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ERIC METAXAS

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON A PASTOR, MARTYR, PROPHET, SPY

I first heard the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the summer that I turned 25. I had just returned to faith in a serious and moving way and one day the man who led me along that journey gave me a copy of Bonhoeffer's classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He asked if I'd ever heard of Bonhoeffer. I told him that I hadn't, and he told me that Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who because of his faith had stood up for the Jews and had gotten involved in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. He said that Bonhoeffer was killed in a Concentration Camp just three weeks before the end of the war. Was there really a Christian whose faith had led him to heroically stand up against the Nazis at the cost of his own life? It seemed that the only stories I had heard of people taking their faith seriously were negative ones. This was something new to me, and I instantly wanted to know more about this courageous hero.

One of the reasons I was so interested in Bonhoeffer's story was that I am myself German. My mother was raised in Germany during the terrible years of Hitler. When she was nine years old her father—my grandfather Erich, after whom I'm named—was killed in the war. I had always wondered about what had really happened. How had a great nation of people been drawn down this dark and ultimately evil path? My grandmother often told me that my grandfather would listen to listen to the BBC with his ear literally pressed against the radio speaker, because if you were caught listening to the BBC at that time, you could be sent to a concentration camp. He was certainly not on board with what the Nazis were doing, but he was forced to go to war, like so many men of his generation, and was killed. My book on Bonhoeffer is dedicated to him.

So, in many ways, I grew up in the shadow of World War II and I have always puzzled about the great evil of the Nazis and the Holocaust and how it happened. This evil is something that I have thought about a lot—about the question of “What is evil and how do we deal with evil?” Bonhoeffer seems to be a perfect model for us in answering that question.

What I read in Bonhoeffer's book given to me by my friend that summer was as impressive as his own story of heroism. His writing had a sparkling clarity and an intensity, and his words bespoke an authentic Christian faith that had no patience for "phony religiosity"—what Bonhoeffer famously called "cheap grace." As I read that book I realized that it was phony religiosity that had turned me away from the Christian faith altogether. So it was thrilling to encounter a Christian man who had really lived out his faith, who in fact put his whole life on the line for what he believed. This kind of Christianity I could be interested in.

Now, I never intended to write a biography about anyone. But of course, I did end up writing *Amazing Grace*, the biography of William Wilberforce, which came out in 2007. After that book appeared, people kept asking me, "Who are you going to write about next?" Some others asked, "About whom will you next write?" As an English major and a writer, I'm a great advocate of using the word "whom"—correctly. But the answer was: no one. I didn't want to write any more biographies. I didn't even want to write the first biography. But people kept asking and eventually I knew it had to be Bonhoeffer. My book struck a nerve and has revived interest in Bonhoeffer and his work in a way that I simply never expected. As a result of writing the book I've had the great honor of meeting two U.S. Presidents—Bush and Obama—and everywhere I go, the message of Bonhoeffer gets people talking. There's a good reason for that and I'm thrilled to share Bonhoeffer's story here.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906, into what must be described as an extraordinary family. For the first half of the twentieth century, his father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was the most famous psychiatrist in Germany. His mother, too, was brilliant, as were all of his seven siblings. Dietrich's elder brother, Karl Friedrich, went into physics and at age twenty-three split the atom with Max Planck and Albert Einstein. Bonhoeffer's famous scientist father created a family culture that stressed thinking clearly and logically. One must follow the evidence and facts and logic all the way through to the end. One would think twice before opening one's mouth at the dinner table, because what one said would immediately be challenged and put to the test.

Perhaps even more important in the Bonhoeffer family, however, was living out what one said one believed. One must not only think clearly, but one must prove one's thoughts in action. If one was unprepared to live out what one claimed to believe, perhaps one didn't believe what one claimed after all. So it was from an early age that Bonhoeffer understood that ideas were never mere ideas. They were the foundations upon which one built one's actions and ultimately, one's life. Ideas and beliefs must be tried and tested, because our lives might depend on them. This was true in the world of science and in the world of theology alike.

