

2015

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, His Life in Brief

Kerry Irish

George Fox University, kirish@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Irish, Kerry, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer, His Life in Brief" (2015). *Faculty Publications - Department of History and Politics*. 14.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/14

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History and Politics at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Department of History and Politics by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, His life in Brief

On the morning of April 9, 1945, in the last days of the Third German Reich, a tall bespectacled man was led from his cell at Flossenburg prison to a rope hanging from a hook on a wall in a nearby courtyard and unceremoniously hanged alone, his feet often scraping the ground. In the next few hours, his colleagues, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of German Military Intelligence, and his deputy Major General Hans Oster, along several others were each in their turn similarly hanged.

This man, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the others were executed for of their roles in a conspiracy to assassinate Adolph Hitler. The conspirators had tried on several occasions to eliminate the Fuehrer but failed. Their hope had been to replace the Nazi state with a government that would end the war in Europe without resulting in German dismemberment. But even when it was clear that their dream had no basis in reality, the Allies would not allow Germany, even without Hitler, to escape punishment, the assassins continued to work toward Hitler's death as a matter of justice.

The irony in Bonhoeffer's involvement in these several attempts on Hitler's life was that he had been a near pacifist, and argued for that belief in the years before his arrest. Indeed, his arrest in April 1943 had been ordered because he had evaded military duty and persuaded others to do the same. The normal punishment for such behavior was an unceremonious bullet in the back of the head. (Marsh, 357) Though he believed in a Christian peace ethic, he eventually came to the conclusion that in extreme circumstances the Christian must act to preserve life even if it meant taking it. It was the monstrous butchery of Hitler's Reich which drove Bonhoeffer to the inescapable conclusion that his Christian faith admitted of no other course than to attempt Hitler's death in order to stop the killing. Bonhoeffer used a simple analogy to make the point. If one was riding in a car with a driver who was about to run over a crowd of people on a sidewalk, one would do all he could to stop the act, perhaps even seizing the wheel of the car. One could not morally restrict one's efforts to merely praying for the victims after their deaths.

Unfortunately for Bonhoeffer, Germany, and the world, the conspirators attempts on Hitler's life all failed, some seemingly miraculously in favor of the Fuehrer. After Count Maria von Stauffenberg's near miss on July 20, 1944, Bonhoeffer's life was precarious indeed.

Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 to Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer in Breslau, Germany. Karl was a noted psychiatrist and the family eventually lived an upper middle class life on the outskirts of Berlin with occasional forays to a mountain summer house near Friedrichsbrunn. There were eight children; Dietrich and his twin sister Sabine were numbers six and seven. Their father was not a religious man, but their mother held to the Lutheran faith. Paula seemed more determined to influence her younger children toward that faith than she had the older boys.

Young Dietrich grew up fascinated, perhaps even obsessed, with the larger questions of life such as existence after death and the nature of eternity. These concerns were strengthened in the midst of the Great War from 1914 to 1918 as reports of the deaths of distant family members and friends became ever more common. Paula, an accomplished educator, taught her children at home for many years. Then, as an

adolescent, Dietrich attended Werder Gymnasium in Berlin. He was an outstanding student. His only rival was a Jewish girl three years his senior.

At the age of thirteen, shortly after his older brother Walter had been killed in the western front offensive of 1918, he announced to the family that he was going to be a theologian. His remaining older brothers laughed and his father was non-plussed. But one of Dietrich's qualities was firmness of mind. He had ancestors on his side as well. His mother's father had been Chaplain to Wilhelm the II, and his great grandfather had been a theologian of some repute. Indeed grandfather always performed the family baptisms and as a boy one of Dietrich's favorite games was to perform baptisms. This is reminiscent of the main character in Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Gilead*. John Ames, also a pastor, grew up in the late 19th century performing baptisms as play.

When Dietrich was eighteen, he was accepted for theological studies at the Friedrich-Wilhems University of Berlin. There he studied a broad array of disciplines in addition to theology. The theology faculty was the epitome of modern German liberal thought. Following a scientific historical approach to the Scriptures, German theologians of the late 19th and 20th centuries had abandoned faith in the traditional Jesus of the Bible. To them, Christianity – and all religion – was merely a mode of human experience that sought cultural relevance at the expense of the Biblical God's absolute moral requirements. (Marsh 56) Ironically, these liberal German theologians retained the notion of a Messianic people. Like the Hebrews of old, they believed that Germany was God's chosen instrument for creating a more just and ordered world. They enthusiastically supported the Kaiser's purpose in the Great War. Still more ironically, Germany was defeated in that war largely because of the efforts of another nation whose people were summoned to war by their president with Martin Luther's famous peroration, "God helping her, she can do no other." The United States under Woodrow Wilson also fought the war believing in its own God-given special destiny.

