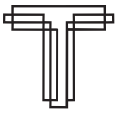

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Also by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Ethics
Creation and Fall/Temptation
Letters and Papers from Prison
The Martyred Christian

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The Cost of Discipleship

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

TOUCHSTONE
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Foreword

In the summer of 1988 a friend handed me this book (minus this foreword, of course) and asked whether I had ever heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I was on something of a spiritual search at that time and my friend obviously thought this book might provide some encouragement and guidance. I confessed that I had never heard of Bonhoeffer. Who was he, I wondered, besides the author of the book I was now holding?

My friend knew of my German background and told me that Bonhoeffer lived in Germany during the Third Reich. Because of Bonhoeffer's Christian faith he valiantly spoke out against Hitler, hardly something many were doing in Germany then. In fact, because of Bonhoeffer's conviction that a true Christian must help those who are suffering—and for him this was principally the Jews of Germany—he eventually became involved in the resistance to Hitler, and then even in an assassination plot against him. This was not the typical path we would expect from a man of God, but I soon learned there was nothing typical about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. My friend also told me that Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and eventually murdered by the Nazis, just three weeks before the end of the war.

I was somewhat embarrassed not to know of this extraordinary figure. That a German Christian had publicly defended the Jews and was murdered for doing so was, for me, not less than astonishing. Even given my own skepticism toward Christianity at that time, I had to admit that this was the sort of Christian in whom I might be interested.

But for me the subject of the Nazis was also a deeply personal one. My mother grew up in Germany during the Third Reich. I knew that my

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grandfather, for whom I was named, had dared to listen to the BBC in the evenings, with his ear pressed against the radio's speaker, lest anyone discover what he was doing, since such things could land one in a concentration camp. But my grandfather's dislike of Hitler could not prevent him from being forced to serve in the army. He was killed on his way to the Russian front in April 1944, aged thirty-one when my mother was just ten. Her life was haunted by the agonies of those bitter years; and I couldn't help but think that Bonhoeffer was also a voice for many Germans, too, who dared not speak out themselves.

My friend—his name is Ed Tuttle—also told me that Bonhoeffer had come to America twice, the second time in the summer of 1939, hoping to escape serving in Hitler's army. But then Bonhoeffer had gone back, despite the obvious danger to his life. When the Nazis executed him, he was thirty-nine years old and engaged to be married. Who could fail to be fascinated by the life of such a brilliant and brave man?

And so I began reading this book. In the first line of the foreword of that edition, Bishop George Bell quotes something from Bonhoeffer that is at the heart of this book—and at the heart of all Bonhoeffer's theology. It is as bracing a sentence as one may encounter: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." If one wishes to recommend the Christian faith to someone, such a sentence might well be what one would avoid saying at all costs. But when Bonhoeffer wrote those words he had long since passed beyond niceties and bromides. He was a man of truth in word and deed, a man who would live out what he had written. So I was hooked immediately. Whom had I ever read who wrote anything that was at once so blunt and off-putting, and yet so heartbreakingly beautiful and good and true? The sentence becomes that much more haunting in light of Bonhoeffer's death eight years later. As I read the rest of this book, my life was forever changed. It was unlike anything I'd read before. Indeed, it was a revelation.

I wanted to know more about the man behind the words, but at that time there was no popular-level biography of Bonhoeffer—nor did I dream that twenty years in the future I would write one myself. So for a time I was forced to content myself with the most basic details of his life. But when at last I did write my own book, I discovered that his upbringing and his life are themselves fascinating and go a long way toward explaining how he came to write a book like this one.

To begin with, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a genius. He was born in 1906 into a celebrated family of similarly brilliant figures. Bonhoeffer's

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father was the most famous psychiatrist in Germany and for decades ranked among the most renowned scientists of Europe. One of Dietrich's brothers was a physicist who split atoms with Einstein, while another rose to become the legal head of Lufthansa. Dietrich was among the youngest of eight brothers and sisters, whose vibrant company dramatically honed the young Dietrich's skills as a rigorous thinker. For the whole family, anything like the sloppiness of clichés was an embarrassment and an anathema. In the Bonhoeffer home one was taught to know what one thought and never to speak unless one had something to say, and then to say it precisely and well. But it was hardly a harsh environment. The family reveled in literature and art and sports, and even had a musical night once a week, to which friends were invited. Reading of his early years cannot help make anyone somewhat jealous, because a better environment in which to be raised can hardly be imagined.

But then during the Great War Dietrich's seventeen-year-old brother Walter was killed on the Eastern Front. This tragic news, as Dietrich was turning twelve, seemed to catapult him from his idyllic childhood into a sudden maturity. He was always thinking about the biggest questions, about God and eternity, but in his thirteenth year he decided he would do this for the rest of his life by becoming a theologian, though it took him a full year to admit this decision to the rest of his family. He knew that his scientifically minded brothers and father would not be pleased with this choice; but when they chided him for joining an institution as flawed as the church, he resolutely shot back, "Then I shall reform it!" Little did he know how much truth there was in this youthful boast.

Bonhoeffer's maternal great-grandfather was a nationally distinguished theologian, and his mother's father and brother both were pastors, so his choice of profession was not as wild a departure for him as his brothers made it out to be. At seventeen Bonhoeffer entered Tübingen University and then returned to Berlin, where, studying under such living legends as Adolf von Harnack, he earned his doctorate in theology at the astonishing age of twenty-one.

