



# For Love of the World: Bonhoeffer's Resistance to Hitler and the Nazis

MARK S. BROCKER

## PASTOR BONHOEFFER BECOMES A CONSPIRATOR

On June 17, 1940, in the early stages of World War II, France surrendered to Germany. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his closest friend and colleague, Eberhard Bethge, were having a leisurely lunch in a café in the Baltic village of Memel. They were in East Prussia doing three visitations on behalf of the Confessing Church, which had issued the Barmen Declaration in 1934 and struggled against the inroads of the Nazis into the life of the church. They had met with a group of pastors in the morning, and Bonhoeffer was scheduled to preach in a Confessing Church congregation that evening.

According to Bethge, when the announcement of France's surrender came over the café loudspeaker, "the people around the tables could hardly contain themselves; they jumped up, and some even climbed on the chairs. With outstretched arms they sang 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles' and the Horst Wessel song. We had stood up, too." Bethge was shocked, however, when "Bonhoeffer raised his arm

*Bonhoeffer's Christian faith and his roles as theologian and pastor led him to active engagement with the very dangerous world around him, which led to his imprisonment. In prison he was led to examine and deepen his commitments both to this world and to the coming kingdom of Christ in ways that each informed and enriched the other.*

in the regulation Hitler salute.” Recognizing his friend’s shock, Bonhoeffer whispered to him, “Raise your arm! Are you crazy?” Shortly thereafter Bonhoeffer added: “We shall have to run risks for very different things now, but not for that salute!”<sup>1</sup>

In Bethge’s assessment, Bonhoeffer’s “double life” truly began in that moment. The Confessing Church pastor and theologian became fully immersed in the conspiracy to overthrow Hitler and the Nazis. Bonhoeffer and his fellow conspirators had hoped the Allies would stop the Nazi regime. But after the surrender of France, they could not count on that.

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Some Christians, moved by Bonhoeffer’s courageous resistance, have tended to exaggerate Bonhoeffer’s role in the conspiracy. In fact, his role was limited but specific. He served as a courier for the resistance group operating out of the *Abwehr* (Office of Military Intelligence). He was thus a double agent, pretending to spy for Germany while engaging in conspiracy against the Nazis. Resistance leaders in the *Abwehr* assigned him to engage in secret talks with foreign church leaders who would communicate with Allied leaders concerning the plans and aims of the resistance movement.<sup>2</sup> In his role as a church leader, Bonhoeffer was banned from public speaking August 22, 1940.<sup>3</sup> During that same month of August, a residency restriction was placed on him.<sup>4</sup> On March 19, 1941, he was officially banned from publishing.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, his role as a military courier for the *Abwehr* qualified him for UK-classification, declaring him *unabkömmlich* (indispensable) because he was engaged in a civilian occupation essential to the war effort.<sup>6</sup>

In this role Bonhoeffer traveled to Switzerland in the spring and September of 1941. During his first trip to Switzerland, he informed foreign friends about the resistance movement in Germany and brought back information from abroad. On the September trip, he sought to obtain information on the peace aims of the Allies and to inform his church contacts of imminent regime change in Germany. In an evening conversation with Bonhoeffer during this second trip,

<sup>1</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria Barnett, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 681. Also, cf. my account of this incident in the Memel café to the “Editor’s Introduction” of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*, ed. Mark S. Brocker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 16 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer’s brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi was one of those resistance leaders.

<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, 71.

<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer was required to report on a regular basis to the police in Schlawa, his official place of residence. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 698.

<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, 181.

<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, 11–12.

Willem Visser 't Hooft, general secretary of the provisional World Council of Churches, asked him what specifically he was praying for. Bonhoeffer responded: "If you want to know, I pray for the defeat of my country, for I think that is the only possibility of paying for all the suffering that my country has caused the world."<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer traveled to Sweden in May 1942 to meet with Bishop Bell of England. The purposes of this meeting were to inform the Allies of the impending overthrow of the Nazi regime and to inquire whether the Allies were willing to negotiate with a new government. The conspirators never received a response from the Allies. Bishop Bell may have trusted Bonhoeffer, but the Allied leaders did not trust any Germans.

