In the Voices of Those Who Knew Him: An Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born one hundred years ago, on February 4, 1906—an anniversary that will be commemorated this year in countless ways. My own interest in this pastor, theologian, scholar, and martyr—so important to both the cultural and the church history of the twentieth century—took a more personal turn during my years as an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities when I had the opportunity to travel to Germany to meet some key people in the Bonhoeffer story. My various contacts in the United States, including Marlan Johnson, a former pastor of my home congregation, led me to people instrumental in the life of Bonhoeffer, making me realize firsthand Bonhoeffer’s historical and ongoing influence. In addition to interviewing people who had direct connections with Bonhoeffer, I also interviewed scholars who currently study him and his work. Their stories echo those of Bonhoeffer’s students, colleagues, and relatives; all summarized his influence by referring to his insistence that the church cannot exist for itself, but rather only for the sake of people.¹

¹The interviews were originally used, with permission, in my undergraduate thesis: Kyle Schiefelbein, “A Martyr with a Cause: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Influence Yesterday and Today” (undergraduate thesis, University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, 2003). Responsibility for accurate transcription and reporting of the interviews is my own.
BACKGROUND AND EDUCATION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s parents both came from notable families: Karl, from a family of academics, was the director of the University Hospital for Nervous Diseases in Berlin; Paula came from the von Hase family, known for its preachers, church historians, and theologians. Though Dietrich came from a family known for its theologians, the Bonhoeffer household was not overly religious. They usually did not attend worship, nor did they participate in the local church, but the children still learned the basics of the Christian faith.

Dietrich’s childhood was one of privilege and education. When he turned eight years old, he began to participate in the family’s Saturday evening classical music concerts. Renate Bethge, Dietrich’s niece and the wife of his most notable biographer Eberhard Bethge, remembers that Dietrich kept music as part of the family even during his subsequent involvement in the resistance movement. Dietrich would play the piano, his father Karl would play the violin, and his brother Klaus would play the cello. Following the First World War, the Bonhoeffer family moved to Grunewald, one of Berlin’s western neighborhoods. Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, Dietrich’s teaching assistant at the University of Berlin and a student at the illegal seminary in Finkenwalde, sees Dietrich’s seclusion from the rest of Berlin in this “high bourgeois ghetto” as one of the greatest reasons for his initial failure in the parish setting.

Bonhoeffer entered the academic world in the fall of 1923 and completed the first part of his studies at the University of Berlin (present-day Humboldt University). Under the direction of Reinhold Seeberg, professor of systematic theology, Dietrich wrote his dissertation on the communion of saints (Sanctorum Communio), a heavily theological document investigating the theme of religious community. Here Dietrich first formulated his idea of Christian community that would eventually play a major role in the development of the Confessing Church’s Finkenwalde seminary. Following the completion of his dissertation, Dietrich was called to Barcelona to serve a German Lutheran congregation. Because of his upbringing in the Grunewald “ghetto,” he visited parishioners on a regular basis to immerse himself in their poverty and unemployment.


4Renate Bethge, interview by the author, 15 July 2003, Wachtberg, Germany.

5Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, interview by the author, 12 June 2003, Berlin, Germany.

Since Bonhoeffer planned to focus on the university lectern instead of the parish pulpit, he returned to the University of Berlin for postdoctoral studies, where he served as a voluntary assistant lecturer in systematic theology from summer 1929 until fall 1930. During this time he also completed his Habilitationsschrift (professorial dissertation), *Act and Being*, which qualified him for professorship in a German university. Building on the idea of the church as part of society that he introduced in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer concentrated more on God’s accessibility despite contrary philosophical claims. 7

EARLY CAREER

Since Bonhoeffer was not old enough to qualify for ordination in the German church, he was granted a scholarship to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1931. At the Abyssinian Baptist Church on West 138th Street, Bonhoeffer saw firsthand the community he envisioned in his first two academic writings. Jean Lasserre, a student at Union from France, first introduced Dietrich to the biblical idea of peace, especially Christ’s blessing of peace in the Beatitudes. These ideas of peace and resistance were the foundation of Dietrich’s ministry during the Third Reich. Finally reaching the age of 25, Dietrich was ordained on November 15, 1931, at St. Matthew’s Church in Berlin. The consistory of the Berlin-Brandenburg church assigned him as student chaplain at the technical college in Berlin-Charlottenburg. He filled this position for two years, fulfilling his obligation to the consistory.

