He felt keenly about burning issues facing the world while grounding his perspectives in theology. In the years after the Nazis gained control of the government, Bonhoeffer was able to speak to ecumenical gatherings about the real nature of Nazism. He helped make the German church struggle known to the international Christian community.

To express solidarity with his non-Aryan pastor friend, Franz Hildebrandt, Bonhoeffer believed he could not serve in a church where racial privilege was dominant. So he took a

pastoral position serving two German Evangelical churches in London. In addition to his pastoral duties, Bonhoeffer assisted "countless" German visitors, the majority of which were Jews. Soon Bonhoeffer became the leader of German pastors in England who protested steps being taken by the Hitler-appointed *Reichsbischopf* (Reich bishop). By January 1934, it was illegal to discuss or to write about the struggles in the German church. Bonhoeffer's ecclesiastical superior called him to Berlin and forbade him from participating in ecumenical activities.

An important friendship developed for Bonhoeffer in this period with George K. A. Bell, bishop of Chichester and a leading British ecumenical figure. Bonhoeffer spearheaded the movement for English congregations to withdraw from the Reich church since the Aryan paragraph clearly violated the teachings of Scripture. To Bonhoeffer, even ministers of the growing Confessing Church movement in Germany, which opposed Hitler's takeover of the church and the Aryan paragraph, were moving too slowly. For him, it was the stark choice of National Socialism or Christianity.

Bonhoeffer continued his ecumenical activities, speaking at a youth conference in Denmark (as a representative of the Confessing Church) on the need for Christians to maintain peace. Bonhoeffer said that when Christians use weapons against each other, they are aiming their weapons at Jesus Christ himself. When he was asked what he would do if war broke out, Bonhoeffer replied he would pray for strength not to take up arms. In England, Bonhoeffer became increasingly

interested in the teachings of Gandhi of India, whom he saw as enacting Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7).

The deep impact of Jesus' prescriptions to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount led Bonhoeffer to believe it was time to draw people together into a community and live the discipleship of which Jesus had spoken. When the Reich Bishop Müller closed preachers' seminaries that resisted the Reich, the Confessing Church decided to provide seminary training apart from the German universities. Bonhoeffer was offered the position of Director of the Confessing Church seminary in Berlin-Brandenberg. In April 1935, he met with twenty-three potential students at Zingst by the Baltic Sea. In mid-June they moved into a vacant building in the country town of Finkenwalde.

For the next two and a half years, Bonhoeffer helped shape a Christian community that devoted itself to educating and nurturing those who would lead Confessing Church congregations in the face of Nazi power. The students were instructed in theological courses and practiced communal living that emphasized Scripture study, prayer, meditation, spiritual discipline, and communal accountability. Students gradually accepted the regimented schedule.

The call to military service was a main issue with which students had to deal. Bonhoeffer did not advise students to refuse this call, but he did raise issues that troubled their consciences. Most all the 150 students who participated in the

seminary at Finkenwalde were conscripted into the service, and more than eighty were killed in action during the war.[5]

An important result of the Finkewalde experience was the 1937 publication of Bonhoeffer's seminary lectures on discipleship, called *Nachfolge*. This book has become a classic, published in English as *The Cost of Discipleship* (1949 in the US) and later as *Discipleship* (2001). Bonhoeffer's focus was on the Sermon on the Mount, and the book begins with the contrast between "cheap grace" and "costly grace." Belief and obedience are inextricably bound up together. Those who believe in Jesus will obey, and only those who obey truly believe in Jesus.

Bonhoeffer insisted those who separated themselves from the Confessing Church cut themselves off from salvation. German Christians claimed that to be a "good Christian" was to be a "good German" (supporting the Nazis). To be a "good German" was to be a "good Christian." Bonhoeffer rejected this as idolatry, a betrayal of the Christian gospel and instead emphasized the Christian's primary call by Jesus: "Follow me."

The Reich Church regarded the Finkenwalde seminary activities as illegal. In 1936, Bonhoeffer's authorization to teach in the university was withdrawn due to his "subversive activities." By the end of 1937, 804 members of the Confessing Church had been imprisoned. Bonhoeffer and his students traveled throughout small congregations, urging them to stand against Nazi activities. But it became impossible for those who served in the Confessing Church not

to break the laws of the land. On September 28, 1937, the Finkenwalde seminary was closed when the Gestapo sealed its doors. Other confessional seminaries were soon closed as well.