The subject of his dissertation was the question "What is the Church?", which he answered with such academic luminosity that the finest theological minds of the era were astonished. No less than Karl Barth declared it "a theological miracle." Even so, Bonhoeffer did not wish to limit himself to academia. It was his ambition also to be ordained as a Lutheran pastor. He wanted not only to think about God in a university setting but also to serve Him in an ecclesiastical one.

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Bonhoeffer believed that if one could not translate one's theological ideas from the academic realm down to the layman in the pew—and not just to him but to his children—perhaps one did not understand much at all or have much to say. And beyond this, Bonhoeffer believed that whatever one said one believed was not as important as living what one believed. If you weren't living it, did you really believe it? So taking his theology to real people, and not just to be understood but to be lived out as disciples of Christ, was for him paramount. This is of course what led him to write this book, published in 1937, whose German title, *Nachfolge*, simply translated, is "discipleship," but which literally means "to follow after." Whom one is to follow is implicit.

But to be ordained a pastor in the Lutheran Church at that time was not possible until one was twenty-five years old, so Bonhoeffer occupied his time with many things. When he turned twenty-four he decided he would spend a year in America—specifically in New York City—on a fellowship to Union Theological Seminary.

Bonhoeffer did not expect to find much by way of theology at Union, and, alas, he was not disappointed. In fact, he wrote home: "there is no theology here." After all, he had earned his doctorate in Berlin, among the greatest theological minds of that time. But in retrospect Bonhoeffer's time in New York was not to be marked by what he learned at Union but rather by what he experienced at an African American church in Harlem. One Sunday in September 1930 a fellow student from Alabama took Bonhoeffer up to the Abyssinian Baptist Church. What the young German saw there took his breath away. The congregation was on fire with faith, shouting and rejoicing in the worship and during the sermon, too. And their many activities during the week reflected what they did on Sunday. Dietrich saw that they were not merely religious, but that they were real Christians, disciples of the Christ they worshiped. So they were not playing church but rather *were* the church, the people of God living out their faith with a joy Bonhoeffer had never seen, neither in the churches in Germany nor in the white Protestant churches in New York. From that Sunday on he went to the Abyssinian Baptist Church every week, even teaching Sunday school and becoming involved in the lives of many of the congregation. He would never be the same. Whatever faith resided in his head in the next months descended to his heart and from there suffused his whole being. When he returned to Germany in 1931, everyone saw that he was somehow different.

For one thing, he now attended church regularly. Although his

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family had always taken God seriously and had had private devotions, regular church attendance was never a priority. But there was another aspect to his faith, too. Bonhoeffer had seen in New York how the African American Christians spoke up about the injustices done to their brethren, especially in the American South, and Bonhoeffer quickly saw a parallel with the Jews in Germany. While he had been away, the political winds in Germany had shifted. The civilized nation of Goethe and Schiller and Bach had in its economic agonies writhed in the direction of a vulgar fellow named Adolf Hitler. Under Hitler, the persecution of the Jews increased dramatically, and Bonhoeffer knew that it must be the church that led the way in opposing this.

Bonhoeffer himself took the lead very early on, giving a radio speech just days after Hitler's election as chancellor in 1933. In it Bonhoeffer explained that the popular German idea of a strong leader—or Führer—was not based on God's idea of leadership but on a mistaken idea that made an idol of the leader and that made him not a real leader at all but a *mis*leader. And this was only the beginning. Bonhoeffer knew that God was calling him to wake up the church to what was happening. But as with the prophets before him, Bonhoeffer's cries fell mostly on deaf ears. For one thing, the church in Germany was not used to standing against governmental authorities. The Lutheran church and the German state had long had an amicable history, so when Hitler became the head of the German state, almost no one could see the troubles that lay ahead. The typical religious pieties—that it was not the role of Christians to be involved in politics or that it was their role only to pray and "preach the gospel"—were all trotted out and firmly believed. By the time some church leaders saw what was happening, it was simply too late to do anything. By then, Hitler had consolidated his power to the extent that it was impossible to oppose him. The window of religious liberty in Germany had been shut.

Bonhoeffer was deeply grieved by the inaction of the German church, but he vowed to do all he could nonetheless. In 1935 he started an illegal seminary to train men who were not mere ecclesiastical types but who understood what it meant to follow Jesus with their whole beings—to be real disciples. When, two years later, the Gestapo shut this seminary down, Bonhoeffer took it underground. The Nazis, however, were relentless. Eventually they forbade Bonhoeffer to teach at all, and then even to speak in public. His options for serving God were being winnowed down to nothing. When in 1939 he had the temerity

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to publish a book on the Psalms, titling it *The Prayerbook of the Bible*, the Nazis had had enough. They forbade him now even to publish in the Third Reich. After all, from their point of view, the entire Old Testament was far too Jewish for National Socialist purposes. A book on the Psalms simply wouldn't do.