In our time Bonhoeffer is often celebrated as a modern Christian martyr, and his conspiratorial activity to assassinate Hitler tends to be viewed with favor. But in Bonhoeffer's time there was no precedent for a Lutheran pastor to be involved in such a plot. In this final stage of resistance, explains Bethge, Bonhoeffer's church "offered no protection and no prior justification for something that fell outside all normal contingencies."<sup>8</sup> It is striking that Bonhoeffer himself intentionally sought to avoid justifying his actions. From his viewpoint, that would have been the height of ethical arrogance. As Bethge clarifies, Bonhoeffer viewed justification "as something only God could do; for Bonhoeffer the responsible position was not to take this justification into his own hands, before, during, and after his actions."<sup>9</sup>

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The truth is that Bonhoeffer did commit treason. His faith, his love of country, his concern for Nazi victims such as the Jews, and his deep sorrow over the suffering caused by Germany compelled him to risk his life and reputation in becoming a conspirator. Arrested on April 4, 1943, he was hung on April 9, 1945, as a traitor against his country. The charge of treason was removed in 1996 by a German court, fifty-one years after his execution. The court's decision was a sign that the people of Germany had come to recognize the true patriotism of Bonhoeffer. But in another sense, removing this charge weakens his witness. Bonhoeffer risked even being viewed as a traitor for the sake of his fellow Germans and all victims of the Nazis.

<sup>7</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 744.

<sup>8</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 792.

<sup>9</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 830.

## GOD'S DEEP LOVE FOR THE WORLD

In January 1999, I taught a weeklong Bonhoeffer seminar during the Graduate Theological Union Intersession on the theme "Conspiracy and Imprisonment." Three of the twenty-four students were Quakers. They greatly admired Bonhoeffer's deep faith and prophetic witness. They were deeply moved by his willingness to take risks in resisting the Nazi regime and assisting victims of Nazi injustice. But they could not affirm his decision to engage in a violent conspiracy to assassinate Hitler.

When Hitler first came to power, Bonhoeffer engaged in nonviolent acts of resistance against the Nazi regime. In a radio address on February 1, 1933, two days after Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer warned against the dangers of making an idol out of a political leader. In "The Church and the Jewish Question" (April 1933) he identified three options for the church in resisting an unjust state: (1) call the state to account for not fulfilling its legitimate tasks, (2) aid victims of state injustice, and (3) engage in direct (nonviolent) political action if the state is out of control. In 1934 he supported the Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church that affirmed Jesus Christ, not Adolf Hitler, as the one Lord of the church; he preached at an ecumenical conference on the church's responsibility to work for peace; and he seriously considered going to India to study nonviolent resistance under Mahatma Gandhi. Just six years later, he was fully engaged in a violent attempt to overthrow Hitler and the Nazi regime. These three Quaker students are not alone in sensing a disconnect between the early nonviolent resistance efforts of Bonhoeffer and his later involvement in a violent conspiracy.

Although Bonhoeffer's methods of resistance may have changed, his motivation for resistance was consistent. The heart of Bonhoeffer's resistance was his confidence in God's deep love for the world. That deep love was the firm ground on which he took his stand in resisting Hitler and the Nazis. That love also gave him the strength to endure the final two years of his life in Nazi prisons.

"Christ, Reality, and Good," the first "draft manuscript" in the most recent edition of *Ethics*,<sup>10</sup> lays out the theological grounding for Bonhoeffer's ethics.<sup>11</sup> He affirms that the central message of the New Testament is that "in Christ God has loved the world and reconciled it with himself." God's acceptance of the world is a "miracle of divine mercy." The task and essence of the church is "to proclaim precisely to this world its reconciliation with God, and to disclose to it the reality of the love of God, against which the world so blindly rages."<sup>12</sup> God's love is not directed toward some ideal world. God accepts the real world, the world as it actually exists, here and now, with all its sins and shortcomings. "This love of God for the world," explains Bonhoeffer, "does not withdraw from reality into

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Charles C. West, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 47–75.

<sup>11</sup> "Christ, Reality, and Good" was written in the fall of 1940, less than six months after the surrender of France.

<sup>12</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 66.

noble souls detached from the world, but experiences and suffers the reality of the world at its worst.”<sup>13</sup> As I write in *Coming Home to Earth*, “one marvels that Bonhoeffer’s strong affirmation of God’s love for the world in *Ethics* was written in the early years of World War II when Hitler and the Nazis were at the zenith of their power. . . . He was horrified by the killing of the Jews and others deemed expendable by the Nazis. To put it bluntly, the world appeared to be going to hell. Yet despite this devastation, Bonhoeffer wrote with passion and clarity of God’s love for this world.”<sup>14</sup>

### THIS-WORLDLINESS: LIVING OUT GOD’S LOVE FOR THE WORLD

Bonhoeffer’s imprisonment in April 1943 constricted his options for resistance. When he was interrogated, his primary concern was to avoid saying anything that would compromise the conspiracy or put his family members, friends, or colleagues at risk. Resistance under interrogation compelled him to lie repeatedly. Under the impact of interrogation Bonhoeffer began working on an essay entitled “What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?”<sup>15</sup> He emphasizes being truthful not in principle but concretely, taking into account relevant relationships, intentions, and real circumstances. Telling the truth, insists Bonhoeffer, must be learned. We need to grow in our capacity to perceive reality, so that we can speak the fitting word for a given situation. He challenges a formal cynical concept of truth that claims to tell the truth “in all places and at all times and to every person in the same way.”<sup>16</sup> If Bonhoeffer had clung to this cynical concept of the truth under interrogation, he would have compromised the conspiracy and so many of those close to him. He was, in effect, living out God’s love and resisting by lying under oath.