When World War I came, Dietrich was just eight years old. But before it ended in 1918, all three of his older brothers became old enough to enlist, and proudly did so. In 1917, Dietrich's brother Walter, the youngest of his three brothers, was called to the front. Two weeks later he was killed. Dietrich's mother had what seems like a nervous breakdown and Dietrich was himself deeply affected by it.

It was about a year later, when Dietrich was thirteen, that he made the fateful decision to become a theologian. The Bonhoeffers took academics extremely seriously, and the idea of a life in the world of academics seemed perfectly normal. But of all the academic disciplines Dietrich might have chosen, theology was one about which his father had serious reservations. His three older brothers were similarly mystified by his choice. They and Dietrich's older sisters and their friends needled him about it. But he was not to be dissuaded. He had thought it through and he met his siblings' skeptical questions with firm resolve.

In the fall of 1923, Dietrich Bonhoeffer enrolled at Tübingen University to begin his theological studies. And in the spring of the following year he and his brother Klaus visited Rome. Dietrich knew it would probably be extremely enjoyable and educational, but he didn't know that it would be important to his future. But it was in Rome that, for the first time, Dietrich thought seriously about the question that would dominate his thinking for the rest of his life. That question was: "What is the Church?"

It first came into his mind with real power on Palm Sunday, when he was visiting Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. It was there that for the first time in his life he saw people

of every race and color taking part in celebrating the Eucharist. This picture struck him with the force of an epiphany. He suddenly saw the church as something universal and eternal, as something that transcended race and nationality and culture. It went far beyond Germany and far beyond Lutheranism. It was then that he first made the intellectual connection that would affect everything going forward. Anyone who called on the name of Jesus Christ was his brother or sister, even if they were nothing like him in any other way. This idea would have far reaching consequences, especially once the Nazis took power. But that would still not be for some time.

When Bonhoeffer returned from Rome, he enrolled at Berlin University, which was then the most prestigious place in the world for theological studies. He earned his Ph.D. at the staggeringly young age of twenty-one. In his post-graduate work, the question he asked and answered on a high theological and academic level was the same one that had entered his head on that Palm Sunday in Rome: "What is the Church?"

In the course of answering that question, he discovered that he actually wanted to work in the church, as well. He wanted not only to be an academic theologian but also to become an ordained Lutheran minister. But in Germany in those days, you couldn't get ordained until you were twenty-five. So, at age twenty-two, he traveled to Barcelona and served there for a year as an assistant vicar in a German-speaking congregation. Then at age twenty-four, with another year before he could be ordained, he decided to go to the United States to study for a year at Union Theological Seminary.

Since he had earned a Ph.D. in theology from the prestigious Berlin University three years earlier, it can be assumed Bonhoeffer was principally going to New York not for the academics, but for the cultural experience. But Bonhoeffer's sojourn in New York ended up being much more: what he experienced in those months would change his life.

It all began when he befriended a fellow student named Frank Fisher from Alabama. Fisher was African-American and the social work component of his Union studies involved spending time at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. So one Sunday in the autumn of 1930, Fisher invited Bonhoeffer to join him. Bonhoeffer was only too eager to go along and what he experienced that morning staggered him.

Abyssinian Baptist Church was then the largest church in the United States.

Bonhoeffer saw a congregation of African-Americans who weren't merely "doing church" or going through the motions. It was quite obvious that took their faith very seriously. Many of the older people in that congregation had been born during slavery times, so they were not strangers to suffering. The faith Bonhoeffer saw that morning was somehow more palpable and visceral than anything he had seen before. The worship was powerful and much more than mere singing. The preaching was powerful too, and it enjoined its hearers not just to have a personal relationship with Jesus, but also to translate that into action in one's life, to care for the poor and do the other things of which Jesus spoke.

The twenty-four-year-old was so moved by what he saw in that congregation that morning that he decided to return every Sunday afterward. In the months following, Bonhoeffer even taught a Sunday school class there. He got very involved in the lives of the congregation and in the budding issue of civil rights. For perhaps the first time in his life, he seemed to link the idea of deep faith in Jesus with taking social action in a way that he had not done before. He always knew that real faith in Jesus must lead to action in real life, not just to philosophical and theological thinking. It had to be translated into one's life in the real world. But the profound faith of the African Americans in New York and their struggle for equality helped him to see this in a new way.