While at Berlin, Bonhoeffer read Karl Barth who had rejected higher German criticism as well as the doctorate he had all but earned at Friedrich-Wilhems. Barth's work re-energized orthodox faith in the historical Jesus. Barth's theology posited a return to the idea of God's absolute sovereignty, His revelation of himself to man was found in Jesus Christ, and Christ as the savior of mankind is found in the Bible. Nevertheless, Barth abandoned the doctrine of Scriptural infallibility, asserting that quibbling over this or that historical or scientific fact was to miss the powerful and unmistakable theme of Scripture: Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Messiah of men. (Barth, 26, 33, 86, 87)

Bonhoeffer drew from Barth much of his reformed theology along with the conviction that the German Lutheran Church was largely dead. That it was in need of a real encounter with the risen Christ. The essence, if not the fullness, of Bonhoeffer's thought may be found in his doctoral dissertation written when he was but twenty one years old. The title is, *The Communion of Saints: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. The key words of the 380 page dissertation are Christ, Community, and Concreteness. The three Cs if you will. It may be helpful to think of the key concepts like this. If one may describe two kinds of Christians, and there are certainly more, the first kind dwells on heaven's glories, but may stumble in being effectual here on earth. The second kind is more firmly grounded on earth and in the reality of our daily lives. This person understands that the present day world matters (as Barth taught). There is no

escape from the earthly tasks that the God who took on earthly flesh and died for this world has called us to. Bonhoeffer passionately desired and prayed to be the latter type of Christian. For Bonhoeffer the Christian life could not be left to the theological position that one's salvation is an abstract event apart from one's life in the Church community. Forgiveness for one's self means forgiving and working with others. (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's crusade, his life's purpose, was to combine faith in the real Christ with the equally important concept that Christian faith may only be lived in community with other Christians. (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*) This passion derived at least in part from his conviction that the German Lutheran Church was a Sunday only church, heavy on grace and light on works. Bonhoeffer's goal was nothing less than to convert the German Church to his view that Christians must live out their faith in community, a community that is about transforming God's world.

While all of this sounds very impressive for a man in his early twenties, for Bonhoeffer himself it was all very theological and abstract. Given his upbringing, it could not have been otherwise. He had no knowledge, and thus little sympathy, for the working people or the destitute and damaged. He was an upper class German who appreciated the finer things in life; and he had little interest in a pastorate where he might have learned about the real world that he championed in his dissertation. But he had an open mind, loved to travel, see new places and people. And so, doctorate in hand, he took a position as an assistant pastor to a German Lutheran congregation in Barcelona, Spain.

Seeing how much of the world lived, both on his way to Barcelona and while working amongst these real people, Bonhoeffer's transformation from mere theologian to a pastor-theologian began. But it wasn't the needs of his German congregation that transformed his heart, rather it was their indifference to the poverty stricken Spanish people of Barcelona that opened his eyes. It was these people with their real world problems, problems that led to the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, that began the application of his thought to life.

Dietrich spent a year in Barcelona and then returned to Berlin where he completed his post-doctoral work. In 1930 he accepted a fellowship at New York's Union Theological Seminary, the center of American liberal Protestant theology. Though it is fair to say that the primary thing the professors at Union protested was a Biblical faith in Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer was not impressed. He was dismayed that no one discussed theology, let alone professed faith in Christ. Then, almost by chance, a new friend, Franklin Fisher, a young black seminarian, took him to Harlem's Abyssinia Baptist Church.

To say Bonhoeffer was startled is an understatement. The exuberance and joy of the Black congregation thrilled him. But the circumspect Dietrich was not easily fooled by mere emotion; he also saw the seriousness, the faith of these second class citizens. He had finally found a real faith, a working faith. Moreover, he became deeply interested in the social plight of black Americans.

It was in America, then, that Bonhoeffer's theological vision, a real Christian faith that one experiences in community came to full realization; and an elemental part of the that realization was that the Christian faith is an activist faith, a faith that compels us to

attempt to make the world a better place. In other words, it was the American liberal theological cornerstone of the social gospel that he saw demonstrated in the Black American's struggle for social justice, combined with the real requirement of faith in the historic Jesus, that led Bonhoeffer to his vision of the church and his own resolute path. From this point on, he would "ground his theology in reality." He began to think of himself as more pastor than theologian.

Now Bonhoeffer argued that Reformation theology, properly understood, always included in its proper expression a concern for the poor and oppressed, for living out the Christian faith in the real world. And then he criticized liberal theologians, both German and American, for abandoning the basis of their criticism of the oppressor – the absolute morality of Jesus Christ.