After the failure of the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt, Bonhoeffer knew that his fate was effectively sealed. His role in the conspiracy would be uncovered in short order. Active resistance was no longer a realistic option. Bonhoeffer continued to reflect, however, on what it means to live out God’s deep love for the world. The day after the failed assassination attempt, he wrote what Bethge considered the most important letter he received from Bonhoeffer.<sup>17</sup> It shed light on the heart of his efforts to resist the Nazi regime, on how he was enduring his imprisonment, and on how he was facing his likely execution. The focal theme of this letter is the “profound this-worldliness of Christianity.” He shares with Bethge that a deeper awareness of the focus of Christianity on this world had developed in him over the last few years. This awareness had been developing since early in

<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 83.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Brocker, *Coming Home to Earth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 50.

<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, 601–8.

<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*, 604.

<sup>17</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Reinhard Krauss, Nancy Lukens, and Lisa E. Dahill, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Work 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 485–86.

his career, even before Hitler came to power. Resisting the Nazi regime and finally being imprisoned had focused and heightened his clarity on the profound this-worldliness of Christianity.

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At the very least, the theme of this-worldliness emerged as Bonhoeffer was writing his *Ethics* and as he was becoming deeply immersed in the conspiracy. Toward the end of *Ethics* he introduces the concept of *genuine worldliness*. Genuine worldliness is grounded in God’s deep love for the world, revealed in Jesus Christ, “the crucified Reconciler.” The cross reveals that the whole world has become godless by rejecting Jesus Christ, but at the same time the cross is the identifying mark of reconciliation. “The cross of reconciliation,” affirms Bonhoeffer, “sets us free to live before God in the midst of the godless world, sets us free to live in genuine worldliness.” Those who live in genuine worldliness have “the freedom and the courage to let the world be what it really is before God, namely, a world that in its godlessness is reconciled with God.”<sup>18</sup> They persist in putting God’s love for a godless world into action in their lives.

Bonhoeffer’s focus on this world also manifests itself in his prison reflections on the hope of the resurrection. On the Second Sunday in Advent, he writes to Bethge that “only when one loves life and the earth so much that” without them “everything seems to be lost and at its end may one believe in the resurrection of the dead and a new world.”<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer distinguishes the Christian hope of the resurrection from redemption myths that seek to overcome death’s boundary. They seek to redeem human beings “out of sorrows, hardships, anxieties, and longings, out of sin and death, in a better life beyond.”<sup>20</sup> “What matters,” asserts Bonhoeffer, “is not the beyond but this world, how it is created and preserved, is given laws, reconciled, and renewed.”<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer stresses that “Christians do not have an ultimate escape route out of their earthly tasks and difficulties into eternity. Like Christ (‘My God . . . why have you forsaken me?’), they have to drink the cup of earthly life to the last drop, and only when they do this is the Crucified and Risen One with them, and they are crucified and resurrected with Christ. This-worldliness must not be abolished ahead of its time.”<sup>22</sup>

In his prison writings Bonhoeffer makes utterly clear that “Christ takes hold of human beings in the midst of their lives.”<sup>23</sup> He bemoans the misguided tendency

<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 400–401.

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 213.

<sup>20</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 447.

<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 373.

<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 447–48.

<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 448.

to have God show up only “when we have unsolved problems to be solved.”<sup>24</sup> He chastises the church for capitulating on all worldly matters and reserving for God, the church, and the pastor the “so-called ultimate questions—death, guilt—which only ‘God’ can answer.”<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer insists that “God should not be smuggled in somewhere, in the very last, secret place that is left.”<sup>26</sup> According to Bonhoeffer, “God wants to be recognized in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering, in action and not only in sin.”<sup>27</sup> Bonhoeffer grounds this insight in God’s revelation in Jesus Christ—that is, in the reality of God’s deep love for the world, the actual world, with all its evil and shortcomings. Jesus claims all human life. As Bonhoeffer observes, “Jesus accepted people living on the margins of human society, prostitutes, and tax collectors, but certainly not only them, because he wanted to accept all humankind.”<sup>28</sup>

This-worldliness is Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of what it means to respond in faith to the presence of God in the midst of life. In the July 21, 1944, letter, Bonhoeffer recalls a conversation he had with French pastor Jean Lasserre when they were both at Union Seminary in New York in 1930–1931. They shared with each other what they wanted to do with their lives. Lasserre was intent on becoming a saint. Bonhoeffer, however, stated that he wanted to learn to have faith. He emphasizes to Bethge that what he has discovered since that conversation with Lasserre and is still discovering is that “one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life.” One must give up trying to make something of oneself—“whether it be a saint or a converted sinner or a church leader (a so-called priestly figure!), a just or an unjust person, a sick or a healthy person”—and one must throw “oneself completely into the arms of God.” That is what Bonhoeffer calls *this-worldliness*: “living fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities—then one takes seriously no longer one’s own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane.”<sup>29</sup>

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Bonhoeffer had resisted the Nazi regime for years and witnessed the destructiveness of their rule; he had experienced months of intense interrogations; he

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<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 406–7.