The events of the nine months Bonhoeffer spent in America had a profound effect on him, and when he returned to Germany in the summer of 1931, it was clear to his friends that something had changed. He seemed to take his faith much more seriously. Before he had left, his intellect had been in the right place, but somehow now his heart was engaged in a way that it hadn't been before.

He now took a position on the theological faculty of Berlin University and began to teach there. But from behind the lectern, he was saying things that one did not normally say in Berlin theological circles. For example, he referred to the Bible as the Word of God, as though God existed and wanted to speak to us through it. This was not the sort of thing one heard in the theologically liberal precincts of Berlin University at that time. Bonhoeffer also would take his students on retreats and teach them how to pray. One of his students said that Bonhoeffer once asked him: "Do you love Jesus?"

This was dramatically different from what one expected at Berlin University at that time. But Bonhoeffer believed that God was alive and wanted to speak to us through the Bible. The whole point of studying the text was to get to the God behind the text. Bonhoeffer understood that God actually existed and that connecting to God himself was the whole point of it all. The experience must be personal and real, as it had been for many of the African-American Christians in New York City.

So, Bonhoeffer was changed, but Germany was changing rapidly, too. Before Bonhoeffer had left for New York in 1930, the Nazis had had very little political power. They were then the ninth most important political party in the Reichstag, the German parliament. But when he returned in 1931 they had vaulted to being the second most important party and they were consolidating power with each day that passed. Bonhoeffer could see the trouble on the horizon, and he began to speak in his classes about it. He was not afraid of saying things like “For German Christians, there can be only one savior, and that savior is Jesus Christ.” That was a brave thing to say at that time, because many Germans were beginning to look toward Hitler as their savior, as the man who would lead them out of the wilderness and suffering of the last several years.

Bonhoeffer’s first opportunity to speak out on a large stage came two days after Hitler became chancellor in late January of 1933. Bonhoeffer gave a famous speech on the radio in which he dissected the terrible concept of the “Führer Principle.” This was one of the many half-baked philosophical ideas that enabled Hitler’s rise to power. *Führer* is the German word for “leader” and the Führer Principle was the idea that Germany needed a strong leader to lead them out of the morass of the Weimar Republic. It seemed logical. After all, before their loss in the First War, Germany had had strong leadership under the Kaiser, and after they lost the war and the Allies insisted that the Kaiser abdicate the throne, everything went sour. A democratic government was imposed on Germany by the Allies, but without the tradition of democracy, the Germans simply didn’t know how to govern themselves. So the Weimar government seemed rudderless and the results were horrific. There were long bread lines and rampant unemployment and terrible political squabbles. Surely things had been better under the strong leadership of the Kaiser! Surely any strong leader would be better than what they now had! The Nazis exploited this idea brilliantly, presenting Hitler as the one-man solution to it all. He

would be a strong leader who would lead Germany back to their glory days under the Kaiser!

The only problem was the Hitler's idea of leadership had nothing to do with the biblical idea of leadership, and Bonhoeffer made this crystal clear in his radio speech. Bonhoeffer explained that true authority must, by definition, be submitted to a higher authority—which is to say, God—and true leadership must be servant leadership. This was precisely the opposite of the idea embodied in the Führer Principle and in Hitler. Bonhoeffer explained that the idol worship that Hitler was encouraging would make him not a leader, but a “mis-leader.” He would “mislead” the German people, with tragic results.

Bonhoeffer also saw that Nazi ideology could not coexist with Christianity. Hitler himself loathed and despised Christianity, thinking it a weak, effeminate religion. Of course he could never say this publicly, since most Germans thought of themselves as good Lutheran Christians. So Hitler pretended to be a Christian because he knew that to say what he really believed would erode his political power. His goal was to slowly infiltrate the church with Nazi ideology and to take it over from the inside. He wanted to unify all the German churches and create a single state church, which would submit to him alone. But he would do it a step at a time and would not draw attention to what he was doing, of course. And like the proverbial frog in the tea kettle, the German people would not realize what was happening until it was too late.