By this time, however, everyone could see that war was coming, and this presented other problems. Bonhoeffer knew he could never fight in Hitler's war, so he had to get out of fighting in a way that did not draw too much attention to himself. He was willing to pay whatever price necessary for his convictions, but he didn't want others to pay for his bold stand. But what could he do? At this time well-meaning friends in America came to the rescue, pulling what strings they could to invite him to return to New York, where he could teach at the Union Theological Seminary. His friend Paul Lehman in Chicago would also arrange lectures for him around the country. They knew that his life was in danger in Germany. In America he could be safe from the Nazis.

So Bonhoeffer accepted the offer. But no sooner had he boarded the ship to cross the Atlantic in early June of 1939 than he began to have second thoughts. During the journey he felt increasingly unsettled, complaining in letters to his friends back home that because the ship crossed a time zone every day it became more and more confusing and difficult to keep his promise of praying with them at the same hour each day, in order to remain with them in spirit, as it were. It was as though each day of the journey carried him further and further from himself. By the time he arrived at the beautifully appointed apartment assigned to him—the so-called Prophet's Chamber—at Union Theological Seminary, he was already scheming how to tell his hosts he could not stay as long as they had hoped. What had been a promise to stay three years soon became one year. Soon he felt staying through the fall might be the limit of what he could do.

All that June in New York he searched the scriptures for an answer to the strange but unshakable feeling of being in the wrong place, and afterward he walked the lonely, sweltering streets of Manhattan like a man divided from himself, like an exile and a ghost. He wandered through museums; he took in a newsreel in Times Square; but even that only reminded him of what was happening at home and made him long to return. One day he boarded the subway to Queens to visit the 1939 World's Fair. But in the end his distance from Germany felt to him like an escape and a mistake. He knew he must return, and the sooner the

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better. When at last he boarded the ship to go back to Germany, Bonhoeffer had been in New York no more than twenty-six days.

When in mid-July he suddenly appeared to his friends in Germany, they were shocked. To what was he returning now, other than to danger? What would he do that he couldn't do before he had left? But he couldn't even tell them. That's because he had decided that he would accept his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnányi's invitation to work for the Abwehr, the German Military Intelligence. This would enable Bonhoeffer to give the appearance of having come to his senses and being willing to serve his nation during a time of war. But even that was not the whole answer. He would indeed be working for the Abwehr, but in reality he would become a double agent. Dohnányi had invited his brilliant young brother-in-law to join the conspiracy against Hitler, which was centered in the Abwehr. Bonhoeffer would now be working with those brave souls plotting the end of the Nazi government—and the assassination of Hitler.

Bonhoeffer's dramatic decision to become a spy and enter the conspiracy to kill Hitler has been the subject of decades-long debate and controversy. But Bonhoeffer knew that to sit on the sidelines while innocents were being murdered was to be complicit in their murders. He believed that God would have us defend the innocent, even if it meant becoming involved in killing, although he by no means took such a thing lightly. But David's killing of Goliath was not something David ever repented of; and those who have valued the teachings of the Bible have never seen that victory as an act of murder. Nor did Bonhoeffer believe that having an armed military or a police force was wrong. The idea that a pastor was not required to take action the way anyone else would be required to take action if he could prevent killing was one of those theologically sloppy and "religious" ideas for which Bonhoeffer had little patience. In fact, he knew that because other Christians in Germany had such ideas was the very reason Germany had descended into the madness of National Socialism. As Bonhoeffer saw it, it was the church's duty to call the state to account for its actions; and in the end, if the state did not do the right thing, it was the duty of the church to oppose the state with action. Most Christian leaders in Germany were unwilling to follow Bonhoeffer in this, and what had been a lonely road for him now became lonelier still.

But Bonhoeffer knew that if serving God meant doing so outside the church, so be it. He knew that much of what God had done in history was done without the help of—or sometimes in spite of—those who

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called themselves God's people. And sometimes it involved the kinds of behavior that "religious" people thought beneath them. After all, was it not Rahab, a prostitute, who deceived her own people to enable the Israelites to conquer Jericho?

Bonhoeffer knew that the mere religiosity of the Pharisees whom Jesus condemned was not the kind of faith God wanted. In fact, Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his friend Eberhard Bethge in which he coined the term "religionless Christianity," a Christian faith that was more than mere "religion," that consisted of far more than simply avoiding sins and attending a church service once a week. Rather, it was the kind of faith Bonhoeffer had seen among the African Americans in Harlem. But Bonhoeffer did not find this kind of faith in Germany when Germany needed it most. And so now Bonhoeffer felt more alone than ever, but he knew that in the end he answered to his audience of One, the only One whose opinion mattered. Bonhoeffer also knew that in the end that was where each of us must find himself.

In his day, Bonhoeffer was thought a radical, but isn't that the point of his popularity ever since? He actually believed what the Bible said and proved that by living his faith all the way, and indeed "unto death," to use the traditional parlance. He bade us all follow him in this, just as Jesus bade us all "pick up our crosses and follow him." In both of these exhortations there is an inescapably prophetic element, for how is it that Jesus spoke of his cross so long before there was any talk of crucifying him, long before the grim specter of that horrific Roman death? Just so, when Bonhoeffer in this book wrote of Christ bidding us come and die, we can hardly now help hearing it in the context of Bonhoeffer's own future death.

