Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Powerful, for me, was to choose from a list of eminent writers of religion a man whose timeline intersects, however briefly, with mine and whose martyrdom is filigreed into an event that has haunted my life as well as that of the entire Twentieth Century. When I was just four years old, in 1946, my father was stationed in Erlangen, Germany. A young lieutenant, he was told to pick out any house he wanted and the German family therein would have to leave. Fortunately, an American major was just vacating his flat, so my parents and baby brother and I had a place to go without, well, blood on our hands.

At Iliff I have read a lot about whether or not the churches were involved in the Holocaust, either by aid or by tacit approval. Our pontiff got mixed reviews. So it was with illusion that I realized that Daniel Bonhoeffer, whom we studied in justice classes, was actually a martyr. Martyrs are familiar territory to Catholic school children. But they usually involved lions and belonged to a place far away and a time long ago. And these martyrs required no action but to say that they were Christian. Bonhoeffer died by living his faith, by placing his life in the balance with that of six million Jews.

The captivating ingredient of the death of Bonhoeffer is that he did not have to die. He did not have to return to Germany either time he was away on lecture, especially the last. He had, however, what is called *noblesse* *oblige*. Uncomfortable with comfortable Christianity, he said, “cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession…Cheap grace is a grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”[[1]](#footnote-1) His kind of bravery is rarely seen beyond books that deal, say, with the American Revolution. Bonhoeffer figured he had one job to do – take care of his neighbor. And he was going to do that job no matter the cost.

The German Bonhoeffer was born to an aristocratic family, perhaps attributing to his notion that he was the subject of a sentence and not its object. He was an agent of his life. His mother was the daughter of a preacher in the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II, and his father was a neurologist and a professor of psychiatry at the University of Berlin. All eight children were schooled in music so that when Bonhoeffer announced that he was going to study ministry, his parents were not amused.

“Too young to be ordained when he graduated from seminary,” [[2]](#footnote-2) he went to America to New York’s Union Theological Seminary, returning to the University of Berlin. In the meantime, the Hitler business had begun to fester. Bonhoeffer and his Lutheran colleagues began what they called the Confessing Church, declaring, as in the 1937 Barmen Declaration, allegiance went first to Jesus Christ and a statement against pressure on the Protestant Christians to “aryanize”[[3]](#footnote-3) the Church, expel Jewish Christians from the ordained ministry, and adopt the Fuhrer Principle of church government. To wit: German was Hitler. Hitler was Germany. Such did not work with Bonhoeffer.

In 1937 he wrote Cost of Discipleship, giving birth to the Cheap Grace leitmotif.

At this point he was still a pacifist, but he stood ankle deep in his destiny. He taught pastors in an underground seminary, banned from teaching in the open. The screws of his condemnation were beginning to turn. The seminary closed and those in the Confessing Church became increasingly reluctant to speak out against Hitler. Moral opposition became pie in the sky.

So Bonheoffer signed up with the German secret service as a double agent. He aided the Jews. When presented with the plot to help kill Hitler, he embraced it. But first he took advantage of an opportunity to lecture in the States. His letter to Reinhold Niebuhr is now a classic:

“I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America I have to live through the difficult period of our national history with the Christians in Germany. I will have no right to assist with the restoration of Christian life after the war in Germany if I do not share the tests of this period with my people.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

It was probably his work with the Jews, and not his assassination plot, that got him arrested. Jon Walker, in Costly Grace, says that his joining the *Abwehr*, a branch of Germany’s military intelligence, drew general attention to him. The details of his incarceration and execution are the stuff of TCL late night documentaries and need not be repeated here.

I pause only to think of the word *courage.*

I’ve had someone pray over me for peace. I’ve had someone else put hands on me as I was wheeled into an operating room. So I have experienced the supernatural, the palm of God. I imagine that is what Bonhoefer felt to give him the strength to stand firm for his execution. Courage is granted. It cannot come from deep within. It’s awarded us as we step forward.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived the theology he preached. That nugget has me reviewing my life right now. “It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but the sufferings in the secular life.” [[5]](#footnote-5)

Writer Eric Metaxas in *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* reports that Dietrich thought it was the duty, plain and simple, of the Christian – as well as the privilege – “.to suffer with those who suffer.”[[6]](#footnote-6) He was the quintessential Christian. And I think of me and my courage during these challenging times.

1. Eric Metaxas. *Bonheoffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy.* (2010. Nashville, Thomas Nelson) 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jon Walker. *Costly Grace.* (2010. Abilene: Leafwood), p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *www.ucc.org/barmentdeclaratonthe Church* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *www.bonboefferwordpress.com* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Letters and Papers from Prison. Kindle edition. Amazon.com [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Metaxas, 532

   [↑](#footnote-ref-6)