Bonhoeffer responded by establishing "collective pastorates" where potential Confessing Church ministers assisted Confessing Church pastors in two remote parishes. Bonhoeffer traveled between the two parishes twice a week. Assisting him was his former Finkenwalde student and faithful friend, Eberhard Bethge. Bethge became a key figure in making Bonhoeffer's work known after his death and, four decades later, writing a thousand-page biography of his friend.

During this period, Bonhoeffer had also been working on his book *Life Together* (German publication, 1939). This book details the kind of daily schedule the Finkenwalde seminarians experienced. Balances were to be struck among piety, study, classes in theology and preaching, services of various kinds to community members, meals together, worship, leisure, and play.

Disturbingly, on April 20, 1938 (Hitler's birthday), all ministers in active church service were required to take a loyalty oath to Hitler himself. Since Bonhoeffer had no active ministerial "call" or official ministerial position in the church at this time, he was not required to take the oath. But when the Confessing Church permitted its ministers to take the oath under certain conditions, Bonhoeffer was bitterly disappointed.

Kristallnacht ("Crystal Night"), on November 9 and 10, 1938, was a persecution of Jews throughout Nazi Germany. It featured the smashing of glass in some seven thousand Jewish-owned stores and the burning of more than a thousand synagogues. Bonhoeffer viewed damages and underlined words in his Bible from Psalm 74:8: "They burned all the meeting places of God in the land." In September, Bonhoeffer's twin sister, Sabine, and her "non-Aryan" husband emigrated.

Bonhoeffer considered leaving Germany. He knew he was opposed to a coming war, and he had the deepest concerns for the church. Bonhoeffer visited church leaders in England, including Bell, and in June 1939 sailed to New York since he had received an official invitation to teach at Union Seminary. This deferred him from military service.

Bonhoeffer was not entirely clear on his own motives for returning to America. But within a few weeks he knew he must return to Germany. He regarded this journey as a mistake, saying to Reinhold Niebuhr that "he would have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after a war if he did not now share in its trials."[6]

When he returned to Germany, Bonhoeffer spent time with eight ordinands in the collective pastorate. But in March 1940, the collective pastorates were disbanded. It was known to the Security Service (SD) that Bonhoeffer did much traveling among Confessing Churches, which it viewed as subverting the people. This led to a prohibition of Bonhoeffer's speaking publicly anywhere in the Reich and the requirement

that he report his movements to the police. This was soon followed by a prohibition of his right to publish.

Bonhoeffer became involved in political resistance to Hitler through his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi. Since 1933, Dohnanyi had been collecting materials about Nazi crimes, which he shared among sympathetic Army generals. In 1939, Dohnanyi joined the *Abwehr* (military intelligence), which was composed of many anti-Hitler operatives. Bonhoeffer joined and was permitted to travel as an agent. In reality, he was making ecumenical contacts, being allowed to move around freely due to his military exemption and passport. Throughout the war period, Bonhoeffer was also involved in efforts to assist Jews, one of which—known as "Operation 7"—sought to aid fourteen Jews to pass into Switzerland under the guise of being *Abwehr* agents.

Plans for the removal of Hitler were proceeding among conspirators. This would include Hitler's assassination, a decision Bonhoeffer supported. One question would be how Germany itself would be treated were Hitler removed. Friends like Bell in England sought to influence the government not to pursue an "unconditional surrender" against Germany since a revolt was on its way. Several assassination attempts were planned but did not work.

On April 5, 1943, Bonhoeffer, along with Dohnanyi and his wife, Christine, Bonhoeffer's sister, were arrested by the state police apparatus, which were rivals to the *Abwehr*. Bonhoeffer was charged with "subversion of military power."[7] He was taken to Tegel Military Detention Prison in

Berlin where he remained for eighteen months in a seven-by-ten-foot cell.

This began Bonhoeffer's imprisonment. On January 17, 1943, Bonhoeffer had become engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer, whom had had met a few months before. But their marriage was never to be. Maria moved to Berlin to visit Bonhoeffer, but their visits were always supervised. Later, Bonhoeffer wrote to Bethge that although he and Maria had been engaged for nearly a year, they had never spent even one hour alone.[8]

Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* was published in various phases in English from 1953 until the full volume appeared in the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English series (2010). These materials give an invaluable look at Bonhoeffer's thoughts, emotions, and theological reflections from April 1943 until his death in April 1945. During his time in Tegel prison Bonhoeffer wrote some fiction as well as portions of what became his book, *Ethics*. Materials from his time in prison were smuggled out by sympathetic guards and by other means. Bonhoeffer was able to write censored letters to Maria, his parents, and Eberhard Bethge, who, in the July after Bonhoeffer's April arrest, was married to Renate, Bonhoeffer's niece. Bonhoeffer wrote a wedding sermon from prison, which the couple received much later. Throughout his letters, in the extreme circumstances of his being in prison, we see Bonhoeffer exploring the meaning of his faith in Jesus Christ and probing its importance and relevance for the days ahead.