During his chaplaincy Bonhoeffer was also invited to be lecturer in the systematic theology faculty at the University of Berlin, a position he held for two years. In the fall semester of 1932 he taught a course entitled “Nature of the Church,” which is where Zimmermann first encountered Bonhoeffer. He recalls the introductory lecture, in which Dietrich addressed the pressing questions of the day, including the need for the church, Christ, and God. Dietrich focused on how one should appropriately and critically formulate questions. The church, Christ, and God are always present, he argued, so one should not ask if these are needed, but rather how we are to be of service to them. 8 During the winter semester 1932–1933, Dietrich also taught a course on interpreting the first three chapters of Genesis. These lectures focused on Christianity’s return to its Jewish birth. 9 Since Germans in the first part of the twentieth century did not concentrate on the Old Testament, the publisher (Christian Kaiser) was reluctant to publish the lectures. Eventually, however, they did decide to print the small book, and it became Dietrich’s first literary success. 10

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7Ibid., 76.
8Zimmermann, personal interview.
A close bond formed between Dietrich and Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, and Dietrich invited him to be his teaching assistant. Zimmermann recalls, “At the end of the semester, he told me that he would like to meet me somewhere else. ‘You [Zimmermann] are writing and I [Dietrich] am talking, but I really do not know you. Do not meet me in my home because it is too intimidating.’” They met for fourteen Thursdays, first at Zimmermann’s home, but later at a pub in Alexanderplatz (Berlin). This role allowed Zimmermann to see Dietrich outside the walls of the university. Six or seven more students joined these discussions, which focused on how to handle the problems of language and thinking.

Albrecht Schönherr, former bishop of the Protestant Church of Berlin-Brandenburg East (1967–1981), was also among Bonhoeffer’s first students at the University of Berlin. He recalls Dietrich’s first attempt at creating a small Christian community by taking students for a week to a youth hostel in northern Brandenburg. Here they lived together and discussed what a Christian life should be. They focused on the word of God and had quiet time three times a day; this would eventually help form the model of the Finkenwalde seminary.

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Besides acting as a chaplain and lecturer, Bonhoeffer was also assigned to the Sunday school and confirmation instruction at Zionskirche in Berlin-Wedding for two years. Margarette Behm, one of the girls in Sunday school, recalls how the children in her neighborhood were all poor. Dietrich had only experienced the poor once before, while serving in Barcelona; again, Dietrich went out and visited his parishioners. Margarette was thirteen when Dietrich arrived at the congregation and remembers that the children liked him greatly. He would “put the love of God in her finger,” characterizing God’s love as very personal. Because of the poverty in this neighborhood, parents usually did not have time to spend with their children. Dietrich became the first adult to listen to Margarete and all the children; he heard their concerns, and they realized that this adult was their friend. Behm still thinks of Dietrich every time she is engaged in prayer. He told the children that when one prays, wonderful things will happen. He taught the children to start each prayer with “Loving God, give me the power....” Through prayer God also provides one with a Schutzengel (guardian angel). When children pray, “Oh God, help me,” God sends an angel to protect them. Dietrich talked about how guardian angels work after one of the students in the class died. He told the children that when a child is born, a star is created in heaven; now when a child dies, the guardian angel brings the child to heaven.  

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11Zimmermann, personal interview.
12Albrecht Schönherr, interview by the author, 25 July 2003, Berlin, Germany.
13Margarete Behm, interview by the author, 10 July 2003, Berlin, Germany.
LIFE UNDER HITLER

The turning point in modern German history came on January 30, 1933, when Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of the German Reich. Hitler’s power spread throughout all parts of Germany, including the church. In April 1933 the Reich Conference of German Christians met to institute changes in the church. Hitler appointed an unknown military chaplain, Ludwig Müller, as his personal advisor about church matters and subsequently as Reich Bishop, strengthening Hitler’s influence over the church. As an attempt to counter Nazi control, Bonhoeffer and other German theologians drafted the Bethel Confession, which called the church to remain strong and true to its tradition. Because some participants sought compromise, they watered down the document so much that Bonhoeffer refused to sign it.¹⁴