But this is where the radical quality of Bonhoeffer and Jesus becomes attainable to all of us: we see that they did not merely believe or merely hope that there was heaven on the other side of their sufferings and death. They knew there was a life beyond this pale and preliminary life. They had no doubt of that effulgent reality beyond what looks like human death, and they knew that what looks to us like death is in fact a portal to the very antithesis of death.

This is the magnificent witness of those who have gone before us, whom we call saints, because they show us with their lives that they know something we too can know but may not yet know; and in the act of their dying they show us that there really is nothing to be feared, that we are fools not to know it and to rejoice in it as they have done. But who can hear such things? Bonhoeffer believed that we could. And in writing this

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book he hoped to enliven that spark in us and to give it fuel, so that we too might grasp that what he says is not only true, but is Truth itself.

In the decades since Bonhoeffer's death some put forth the idea that this book merely represented a transitional phase in Bonhoeffer's life and that some of his wartime letters showed a new Bonhoeffer emerging, one who was finding his way past the thinking of this book toward a kind of humanism that was nearly agnostic. This even led many to see him as a prophet of the trendy "God is dead" movement of the early sixties. We now know this was a grave mistake and that most of it was centered around Bonhoeffer's use of the phrase "religionless Christianity" in a letter to Bethge. Bethge himself, who knew Bonhoeffer better than anyone, publicly bristled at this distortion of Bonhoeffer's legacy, writing: "The isolated use and handing down of the famous term 'religionless Christianity' has made Bonhoeffer the champion of an undialectical shallow modernism which obscures all that he wanted to tell us about the living God."

Furthermore, for Bonhoeffer, swerving and lurching from one way of thinking to another was unthinkable. This was why he thought and wrote so exceedingly carefully, processing each thought to its logical conclusion. In fact, as though presciently to head off such irresponsible speculations in the future, he wrote—around the very time of his letter containing the phrase "religionless Christianity"—that he stood by every word of this book you are holding. That he might have more to add, and that he might wish to make some further observations and annotations, should go without saying, for his active mind was in his last months far from having spent itself. And this is of course the great tragedy. There was so much more he might have said. But what we have, we have. And it is so glorious that to quibble about what might have been Bonhoeffer himself would have thought faithless and beneath us. We have this lapidary and magnificent book, one of the most vital ever written, by one of the most extraordinary figures in modern history. Let us rejoice in that by reading it with all the care it demands, and then celebrating that we have done so by living out what it says in our own lives. Amen.

Eric Metaxas
New York City
March 2018

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Memoir

by G. Leibholz

1

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER was born in Breslau on February 4th, 1906, the son of a university professor and leading authority on psychiatry and neurology. His more remote ancestors were theologians, professors, lawyers, artists. From his mother's side there was also some aristocratic blood in his veins.

His parents were quite outstanding in character and general outlook. They were very clear-sighted, cultured people and uncompromising in all things which matter in life. From his father, Dietrich Bonhoeffer inherited goodness, fairness, self-control and ability; from his mother, his great human understanding and sympathy, his devotion to the cause of the oppressed, and his unshakable steadfastness.

Both his father and mother brought up their son Dietrich with his three brothers, his twin sister and three other sisters, in Breslau and (from 1912) in Berlin, in that Christian, humanitarian and liberal tradition which to the Bonhoeffers was as native as the air they breathed. It was that spirit which determined Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life from the beginning.

Bonhoeffer was as open as any man could be to all the things which make life beautiful. He rejoiced in the love of his parents, his sisters and brothers, his fiancée, his many friends. He loved the mountains, the flowers, the animals—the greatest and the simplest things in life. His geniality and inborn chivalry, his love of music, art and literature, the firmness of his character, his personal charm and his readiness to listen, made

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him friends everywhere. But what marked him most was his unselfishness and preparedness to help others up to the point of self-sacrifice. Whenever others hesistated to undertake a task that required special courage, Bonhoeffer was ready to take the risk.

Theology itself was somehow in his blood. On his mother's side Bonhoeffer's grandfather, von Hase, had been a chaplain to the Emperor, whose displeasure he incurred when he allowed himself to differ from his political views. When the Emperor stopped attending his services, Hase was urged to tender his resignation. His great-grandfather was Carl von Hase, the most distinguished Church historian in the Germany of the nineteenth century, who tells us in his autobiography of his visit to Goethe in Weimar in 1830, and who (just as Dietrich Bonhoeffer's grandfather on his father's side) was himself imprisoned for his subversive liberal views in the fortress of the High Asperg in 1825.[1] On his father's side he belonged to an old Swabian family which had been living in Württemberg since 1450 and which was also able to claim not a few theologians in previous generations.

This tradition of the Bonhoeffer family may explain why Dietrich Bonhoeffer had already made up his mind at the age of fourteen, when he was still at school, to read theology. At the age of seventeen he entered Tübingen University. A year later he attended courses at Berlin University, and sat at the feet of Adolf von Harnack, R. Seeberg, Lietzmann and others. Harnack soon formed a very high opinion of his character and abilities. Later he came under the influence of Karl Barth's theology which, though he never went to his lectures or studied under him, left its mark on Bonhoeffer's first book, *Sanctorum Communio.* In 1928 he went as a curate to Barcelona for a year and in 1930 at the age of twenty-four he became a lecturer in

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1. For further details on C. von Hase, cf. *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* vol. 11, p. 241. Von Hase has made Jena an attractive place for theology and men of learning all over the world.