Basic to the charges against Bonhoeffer was that the *Abwehr* connection enabled Bonhoeffer to escape serving in the military, that it had gotten him around the prohibition on public speaking issued by the Gestapo, and that he had continued to do work for the (Confessing) church. Initially, Bonhoeffer and his family hoped he would be tried and that his release would occur soon. By July 30, he was informed the introductory inquiry into his case was completed. But as time went on, the realization that his situation might not happen according to his hopes began to set in. His letters testify to his weakness and courage, his doubts and fears, as he came to terms with his life in prison. Yet Bonhoeffer continued to be a pastor to others. He continued with what he saw as his "real work" in prison—his theological explorations.

On July 20, 1944, Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg smuggled a bomb into a meeting of Hitler and his associates. The bomb went off, but Hitler was not killed. This was a coup attempt that would have triggered others of the resistance to spring into action. But this turned more attention to Bonhoeffer's activities. It also signaled to Bonhoeffer that his situation could not be overcome. On September 22, a Gestapo officer discovered files from those who participated in the coup at an outpost of the military intelligence headquarters in the town of Zossen. The extensive nature of these materials included correspondence that connected Bonhoeffer to the *Abwehr* conspirators and indicated his resistance activities.

On October 8, Bonhoeffer was transferred to the cellar of the prison at the Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse in Berlin where he was incarcerated for four months in a five-by-eight-foot cell. A table, a stool, and a bed that could be folded up in the daytime were the furniture. Breakfast and dinner featured a mug of imitation coffee and two slices of bread with jam. At midday, there was soup. In February 1945, the heating system stopped working, and prisoners showered in cold water. Allied air raids were common.

On February 7, 1945, Bonhoeffer was transported to the Buchenwald concentration camp. This marked the end of the correspondence and contact Bonhoeffer had with his family and with Bethge. Five members of the Bonhoeffer family were in Gestapo custody. Bonhoeffer's brother, Klaus, and his brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher, were the first to be sentenced to death.

On April 3, 1945, Bonhoeffer was removed from Buchenwald with other "special prisoners." They stopped in Regensburg. At Hitler's midday staff meeting on April 5, he ordered the execution of the conspirators. The next day, the prisoners were moved to Schönberg where they arrived on April 6, the Sunday after Easter. Bonhoeffer was requested to lead a worship service and explained the Scripture texts to his fellow prisoners: "With his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5) and "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). Soon after the service concluded, two civilians

appeared who called, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready and come with us!"

As he gathered his things together, Bonhoeffer asked the Englishman, Payne Best, to give this message to Bishop George Bell if he got back to England: "This is the end—for me the beginning of life."[9]

Bonhoeffer and other prisoners were transported to the Flossenbürg concentration camp that Sunday. Late at night, after they arrived, a court martial was convened and the prisoners interrogated. The next morning, April 9, as Bethge wrote, "The executions took place in the gray dawn of that Monday."[10] Bonhoeffer's body was burned and his ashes mingled with those of his fellow prisoners.

Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, was put to death on the same day as Bonhoeffer at the Sachenhausen concentration camp near Berlin. Brother Klaus and brother-in-law Rudiger Schleicher, the father of Renate Bethge, were shot by the Gestapo on April 22.

Maria von Wedemeyer, Bonhoeffer's fiancée, heard of his death in June. But Bonhoeffer's parents and Eberhard and Renate Bethge did not learn of it until late July. The Bonhoeffers happened to hear a BBC broadcast from the London memorial service for their son.

Notes

1. Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 4–5.

2. Haynes, *Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*, 9.

3. Cited in Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Virginia J. Barnett, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 257.

4. Cited in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 302.

5. See Stephen R. Haynes and Lori Brandt Hale, *Bonhoeffer for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 44.

6. Elesha Coffman, "Agent of Grace," *Christian History*, no. 32, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian in Nazi Germany" (1991), www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/agent-of-grace.html.

7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Indictment by the Senior Reich Military Prosecutor," in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*, ed. Mark S. Brocker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 16:445.

8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letter to Eberhard Bethge, December 15, 1943," in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lurens, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 8:221.

9. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 927.

10. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 927.