But Dietrich Bonhoeffer could see what was happening and he tried to warn the Christians of the time. The main issue in the battle between the Nazis trying to take over the church was the Nazi idea that all things must be seen through a racial lens. According to the Nazis, Germans must be “racially” pure, and so they tried to purge the German Church of all “Jewish” elements. Of course Bonhoeffer saw this as an absurdity. He knew that Jesus was a Jew and he knew that Christianity is at its core fundamentally “Jewish.” To excise all “Jewish elements” from it would be to kill the church altogether. And of course, that was the Nazi's goal, not to change the German Church, but to destroy it. One of Bonhoeffer's dearest friends, Franz von Hildebrand, was ethnically Jewish, but his family had converted to Christianity and he himself had become ordained as a Lutheran

minister. But according to the Nazi idea of what should constitute the German church, this was not permissible. All ethnically Jewish men must leave the “German” church. Bonhoeffer fought this tooth and nail, knowing that the God of Scripture looks on the heart of a person, not at their ethnic background. In the end, frustrated with what was happening, Bonhoeffer led the way for a number of pastors to leave the increasingly Nazified “official” German Church. They formed what became known as the “Confessing Church.”

Bonhoeffer was perhaps the first at that time to see that Christians were obliged to speak out for the Jews. At one point he made the incendiary statement that “only he who stands up for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants.” What he meant by this was that if we were not heroically and courageously doing what God wanted us to do, God was not interested in our public displays of worship. To sing to God when we were not doing what God called us to do was to be nothing more than a hypocrite. Many were offended at Bonhoeffer’s outspokenness on these issues. But he insisted that Jesus was the “man for others” and to follow Jesus meant to stand up for the dignity of those who were different than ourselves.

In some ways, the formation of the Confessing Church was a great victory for true Christians in Germany. But Bonhoeffer was not as encouraged by what was happening as some others were. He seemed to see that despite the victories they had along the way, it would not end well. He saw that most Christians in Germany—including those within the Confessing Church—did not see what was at stake and were unwilling to fight the Nazis with everything they had. They seemed to think that the Nazis weren’t necessarily so bad. They thought that whatever problems existed could be fixed. But Bonhoeffer knew this was not the case.

In 1935 Bonhoeffer was called upon to lead an illegal seminary in the Confessing Church. He writes about this at length in his classic book, *Life Together*, telling what it means to live in a Christian community, one that takes the Sermon on the Mount very seriously, and that learns to be true and obedient disciples of Jesus Christ. He wanted his seminarians to understand how not merely to think as a Christian, but how to live as a Christian. He taught them how to maintain a robust devotional life, studying and

meditating on the Scriptures daily. He was helping these young seminarians to learn how to live out their faith.

By the late Thirties, Bonhoeffer's possibilities for serving God were being winnowed down to nothing. The Nazis kept tightening the noose, and there was less and less that Bonhoeffer could really do. After the Nazis prevented him from teaching, they also prevented him from speaking publicly. Finally they would also prevent him from publishing, because he had the temerity to write a book on the Psalms. The Nazi ideologues who had tried to purge the German church of all "Jewish elements" thought that the Psalms and everything in the Old Testament were "too Jewish" and must be avoided altogether. It may sound almost comical to us that they would consider such a thing, but for German Christians at the time in Germany it was all deadly serious.

In 1938 and 1939, there were war clouds on the horizon. Bonhoeffer knew that whenever he was called up to fight, his conscience wouldn't allow him to pick up a gun and fight in Hitler's war. He wasn't a pacifist in our contemporary understanding of that term. Nevertheless, he knew that he couldn't fight in Hitler's war, since it was not a just war, but a war of nationalist aggression. So he prayed earnestly, asking God to show him what to do. It simply wasn't possible to be a "conscientious objector" in the Third Reich.

But Bonhoeffer couldn't take a public stand against fighting in the war, because as a leading figure in the Confessing Church, he would get everyone else in the Confessing Church in trouble. How could he get out of having to fight while at the same time not endangering his brethren in the Confessing Church?