That same year Hitler began his assault on the Jewish population of Germany by instituting the Aryan clause, which meant that the church was no longer allowed to employ baptized Jews as pastors. In response, Dietrich, Martin Niemöller, and others formed the Pastors’ Emergency League to help fund those who would lose their positions. Seven thousand and thirty-six pastors had joined the league by January 1934. Bonhoeffer became frustrated with the German church and agreed to accept the pastorate of two German congregations in London. Contrasting with the view held by most Bonhoeffer scholars that Dietrich’s theological thought demonstrates gradual progression, Zimmermann sees this moment as a definite break. Prior to his pastorate in London, Dietrich had been a systematic theologian who approached all situations in a scholarly manner. In London he had his very own congregations for the first time; Dietrich could no longer use systematic theology as his primary tool. Zimmermann views Dietrich’s work in London and his leadership of the Finkenwalde seminary as that of a practical theologian.¹⁵

During Dietrich’s time in London, Karl Barth and other theologians drafted the Barmen Confession, which led to the formation of the Confessing Church. Dietrich’s support of the new Confessing Church brought him into conflict with the official German Protestant Church since he was still under their authority. While in London Dietrich made connections in the ecumenical community, especially with George Bell, Anglican bishop of Chichester. Knowing that he would eventually be in charge of one of the five seminaries of the Confessing Church, Dietrich toured some Anglican seminaries and monasteries before returning to Germany in April 1935.

Dietrich and twenty-three candidates for ordained ministry left for the Rhineland Bible School in Zingst on the Baltic coast on April 26, 1935. Here Dietrich came in contact with Eberhard Bethge, who had recently been expelled

¹⁵Zimmermann, personal interview.
from the seminary in Wittenberg for shifting his allegiance to the Confessing Church. Bethge, of course, would become Dietrich’s trusted friend and biographer. The seminarians remained in Zingst for less than two months before finding a more permanent facility in Finkenwalde, near present-day Szczecin, Poland. Employing some of the techniques used while leading Schönerr’s group at the youth hostel and other methods he found while touring in England, Dietrich constructed a strict schedule of daily prayer and meditation on the Scriptures and instituted periods of silence throughout the day.

“Zimmermann recalls the excitement among the seminarians as each one found something different in the texts”

Zimmermann vividly remembers the Finkenwalde schedule. Silence structured the day: Dietrich instituted silence in the morning between waking up and breakfast and between dinner and bedtime; a half hour of meditation followed breakfast. The seminarians concentrated on one passage of Scripture per week. Bonhoeffer gave them twelve verses of German biblical texts, and they were to concentrate on these verses, without commentaries, for six days. On Saturday, the students and Dietrich would come together and discuss what came to them from these verses. Zimmermann recalls the excitement among the seminarians as each one found something different in the texts. After the students had discussed their insights, Dietrich would then analyze these verses in ways that the students had not even considered and would sometimes offer the same texts for another week to see if any new meanings would come to them.

From Dietrich’s leadership of the seminary came two of his better-known books, Life Together and Discipleship, two works with overlapping themes. In Life Together Dietrich writes about living in intentional community, something largely unknown in German Lutheran church life. Discipleship discusses the church in the context “out of which individual faith and life are to be lived and understood,” especially through confession and sacrament. The activities of the Confessing Church, and especially of the illegal seminaries, began to be observed by the Nazi regime. Now Dietrich and the Confessing Church realized that they had to conduct their meetings and seminaries in secret to prevent Gestapo involvement. The Finkenwalde seminary was closed in March 1938 by the Gestapo.

ACTIVE RESISTANCE

The passive resistance to which Dietrich had subscribed was no longer working. Hans von Dohnanyi, his brother-in-law, worked in the Counterintelligence

17 Zimmermann, personal interview.
Office (Abwehr) of the High Command of the Armed Forces, and conversations between the two led Dietrich to Admiral Canaris and General Oster, members of the resistance movement within the Abwehr. In an attempt to prevent his being drafted, Union Theological Seminary arranged for Dietrich to work in New York; however, because his family and students were alone and unsafe in Germany, Dietrich stayed at Union for only a month.

Zimmermann views Dietrich’s return to Germany in 1939 as another break in his theological thinking. Many Bonhoeffer scholars see his move toward political theology as a development of his systematic and practical theologies, but Zimmermann believes that Dietrich’s response to the German situation marks a completely different phase. Upon returning to Berlin, Dietrich took a more active role in the resistance movement. He became a civilian member of the Abwehr, which allowed him to travel safely within his ecumenical circles. Other resisters within the system used Dietrich’s connections in Sweden and England to pass along information about the resistance within the Nazi regime.

While involved in the resistance, Dietrich began work on Ethics, which dealt, among other things, with the problems posed by war and the Nazi treatment of Jews. One of the main themes posed in the book is worldliness. “The reality of God,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “discloses itself only by setting me entirely in the reality of the world, and when I encounter the reality of the world it is always already sustained, accepted and reconciled in the reality of God.”