After returning to Germany in 1931, Bonhoeffer taught classes at Freidrich – Wilhems and pastored at various places. He was also increasingly interested in the international ecumenical movement as he attended such conferences all over Europe. In the Ecumenical movement, he was a leader for grounding that movement in the historic Christian faith in the risen Jesus Christ. Secondly, he championed a Church led peace movement. In this we see his theology applied to the real world.

At an Ecumenical conference in Cambridge, England (1931), Bonhoeffer argued that a unified Christendom should, "call for a substantial reduction of military armaments of all kinds, for a reasonable and just coexistence between the nations under arms, and for freedom of all nations from military aggression." (Marsh, 142)

But a Great War German corporal from Bavaria had a completely different vision for Germany and the world, and unfortunately, his vision was far more compelling to the German people who believed they had been denied their birthright in their defeat in the Great War. Adolf Hitler advocated an intensified but not original theory that Germans of Aryan blood were God's chosen people, a master race; and as such their proper role in the world was as masters. The Japanese and Italians believed the same nonsense about themselves.

In 1933, Germany elected Hitler Reich Chancellor, the legal head of the German government. By the end of 1934, he was essentially dictator of Germany, der Fuehrer. Hitler was not content to lead only the German state. He believed he had to have control of a unified German state church as well. Thus commenced the struggle for the soul of the German Church in 1933. Those who supported Hitler in his effort to take over the German state church were known as the German Christians, and they wholeheartedly approved the so-called Aryan paragraph of the new doctrine which excluded the 300,000 German Jews who had become Christians. Moreover, they wanted a strong church, a manly church, with manly virtues. No turning the cheek, no helping the weak, and no admiration for the meek. It was the strong who take Europe, and "Tomorrow the World."

Hitler and the German Christians, revised the Christian narrative of guilt and salvation in Jesus Christ as the story of Germany's death as a result of the Treaty of Versailles and rebirth of the Fatherland as the gift of Adolf Hitler. Salvation, now, did not depend on the Jew of Nazareth, but upon the Fuehrer principle and the resurrection of the German people as Ubermensch, those who completely align themselves with God's will in the new German state. Still more blasphemously, Hitler's church recast the Holy Spirit as an ethos instead of the Third Person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit was "a nature

spirit, a folk spirit, Germanness in its essence. In this new unholy trinity, the Spirit was said to proceed not from the Father and Son, but from the father and the fuehrer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer publicly opposed both Hitler's attempt to take over the German Church and the Aryan Paragraph. Bonhoeffer was now on a collision course with Adolf Hitler. The only surprising thing is that Dietrich lived as long as he did.

In the mid 1930s, the German church split. The majority accepted the Aryan paragraph and Hitler's new theology. But for a while a remnant, known as the Confessing Church, maintained the historic Christian faith. Led by Bonhoeffer and a handful of others, Christian pastors and laymen struggled first against official disapprobation, and, as the years went by, against discrimination. The Confessing Church was for all practical purposes illegal by 1938.

Bonhoeffer worked in various pastorates, most notably two German foreign congregations in England in 1933/34. While in England he strengthened his place in the ecumenical movement and as a voice for peace, while explaining the German church crisis to other ecumenical leaders. He hoped they would disassociate the Ecumenical movement from the Reich church. This was not to be.

He returned to Germany in 1935 and surreptitiously created a seminary for a few dozen Confessing German pastoral candidates. It was during the 18 months at the Finkenwalde Seminary that he thought deeply about *Life Together*. He wrote the book in early 1939. In late 1937 the Gestapo closed Finkenwalde. By this time 27 of his former Confessing Church students were already in prison.

In the summer of 1939 he had the opportunity to return to Union Theological Seminary in New York. While there, he was overwhelmed with the sense that he had abandoned the fight for the German church, for the soul of Germany. Bonhoeffer was absolutely convinced that this life on earth matters, that life was a series of crucial decisions, that the emulation of Christ required service to one's community. Perhaps with Elijah and Jonah in mind, he wrote, "One who believes, does not flee." For Bonhoeffer, his community was in Germany.

But there was more to it than even that profound idea; he also believed that the present conflict included a war for the Christian faith. What was to become of Christianity if it failed to oppose Adolph Hitler? What role could he possibly have in resurrecting a vital Christian faith in Germany if he himself did not suffer with other Christians there? Indeed, as it was, he despaired for the Church. He wrote:

The Church confesses that she has witnessed the lawless application of brutal force, the physical and spiritual suffering of countless innocent people, oppression, hatred and murder. And that she has not raised her voice on behalf of the victims, and has not found ways to hasten to their aid. She is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenseless brothers of Jesus Christ. (Video, Hanged on a Twisted Cross)

So he returned to Germany in July 1939.