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Systematic Theology in Berlin University. But before actually starting with his academic career he went to Union Theological Seminary in New York as "a brilliant and theologically sophisticated young man."[1] His writings[2] quickly gave him a firm reputation in the theological world, especially his *Nachfolge* which through his death gained a new and deep significance; this book greatly impressed theologians throughout the world at the time when it first made its appearance. Some of his other books, especially his *Ethics,* written by him in prison, are published in English, and others will appear before long.

A splendid career in the realm of theological scholarship lay thus open before him. In the light of his achievement and in the prospect of what he might have achieved, his death is a great tragedy. But worldly standards cannot measure the loss adequately. For God had chosen him to perform the highest task a Christian can undertake. He has become a martyr. "And seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not. For behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh; but thy life will I give unto thee for a prey in all places whither thou goest." "I cannot get away from Jeremiah 45," wrote Bonhoeffer from the prison cell.

2

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a great realist. He was one of the few who quickly understood, even before Hitler came to

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1. Niebuhr in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review,* vol. 1, no. 3, March 1946, p. 3.

2. *Sanctorum Communio: eine Dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche,* 1930; *Akt und Sein,* 1931; *Schöpfung und Fall,* 1933 (Eng. trans.: *Creation and Fall,* 1959); *Nachfolge,* 1937 (Eng. trans.: *The Cost of Discipleship,* 1948); *Versuchung,* 1937 (Eng. trans.: *Temptation,* 1955); *Gemeinsames Leben,* 1939 (Eng. trans.: *Life Together,* 1954); *Ethik,* 1943 (Eng. trans.: *Ethics,* 1955).

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power, that National Socialism was a brutal attempt to make history without God and to found it on the strength of man alone. Therefore in 1933, when Hitler came to power, he abandoned his academic career, which seemed to him to have lost its proper meaning. He was not, however, expelled from the University until 1936 and even lectured there in the summer and winter of 1935–36. As late as February 1933 he denounced on the wireless a political system which corrupted and grossly misled a nation and made the "Führer" its idol and god. In October 1933, after six months of the Church struggle, he decided to leave Berlin for London, where, as a pastor, he ministered to two congregations and tried to explain to his British friends, among them especially the Bishop of Chichester, the true character of the German Church struggle. He quickly realized that in the situation in which the world and the Churches found themselves in the 'thirties nothing was gained any longer for the Churches by citing their old credal statements. The ecumenical movement seemed to him to offer the only way of reuniting the various members of the body of Christ. This explains why Bonhoeffer considered it the duty of the Churches to listen anew to the message of the Bible and to put themselves in the context of the whole Church. Therefore no wonder that Bonhoeffer soon played a remarkable rôle in the ecumenical movement[1] and that it was he who, more than any other teacher in a German university or theological seminary, had made German students familiar with the life, the history and development of the non-Lutheran Churches.

In 1935 Bonhoeffer, already one of the leaders of the Confessional Church, returned to Germany. He went to Pomerania

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1. He was a member of the Youth Commission of the World Council of Churches and of the World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches. He was elected (with Präses Koch) to be a member of the Ecumenical Christian Council for Life and Work at Fanö, Denmark, in 1934.

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to direct an illegal Church Training College, first in a small peninsula in the Baltic, later on in Finkenwalde near Stettin. This College was not formed after any existing model. It was not an order comprising men living in ascetic seclusion; nor was it a Training College in the ordinary sense of the word. The attempt was made here to live the ''community life'' of a Christian as described in one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's shorter writings. Young ministers who came from all over the Reich learned here what is so sorely needed to-day—namely, how in the twentieth century a Christian life should be lived in a spirit of genuine brotherhood, and how such a life could naturally and freely grow if there were only men who entirely belonged to the Lord and, therefore, in brotherly love to one another. It was not until 1940 that the College was finally closed down by the Gestapo.

When war seemed inevitable, Bonhoeffer's friends abroad wanted him to leave Germany to save his life, for he was unalterably opposed to serving in the Army in an aggressive war. When asked by a Swede at the Ecumenical Conference at Fanö, Denmark, in 1934, ''What will you do when war comes?'' he answered: ''I shall pray to Christ to give me the power not to take up arms.'' In June 1939, American friends got him out of Germany. But soon he felt that he could not stay there, but that he had to return to his country. When he came to England on his return from the United States, his friends quickly realized that Bonhoeffer's heart belonged to his oppressed and persecuted fellow Christians in Germany and that he would not desert them at a time when they needed him most.

The reasoning which brought Bonhoeffer to his decision belongs, as Reinhold Niebuhr[1] says, ''to the finest logic of Christian martyrdom.'' ''I shall have no right,'' Bonhoeffer

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1. Niebuhr, op. cit., p. 3. Cf. also Niebuhr, ''Death of a Martyr,'' in *Christianity and Crisis,* June 25th, 1945.

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wrote to Niebuhr before leaving America, ''to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people. . . . Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make this choice in security.'' Dietrich Bonhoeffer never regretted this decision, not even in prison, where he wrote in later years: ''I am sure of God's hand and guidance. . . . You must never doubt that I am thankful and glad to go the way which I am being led. My past life is abundantly full of God's mercy, and, above all sin, stands the forgiving love of the Crucified.''

