Constructive Theology

Theologian Profile

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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May 8, 2017

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born on February 4, 1906 in Breslau, Germany, now Wroclaw, Poland. He was 6th of 8 children born in a cultured home; his father was a renowned doctor and his mother was a teacher. While his father never considered himself a Christian, he respected his wife’s teaching their children Christian values and her deep faith, including celebrations of religious activities and holidays. The family, as well as the culture of Germany as a whole, was greatly influenced by the teachings and legacy of Martin Luther. During these formative years, Bonhoeffer’s patriotism for his country and disgust for anti-Semitic attitudes began to take shape.

In 1918, the two oldest Bonhoeffer boys, Karl and Walter, were called up to fight in the war. Walter died shortly after being sent to the front line. This devastated his mother, Paula, and it was years before she recovered. Following this time, Dietrich concluded that he wanted to study theology, not a highly respected profession at that time.

Bonhoeffer spent time traveling through Italy, specifically Naples and Rome, cementing in his mind a theological and personal question that he would investigate and study and write about for the rest of his life: What is the church and the path of faithfulness? This question would resonate throughout all of his studies and would eventually morph into a question that he wrote about later in life: What is Christianity for us today?

During his studies in Berlin, he made the acquaintance of and studied under Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, and G. K. A. Bell. He pursued doctoral work, finished his dissertation and received his Doctor of Theology in 1927, summa cum laude. In the early 1930s, he was a lecturer, pastor and led a progressive, confessional seminary, training pastors to oppose the Nazi efforts to control the church. By 1939, under threat of being drafted into the German army, Niebuhr arranged for Bonhoeffer to move to New York, but, conscience stricken, Bonhoeffer shortly returned to minister to and share in the fate of his German Christian brothers.

One of Bonhoeffer’s most notable works was “The Cost of Discipleship”, first published in 1939, translated into English in 1948. In it, he attacked the concept of ‘cheap grace’, justification by faith without the obligations of discipleship. Instead, he proposed ‘costly grace’, calling for believers to follow Jesus Christ, even at the cost of their own lives. He also answered the question of the relationship between works and faith. He posited that faith must be expressed in works, rather than works testifying to faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as part of the resistance movement against Adolph Hitler and the Nazis, was instrumental in organizing assassination attempts on Hitler. The Gestapo was watching his resistance cell closely and began arresting them one by one. April 5, 1943 was Bonhoeffer’s day; he was arrested and sent to a regular army prison. It would be months before he was formally charged and, at the time, he was only charged with attempting to help Jews and Jewish Christians escape Nazi persecution. His involvement with the plot to kill Hitler would not be revealed until a failed attempt by Claus von Stauffenberg on July 20, 1944. While imprisoned, and before the conspiracy became known, he continued his deception and work with the resistance through encoded letter writing to his family and friends. In the months following the failed bombing, one by one, the co-conspirators were arrested and those who did not commit suicide to avoid torture, were summarily tortured and put to death. In October of 1944, Bonhoeffer was moved to various Gestapo prisons, finally ending up at Buchenwald where he spent six months. Then, along with hundreds of political prisoners, was taken to Schonberg and finally to Flossenburg to be hanged on April 9. Two weeks later the Allies liberated Flossenburg.

Bonhoeffer’s final work, “Ethics”, was written before and during his time of imprisonment by the Gestapo at Berlin-Tegel. While it was never complete, it’s beginnings have been very influential. In it he spoke of the moral responsibility of man toward the oppressed. Love and obedience to God will be manifest through responsibility toward all that God created.

Bonhoeffer could not foresee that the many letters he wrote to family and friends during his time of imprisonment would have such a great impact, more so in some respects than his other great writings. They portrayed a remarkable man, consumed with great intellect and theological insight. In these letters he addresses the question that had been with him for so many years: What is Christianity for us today? First of all, he emphasizes that God must be found at the center of all life, in every aspect of life. Second, he speaks of love and reconciliation with all of mankind, an earlier version of social justice. Finally, Bonhoeffer believed that the concepts of Christian theology and terminology should be exposited in such a way that even the non-religious could understand them. He stated that organized religion was for the individual who was looking inward as opposed to the Bible which was for all humankind, all of creation, written by and about a God who, through Jesus’ suffering, conquered the world. As Bonhoeffer said; “Jesus does not call men to a new religion, but to life.” (Peerman 1992, p. 483)

Bonhoeffer’s profound patriotic and theological legacy crosses many denominational lines and ideologies. He has influenced the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the anti-communist movement in Eastern Europe, as well as the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa. His social justice philosophy is based on his theology of personal involvement in the lives of others and the belief that faith in God could bring ecumenical solidarity through Christendom.

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