IMPRISONMENT AND DEATH

On January 17, 1943, Dietrich became engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer, granddaughter of Ruth von Kleist-Retzow, who had been a longtime supporter of Bonhoeffer. Soon after this, Dietrich was arrested and sent to Tegel prison in northwestern Berlin. Tegel was one of many military prisons. Dietrich spent over one year here, during which time he wrote many letters back and forth to family members, Eberhard Bethge, and Maria. He found the isolation of prison difficult to accept. In trying to adapt to this new setting, he began to write a novel and a drama, where Zimmermann believes that Dietrich describes himself as Kristoph, a character who sits far away and says goodbye to his former life. These works are collected in Fiction from Tegel Prison (2000).

While in prison Dietrich began to look to the future. Zimmermann remembers that Dietrich considered it complete nonsense to use the church to “re-Christianize people.” The Nazis concentrated on taking the soul away from the person in order to make something of them. The church must work to save people as they are, without taking anything from them. Christianity’s importance for the future can only come through telling the story, not through heavy theological writ-

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19Zimmermann, personal interview.

20This is the translation from the German edition of Ethik offered by Floyd, “Literary Legacy,” 85. The critical English edition of Ethics appeared in 2005 (Fortress).
ings. Dietrich told Zimmermann, “One can be a good theologian but not be dependent on theology.” He brought the word of God to people simply, without confusing them with mystifying theological explanation.  

Dietrich knew about the assassination attempt on Hitler scheduled for July 20, 1944. All of the members of the resistance were eagerly awaiting news about the bomb planted by Count Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg, but soon they heard that the attempt was a failure. In September 1944 the Gestapo discovered the secret “chronicle of shame” that Dohnanyi had prepared, narrating the horrors of the Third Reich. These papers incriminated Dietrich and other members of the resistance in the Abwehr. Dietrich was transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp on February 7, 1945, and on April 8 the prisoners were moved to Flossenbürg. During the transport from Buchenwald, Dietrich conducted morning worship for the Sunday after Easter. Following the prayer service, the transport guards told Dietrich to gather his things and come with them. According to British prisoner Payne Best, Dietrich’s last words were: “This is the end—for me the beginning of life.”

In the early morning of April 9, 1945, the guards took the prisoners from their cells. After kneeling in prayer, Dietrich climbed the steps to the noose that had been prepared for him, and a short moment later he became one of the church’s modern martyrs. Dietrich’s death had a great influence on his niece Renate Bethge, as did the deaths of her father and her uncle Klaus, both killed in the resistance movement. It was her husband Eberhard’s dedication to Dietrich’s writings that made him more than just one of her “beloved uncles.” Through retelling Dietrich’s story, Renate feels energized. She enjoys seeing people from all over the world becoming interested in the story. Renate claims that all who get involved in Bonhoeffer’s story are in some way special themselves and become part of her extended family.

Ongoing Influence

Zimmermann believes that Dietrich’s ongoing influence comes through the growth in personal belief that derives from knowing Bonhoeffer’s story and writings. The idea that “Christ is always with you” gives one hope when looking into an uncertain future. The best theology is to believe in the living Christ, a theology based solely on Christ’s word and his importance for today. Schönherr sees in Dietrich a model for someone who is “covered” in what he believes. If one wants to be a reformer, every word on which that person stands must be personal. Pastors and theologians must not be distant from their people; they should be good friends to them as Dietrich was to his students. As bishop of East Berlin Schönherr fre-

21 Zimmermann, personal interview.
23 Renate Bethge, personal interview.
24 Zimmermann, personal interview.
quently quoted Dietrich, affirming that the church needs to exist for the sake of others. Members of the church should not put themselves in a “ghetto,” separate from reality; the church needs to be in the community for other people. The 1980s brought about a renewed interest in Dietrich’s writings, and in response Gütersloher Publishing House, under the direction of German Bishop Wolfgang Huber, set out to collect them in a critical edition. These volumes are now available in German, and the English translations are in progress from Fortress Press. Renate Bethge recommends that those not involved directly in the church should read *Letters and Papers from Prison*, since the themes presented there can interest everyone. People who are theologically involved should read *Ethics*, while those interested in Christian piety should read either *Discipleship* or *Life Together*. The work to consult when wanting more information about Dietrich Bonhoeffer is her husband Eberhard’s biography.

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25Schönherr, personal interview.
26Renate Bethge, personal interview.