At the outbreak of the war friends in Germany managed to spare him the ordeal of serving in the Army, so that he was able to go on with the work for the Confessional Church and to combine it with some activity for the political underground movement to which the war had given its chance. Bonhoeffer, qualified both by character and general outlook, soon belonged to the few who had a strong spiritual influence on the growing opposition in Germany.

Bonhoeffer (together with his sister Christel and her husband, Hans von Dohnanyi) was arrested by the Gestapo in the house of his parents on April 5th, 1943. In prison and concentration camps, Bonhoeffer greatly inspired by his indomitable courage, his unselfishness and his goodness, all those who came in contact with him. He even inspired his guards with respect, some of whom became so much attached to him that they smuggled out of prison his papers and poems written there, and apologized to him for having to lock his door after the round in the courtyard.

His own concern in prison was to get permission to minister to the sick and to his fellow prisoners, and his ability to comfort the anxious and depressed was amazing. We know what Bonhoeffer's word and religious assistance meant to his fellow

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prisoners, especially during their last hours (even to Molotov's nephew Kokorin, who was imprisoned with Bonhoeffer in Büchenwald and to whom the teaching of Christ was brought home); we know what Bonhoeffer's practical aid meant in prison (Tegel) during political trials to those men of whom ten or twenty were sentenced to death by a military court every week in 1943 and 1944. Some of these (among them a British soldier), charged with sabotage, were saved by him (and his father and solicitor[1]) from certain death. We have heard that his fellow prisoners were deeply impressed by the calmness and self-control which Bonhoeffer displayed even in the most terrible situations. For instance, during the very heavy bombings of Berlin, when the explosions were accompanied by the howling of his fellow prisoners, who beat with their fists against the locked doors of their cells clamouring to be transferred to the safe bunkers, Bonhoeffer stood, we have been told, like a giant before men.

But this is only the one side of the picture. The other side is that Bonhoeffer was a man who lived in, and loved, this world. He, a giant before man, was but a child before God. While he was in the body, the fight between flesh and spirit, Adam and Christ, was going on in him. Sometimes he seemed to have become a riddle to himself. One day he gave expression to this conflict in his soul in a moving poem written from the prison-cell and entitled:

WHO AM I?[2]

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a Squire from his country house.

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1. Kurt Wergin, Berlin.
2. Translated by J. B. Leishman.

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Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were
compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

Who am I? This or the Other?
Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of
mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

On October 5th, 1944, Bonhoeffer was transferred from Tegel to the main Gestapo prison in the Prinz Albrechtstrasse in Berlin. Although fully aware of what he had to expect there, he was perfectly calm, saying goodbye to his friends as though nothing had happened, but, as a fellow prisoner remarked,

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''his eyes were quite unnatural.'' The direct contact hitherto maintained with the outside world was now cut. One of the last messages received from him was a poem composed at the Gestapo prison in Berlin during the very heavy air raids on Berlin. It was entitled ''New Year 1945'' and reads as follows:[1]

With every power for good to stay and guide me,
comforted and inspired beyond all fear,
I'll live these days with you in thought beside me,
and pass, with you, into the coming year.

The old year still torments our hearts, unhastening:
the long days of our sorrow still endure.
Father, grant to the soul thou hast been chastening
that thou hast promised—the healing and the cure.

Should it be ours to drain the cup of grieving
even to the dregs of pain, at thy command,
we will not falter, thankfully receiving
all that is given by thy loving hand.

But, should it be thy will once more to release us
to life's enjoyment and its good sunshine,
that we've learned from sorrow shall increase us
and all our life be dedicate as thine.

To-day, let candles shed their radiant greeting:
lo, on our darkness are they not thy light,
leading us haply to our longed-for meeting?
Thou canst illumine e'en our darkest night.

When now the silence deepens for our harkening,
grant we may hear thy children's voices raise
from all the unseen world around us darkening
their universal paean, in thy praise.

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1. Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop Young.

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While all the powers of Good aid and attend us,
boldly we'll face the future, be it what may.
At even, and at morn, God will befriend us,
And oh, most surely on each new year's day!

In February, when the Gestapo prison in Berlin was destroyed by an air raid, Bonhoeffer was taken to the concentration camp of Büchenwald and from there to other places until he was executed by special order of Himmler at the concentration camp at Flossenburg on April 9th, 1945, just a few days before it was liberated by the Allies. This happened just about the time when his brother Klaus and his sisters' husbands, Hans von Dohnanyi and Rüdiger Schleicher, met their execution at the hands of the Gestapo in Berlin and in the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen.

3

The guiding force in Bonhoeffer's life, underlying all that he did, worked and suffered for, was his faith and love of God, in whom he found peace and happiness. From his faith the breadth of vision came which enabled him to separate the gold in life from the dross and to differentiate what was and what was not essential in the life of man. From it came the constancy of mind, persistency of purpose, love of suffering humanity and of truth, justice and goodness. But it was not enough for him to seek justice, truth, honesty and goodness for their own sake and patiently to suffer for them. No, according to Bonhoeffer, we have to do so in loyal obedience to Him who is the source and spring of all goodness, justice and truth and on whom he felt absolutely dependent.