Finally he decided that the way out of this situation was to go to America, perhaps to teach at Union or elsewhere. If an invitation was proffered and he went to the United States before the outbreak of war, it would be impossible for him to return to Germany and he would be obliged to ride things out across the Atlantic until the war was over. So this was Bonhoeffer's plan, and of course no one expected the war to last six years. The famous theologian Reinhold Niebuhr got involved in trying to find a way for Bonhoeffer to come to Union, where he was then teaching. Niebuhr pulled some strings and eventually Bonhoeffer got an invitation. In early June 1939 he sailed for America once more.

But no sooner was Bonhoeffer on board ship than he began to feel uneasy about his decision. Had he missed God's will? He was praying earnestly during this time, asking God to lead him, to show him what to do. In my book on Bonhoeffer I quote at length from his diary entries and letters during this period. It's extraordinary to have this window into his private thoughts as he wrestled with his future.

When Bonhoeffer arrived in New York, the uneasiness did not lift. What was he doing in America when his people were about to undergo such a terrible ordeal? In the end he really believed that God wanted him to go back, to stand with his people during this difficult time, come what may. He knew that what was likely ahead for him was great danger and possibly death.

Bonhoeffer left New York twenty-six days after his arrival. Bonhoeffer had little idea what he was headed for, but he knew that he must obey God. When he arrived back in Germany, his Finkenwalde colleagues were shocked to see him. "What are you doing here?" they demanded. "We have arranged things at great difficulty so that you could escape, so that you be spared and be of use to Germany after all of this trouble blows over. Why did you return?"

Bonhoeffer was not one to mince words. "I made a mistake," he said. Nonetheless, it didn't answer the pressing question of what exactly he *would* be doing in Germany now that he had returned.

In order to understand what he would do, we need to remind ourselves that Bonhoeffer's family had been involved in the conspiracy against Hitler for years. The Bonhoeffers were exceedingly well-connected in elite Berlin circles and they were also close to a number of the key players in what would emerge as the widespread conspiracy against Hitler. Bonhoeffer had been involved in these conversations, often providing moral support to the conspirators and giving them solid theological reasons to fuel their involvement in their dangerous conspiracy against the German head of state. Most Germans would not have been comfortable with the idea of taking any kind of stand or action against their nation's leader. But Bonhoeffer had thought the matter through on a much deeper level than most Germans. He believed that to do anything less was to shrink from God's call to act upon one's beliefs. And this included standing up for those who

were being persecuted, come what may. To do anything less would be to buy in to the idea of “cheap grace” that he had so eloquently written about.

But now that Bonhoeffer had returned and war had broken out, what exactly would he do? The time for merely providing moral support to others had passed. For Bonhoeffer, now was the time to get involved directly and actively. But how?

Of all of Bonhoeffer’s family members and friends who were involved in the conspiracy, the one who was most directly involved was his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi. Dohnanyi was a leading figure German Military Intelligence, called the Abwehr—and the Abwehr was at the very center of the conspiracy against Hitler. So, when Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, Dohnanyi hired him to work for the Abwehr, ostensibly to use his talents to help the Third Reich during this time of war. Of course the reality couldn’t have been more different. By taking his brother-in-law up on this offer, Bonhoeffer had now officially joined the conspiracy against Hitler. He essentially now became a double agent.

Although he had officially been prohibited from publishing, Bonhoeffer continued to write during this period. He was now working on his magnum opus, *Ethics*. This was never completely finished, but his dear friend Eberhard Bethge brought it to publication after Bonhoeffer’s death.

In 1942, Bonhoeffer was visiting one of his dearest friends, Ruth von Kleist-Retzow, at her home in Pomerania, when he met her granddaughter Maria. A few months later they were engaged. Maria’s mother was not pleased with the situation, but eventually she came around to accepting it and no sooner had she agreed to let Dietrich and Maria make their engagement public than Bonhoeffer was arrested. But Bonhoeffer was not arrested for his role in the plot to kill Hitler. That plot and the wider conspiracy against Hitler had not yet been uncovered. He was arrested for something much less serious, comparatively speaking: his involvement in a plan to save the lives of seven German Jews.