In September, Hitler ordered his Panzer columns into Poland inaugurating the Second World War. Upon his return to Germany, Bonhoeffer was subject to the draft. To refuse military service usually met with summary execution. Fortunately for Dietrich, his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnayni, had become an important member of the Military Intelligence Department, the Abwehr, of the Army High Command headed by Admiral Canaris. Dohnayni eventually secured a place for Dietrich in that office.

It took months for the Gestapo to decide that Dietrich was valuable to MI. The rationale was that Bonhoeffer's work in the ecumenical movement gave him access to important people in England and elsewhere. In short, he was an intelligence asset and as such immune from the draft.

What the world did not know at the time was that Canaris and MI were at the center of the German resistance to Adolf Hitler, and were actively engaged in long-term and highly complicated plots to both kill der Fuehrer, and take over the government before another Nazi could do so. Bonhoeffer's role in these plots has been exaggerated by some biographers, but the truth is impressive enough. Because he knew the world's religious leaders, important men in their own countries, he could hope to ascertain through these back channels the Allies' response to a German coup. Specifically, would the allies negotiate an end to the war if Hitler were removed? The response was not encouraging.

He also served as pastor to several of those involved in the conspiracy. In the Lutheran tradition, their conspiratorial activities against the state constituted the crime of treason and warranted death. Bonhoeffer, himself was emotionally and spiritually conflicted for quite some time over his own role. But he had come to believe that Winston Churchill was right when he told the British people that they must "wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime." (Winston Churchill, in the House of Commons, May 13, 1940)

In his spare time, which was plentiful, he continued writing the book that became known as *Ethics*. There has been considerable debate and confusion over Bonhoeffer's theological shift while in prison. There was a change in his hopes for the Church, but no change in his Christology or soteriology (views of salvation). In the last letter he wrote to Maria von Wedemeyer, he wrote, "My past life is brim-full of God's goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified. I am most thankful for the people I have met, and I only hope...that they too will always be certain of, and thankful for, God's mercy and forgiveness." (Marsh, 387)

As noted above, he believed that the church in the form of organized religion had failed to oppose Adolf Hitler. He now advocated a "religionless Christianity" much like one finds described in the New Testament. This Christianity was worked out, lived in community, with one another. Hence the significance of *Life Together*. (Marsh, 377, 379)

In March of 1943 there were two unsuccessful attempts on Hitler's life. Now the Gestapo cast the net wider than ever before for dissidents and trouble makers. A few weeks later, Bonhoeffer and Dohnayni were arrested. For the next two years, Bonhoeffer and many of the other conspirators were guests of the Gestapo as that organization attempted to prove their guilt without much success. Then on July 20, 1944, the conspirators who had not been arrested succeeded in exploding a bomb that almost killed Hitler. Unfortunately, all it really did was lead to the arrest of most of the other conspirators including Field

Marshal Erwin Rommel who was allowed to take his own life. About 200 hundred others were also executed.

The new arrests finally yielded the evidence the Gestapo had long sought of Bonhoeffer's complicity in the assassination plots. In early April 1945, with Soviet columns on the outskirts of Berlin, Adolf Hitler personally ordered SS Chief Heinrich Himmler to have the remaining conspirators executed. Bonhoeffer and his colleagues were sent to Flossenburg for their day of days.

Sources:

Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*.

Dr. Kerry E. Irish
Professor of American History
George Fox University
Newberg, Oregon

Other Writings by Kerry Irish

Study Guide for C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Thousands of people have used my free study guide to help them understand Lewis's classic little book.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/73/

Study Guide for Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*. Thousands of people have used my free study guide to understand Bonhoeffer's popular book.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/74/

The Lord's Prayer: A Study in Christian Theology.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/91/

The Second Great Awakening and the Making of Modern America.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/78/

The Apostle's Creed. [An analysis of the meaning of the Apostle's Creed.]

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/86/

Study Guide for David Skeel's *True Paradox: How Christianity makes Sense of Our Complex World*. https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/75/

Thoughts on the Importance of Attending Church.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/72/

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, His Life in Brief. [This short introduction to Bonhoeffer is included in the study guide for *Life Together*.] https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/14/

C.S. Lewis: Reluctant Convert. [This short introduction to Lewis is included in the study guide for *Mere Christianity*.] https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/71/

Billy Graham: Life and Legacy (A five-page biography of Billy Graham)

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/95/

Thanksgiving: Facts and Fantasies (An essay on the origins and development of Thanksgiving) You will be surprised. https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/96/

An Historians Christmas (An essay examining the birth of Christ from an historian's perspective). https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/97/

The Great Awakening and the Coming of the American Revolution

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/100/

The Essential Points of Critical Race Theory

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/101