It is the same call of God which also obliges us only to make use of freedom with a deep feeling of responsibility. Bonhoeffer believed in man as a free spiritual being, but this

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freedom was conferred and inspired by divine grace and granted man, not for his glorification, but for the conservation of the divine ordering of human life. If Christian teaching does not guide us in the use of freedom and God is denied, all obligations and responsibilities that are sacred and binding on man are undermined. A Christian has then no other choice but to act, to suffer and—if it has to be—to die. As he put it in his poem, ''Stations on the Road to Freedom,'' composed in prison when he realized that his death was certain, the last verse of which runs as follows:

DEATH[1]

Come now, solemnest feast on the road to eternal freedom,
Death, and destroy those fetters that bow, those walls that imprison
this our transient life, these souls that linger in darkness,
so that at last we see what is here withheld from our vision.
Long did we seek you, freedom, in discipline, action and suffering.
Now that we die, in the face of God himself we behold you.

It was his brotherly love of his fellow-men which also caused Bonhoeffer to believe that it was not enough to follow Christ by preaching, teaching and writing. No, he was in deadly earnest when he called for Christian action and self-sacrifice. This explains why Bonhoeffer always acted spontaneously, ''in hiding,'' far from all publicity, and why he

1. Translated by J. B. Leishman.

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considered self-righteousness and complacency great sins against the Holy Spirit, and regarded ambition and vanity as the start of the road to hell.

Bonhoeffer stood for what is called Christian Humanism to-day. For he offered his life for a new understanding of the personal life which has its roots in the Christian faith. It was he who made true the word that ''the spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord'' (Prov. 20.27) and that God's revelation is through man and for man only. To Bonhoeffer, Christianity was not the concern of the believing, pious soul who shuts himself up and keeps himself within the bounds of the sacramental sphere. No, according to him Christianity has its place in this world and the Church as the Body of Christ, and the fellowship in him can only be the visible Church. Man must follow him who has served and passed through this world as the living, the dying and the risen Lord. Therefore, wherever it pleases God to put man in this world, the Christian must be ready for martyrdom and death. It is only in this way that man learns faith.

As he himself has put it: ''The Christian is not a *homo religiosus,* but simply a man as Jesus (in distinction from John the Baptist) was a man. . . . Not the flat and banal 'This-sidedness' of the Enlightened, of the deep 'This-sidedness' which is full of discipline and in which the knowledge of the Death and Resurrection is always present, this it is what I mean.[1] When a man really gives up trying to make something out of himself—a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called clerical somebody), a righteous or unrighteous man, . . . when in the fullness of tasks, questions, success or ill-hap, experiences and perplexities, a man throws himself into the arms of God . . . then he wakes with Christ in Gethsemane. That is faith, that is *metanoia* and it is thus that he

1. On the term ''this-sidedness'' see Schönherr, ''Die Zeichen der Zeit,'' *Evangelische Monatsschrift,* 1947, pp. 307–12.

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becomes a man and Christian. How can a man wax arrogant if in a this-sided life he shares the suffering of God?''[1]

The idea that God himself has been suffering through Christ in this world and from its remoteness from him, had occupied Bonhoeffer's mind again and again. Bonhoeffer frequently felt strongly that God himself shared his suffering. In the second verse of the poem ''Christian and Unbeliever,'' composed by Bonhoeffer a few months before his death, this feeling is expressed as follows:

> *Men go to God when he is sore bested:*
> *find him poor and scorned, without shelter and bread,*
> *whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead.*
> *Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.*[2]

Bonhoeffer's standing with God in his hour of grieving explains, ultimately, why he did not take his own suffering seriously and why his courage was so great and uncompromising.

This steadfastness of mind and preparedness to sacrifice everything has been proved on many occasions. For instance, when in the summer of 1940 despair had seized most of those who were actively hostile to the Nazi régime and when the proposal was made that further action should be postponed so as to avoid giving Hitler the air of a martyr, Bonhoeffer unswervingly and successfully opposed this suggestion: ''If we claim to be Christians, there is no room for expediency.'' Thus the group led by him went on with its activities at a time when the world inside and outside Germany widely believed in a Nazi victory. Or when the question arose as to who was prepared to inform the British Government, through the Bishop of Chichester, of the exact details of the German resistance

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1. The full text in German can be found in *Das Zeugnis eines Boten,* ed. by Visser 't Hooft, Geneva, 1945, pp. 46–47.
2. Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop Young.

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movement, it was again Bonhoeffer who, as early as May 31st, 1942, at the risk of his life, undertook this task at the instigation of his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi in the hope of a sympathetic understanding on the part of the British Government.[1]

Further, in his hearing before the Gestapo during his imprisonment, defenceless and powerless as he then was and only fortified by the word of God in his heart, he stood erect and unbroken before his tormentors. He refused to recant, and defied the Gestapo machine by openly admitting that, as a Christian, he was an implacable enemy of National Socialism and its totalitarian demands towards the citizen—defied it, although he was continually threatened with torture and with the arrest of his parents, his sisters and his fiancée, who all had a helping hand in his activities. We know of another scene in October 1944, when friends made an attempt to liberate him and to take him to safety abroad, and he decided to remain in prison in order not to endanger others.