Bonhoeffer was taken to Tegel military prison. Bonhoeffer’s uncle was the

Military Commandant over Berlin, so while at Tegel, Bonhoeffer was treated reasonably well. It was at Tegel that he wrote most of his famous “Letters and Papers from Prison,” and a number of poems, including his most famous poem, “Who Am I?” Bonhoeffer was by all accounts a picture of peace and quiet joy during his days in prison. Many later told how he had been a profound comfort to them amidst the uncertainty and dangers of that time.

Bonhoeffer and his family were quite hopeful that he would eventually be released. He believed that he could probably outfox the prosecutor and prove his innocence when his case came to trial. But Bonhoeffer had another scenario in mind that would lead to his release: even if his case didn’t come to trial or if it came to trial and he lost, he still hoped that the conspirators who hadn’t yet been arrested would succeed in killing Hitler. That way the whole nightmare would be over. But of course that’s not what happened.

Instead, fifteen months after his arrest—on July 20, 1944—the famous Valkyrie plot went into action. There were other failed attempts to kill Hitler, but in those cases, the bombs had never exploded. The Valkyrie plot was the first time that a bomb actually exploded. But it failed to kill Hitler, and now, for the first time in over a decade, the vast conspiracy to assassinate Hitler was exposed. Thousands were now arrested and many of them were tortured. Names came out, and one of those names was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was suddenly known to be one of the leaders in the conspiracy to kill Adolf Hitler.

In October of 1944, Bonhoeffer was transferred to the Gestapo’s underground high-security prison. This was now the end of 1944 and the war was winding down. Most people understood that the Germans were not winning. In February, endless squadrons of Allied planes were bombing Berlin with such intensity that all prisoners being held at the Gestapo prison were transferred elsewhere. Bonhoeffer was transferred to the Buchenwald concentration camp. Then, as April 1945 dawned, he was taken on a week-long journey that eventually brought him to Flossenburg Concentration Camp. There, on the direct orders of Hitler, early on the morning of April 9th, he was executed by hanging.

The idea that this profoundly good and brilliant 39-year-old man who was engaged to a beautiful young woman died just three weeks before the end of the war is

nothing if not tragic and sad. But if we stop there, we will miss the larger and more important reality. In fact, we will miss precisely what Bonhoeffer would have wanted us to see. And that is that anyone who goes to his death because he has obeyed God's will is doing something that is worthy of our celebration, not our pity.

What Bonhoeffer believed about the subject of death helps us to understand how he viewed his own death. We don't need to speculate much about his views, because he wrote and delivered a sermon on death in 1933. In that sermon, Bonhoeffer said, "No one has yet believed in God and the Kingdom of God, no one has yet heard about the realm of the resurrected, and not been homesick from that hour—waiting and looking forward to being released from bodily existence."

He continued, "How do we know that dying is so dreadful? Who knows whether in our human fear and anguish, we are only shivering and shuddering at the most glorious, heavenly blessed event in the world? Death is hell and night and cold, if it is not transformed by our faith. But that is just what is so marvelous, that we can transform death."

In a poem that he wrote in the last year of his life, likely knowing that death lay ahead for him, Bonhoeffer calls death "the last station on the road to freedom." As a devout Christian, Bonhoeffer worshiped a God who had conquered death, and Bonhoeffer exhorted his hearers on that Sunday morning in 1933—and the readers of his poem 12 years later—to consider this idea. For Bonhoeffer, the belief that the God of scripture had actually come to earth and had conquered death changed everything. It gave him the courage to do all that he did and it gave him the courage to face his own death without fear and trembling. What he wrote and said and how he lived and died forces us to think about what we believe and how we would face similar circumstances.

On the day that Bonhoeffer was executed, the crematorium at Flossenbürg was broken. So Bonhoeffer shared the fate of the innumerable Jews who had recently been killed in that very same place: his body was tossed on a pile and burned. His ashes, when they were burned, would have mingled with the ashes of the Jews who had died there before him.

Bonhoeffer believed that obeying God unto death was the only way to live, and it was the only way to defeat evil. In his famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, he writes: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” This was the life of faith in the God of the Scripture. To accept the call of that God was to die to one’s self—and to be resurrected again with the life of God himself. For Bonhoeffer, it was the only way to live.