We also know from the testimony of a British officer, a fellow-prisoner, of the last service which Dietrich Bonhoeffer held on the day before his death and which ''moved all deeply, Catholics and Protestants alike, by his simple sincerity.'' When trying afterwards to keep the imprisoned wives of men executed for their leadership in the plot against Hitler from depression and anxiety, he was taken away. We know that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was never tried, went steadfastly on his last way to be hanged, and died with admirable calmness and dignity.

God heard his prayer and granted him the ''costly grace''—that is, the privilege of taking the cross for others and of affirming his faith by martyrdom.

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1. The Bishop of Chichester tells us of his conversations in Sweden with Bonhoeffer in an article published in the *Contemporary Review,* 1945, no. 958, pp. 203 ff.

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4

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and work has far-reaching implications. First, Bonhoeffer's and his friends' political activities show that the still widely-held view that the plot of July 1944 was simply a ''conspiracy of a small clique of reactionaries and discouraged officers,'' who saw that Hitler was losing the war and had made a mess of their profession, is wrong. There also was in the German opposition movement another strand of uncorrupted spiritual forces which opposed all that Hitler and National Socialism stood for on grounds of Christianity and the basic values of life, of truth, justice, goodness and decency. This trend drew its members from quite different political parties and religious groups. None of these men stood for a special party belief, but for a certain way of life, the destruction of which was the avowed purpose of National Socialism. Here there was the ''other Germany'' of which there was so much talk in the 'thirties. These men were in truth the upholders of the European and Western tradition in Germany, and it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who more than anybody else realized that nothing less than a return to the Christian faith could save Germany. The failure of these men was not only a tragedy for Germany, but for Europe as a whole, and historians may well come one day to the conclusion that the consequences of this failure cannot be made good.

The existence of this strand within the German opposition movement confirms that the last war was, ultimately, ideological in its basic character and that we are living to-day in a primarily ideological age. Only thus can we fully understand the motives of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's action. No doubt, Bonhoeffer was a great patriot and he loved his country so much that he preferred death to safety. But he was also too astute a political analyst not to see that Germany would be engulfed in the coming catastrophe. The fanatical devilish forces within

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National Socialism left no alternative. They were aiming at the destruction of Germany as a European and Christian country. By planned political action he hoped to avoid this tragic disaster. As he used to say: it is not only my task to look after the victims of madmen who drive a motorcar in a crowded street, but to do all in my power to stop their driving at all.

Ultimately, it was the allegiance which he owed to God and his master which forced upon him the terrible decision, not merely to make a stand against National Socialism (all the underground movements in the German-occupied countries did that), but also—and this in contradistinction to all the underground movements which appealed to nationalism—to work for the defeat of his own country, since only thus could Germany as a Christian and European country be saved from extinction. For this very reason Bonhoeffer and his friends were tortured, hanged and murdered. It was Bonhoeffer and his friends who proved by their resistance unto death that even in the age of the nation-state there are loyalties which transcend those to state and nation. They proved that even in this age nationalism stands under God and that it is a sin against him and his call for fellowship with other nations if it degenerates into national egotism and greed. This message, which implies the virtual death sentence of the still prevailing materialistic concept of nationalism, belongs to the spiritual inheritance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's and his friends' martyrdom. Only from this point of view can it be proved that Hitler and his gang were not only the destroyers of Europe but also traitors to their own country; and, further, that men can lose their country if it is represented by an anti-Christian régime.

True, it cannot be said that the war had actually been waged by the Western countries on these ideological lines. We know that in the later stages of the war, when the regrettable ''unconditional surrender'' policy of Casablanca was accepted by the Western countries, the war had gradually lost its ideological character and taken on a more and more nationalistic outlook. This was due to the fact that the West and its political leaders

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were, ultimately, not confronted with the tragic conflict of loyalties to which Christians in Germany were exposed. Of course, there were in the Western countries outstanding Christians and non-Christians who felt this conflict weighing heavily on their conscience and their thought and courageously refused during the war to bow down to public opinion.[1] These men raised the claims of a higher loyalty than the national, and challenged politicians and churchmen alike. But they had not experienced the full weight of the tragic issue at stake. Only those who paid with their lives for the tragic conflict of loyalties can claim to be the martyrs of a new age.

5

Secondly, the religious implications concern the Protestant Church in Germany especially, but also affect the Church as a whole.

In the earlier stages of his career Bonhoeffer accepted the traditional Lutheran view that there was a sharp distinction between politics and religion. Gradually, however, he revised his opinion, not because he was a politician or because he refused to give Caesar his due, but because he came to recognize that the political authority in Germany had become entirely corrupt and immoral and that a false faith is capable of terrible and monstrous things. For Bonhoeffer Hitler was the Antichrist, the arch-destroyer of the world and its basic values, the Antichrist who enjoys destruction, slavery, death and extinction for their own sake, the Antichrist who wants to pose the negative as positive and as creative.

Bonhoeffer was firmly and rightly convinced that it is not only a Christian right but a Christian duty towards God to

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1. Cf., for instance, the speeches delivered by the late Bishop of Chichester in the House of Lords during the war, his essays and addresses which are now embodied in his book, *The Church and Humanity, 1939–1946* (1947).

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