<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 427.

<sup>26</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 457.

<sup>27</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 406.

<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 451.

<sup>29</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 485–86.



had endured over fifteen months of imprisonment; and he had just learned of the failure of the July 20 assassination attempt the day before. After all that, what stood out for Bonhoeffer on what it means to have faith was the “profound this-worldliness of Christianity.” In his view, this-worldliness has nothing to do with religious method. Religious acts are always partial; faith is whole and embraces one’s whole life. Jesus calls us “not to a new religion but to life.”<sup>30</sup> Faith provides us with an integrated personal way of life. But we never become whole by ourselves. Loving the world that God loves is crucial to our wholeness. In faith we embrace all our relationships in this world as they actually are.<sup>31</sup> Having faith is about being human, “not a certain type of human being, but the human being Christ creates in us. It is not a religious act that makes someone a Christian, but rather sharing in God’s suffering in the worldly life.”<sup>32</sup> In a suffering world “only the suffering God can help.” A God who does not suffer with human beings would be a God who does not care about human beings. According to Bonhoeffer, “human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God.”<sup>33</sup>

Living fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities and being willing to share in God’s sufferings in a world deeply impacted by Nazi Germany could lead someone to publicly warn against making an idol out of a political leader, support the Barmen Declaration, consider studying nonviolence under Gandhi, call for the church to work for peace, lead an illegal Confessing Church seminary, participate in a conspiracy to assassinate the head of state, and lie about it under oath. Given that faith is all about this-worldliness, there can never be a formula for resistance. The fitting response to injustice and tyranny must be discerned in the given circumstances of life. A person of faith accepts that in a suffering world, suffering is likely to be a consequence of one’s efforts to resist. One must be willing to lay one’s life and reputation on the line—even risk being wrong.

### IS THIS A BONHOEFFER MOMENT?

In a February 2018 *Sojourners* article Lori Brandt Hale and Reggie Williams ask: “Is This a Bonhoeffer Moment?”<sup>34</sup> While they caution us against drawing too easy of parallels between Nazi Germany and our current context in the United States, they lift up several lessons American Christians can learn from the efforts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and of the Confessing Church to resist Hitler and the Nazis. They view Bonhoeffer as an exemplar of a theologian and a pastor “who resisted his government when he recognized, very early and very clearly, the dangers of Hitler’s

<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 482.

<sup>31</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 278.

<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 480.

<sup>33</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 479.

<sup>34</sup> Lori Brandt Hale and Reggie L. Williams, “Is This a Bonhoeffer Moment? Lessons for American Christians from the Confessing Church in Germany,” *Sojourner* 47 no. 2 (February 2018): 16–20.



regime.” They highlight Bonhoeffer’s February 1, 1933, radio address warning against a leader who makes an idol of himself. They draw a comparison between the way Hitler fanned the flames of white nationalism and Aryan ethnic pride and President Trump’s efforts to promote “Make America Great Again” nationalism. A key part of Hitler’s strategy was to scapegoat the Jews. For President Trump a key strategy has been to scapegoat Muslims and undocumented immigrants. Hale and Williams commend the Confessing Church movement for issuing the Barmen Declaration, which, in opposition to the German Christians, “rejected Hitler as a figure of church authority.”<sup>35</sup> German Christians sold their souls to Hitler and the Nazis as many evangelical Christians in our time have been accused of doing to President Trump and his administration. Bonhoeffer welcomed Confessing Church efforts to resist the inroads of the Nazis into the inner workings of the church. However, as Hale and Williams imply, he desired to have the Barmen Declaration address in an explicit way Nazi racism against the Jews.

Such insights from Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church can certainly be helpful as followers of Jesus seek to discern how to resist injustice and tyranny perpetrated by President Trump and his administration. But in an April 30, 1944, letter, Bonhoeffer shared what he thought might be viewed as a surprising development in his theological thinking: “What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?” He then added that the age had passed to answer that question with words. Actions would speak louder than words. Bonhoeffer’s acts of resistance were crucial to his response to that question. This key question suggests that what should be gnawing at us every day is: who is Jesus Christ actually for us today? More than asking “Is This a Bonhoeffer Moment?” we need to focus on: What sort of a Christ moment are we in? Our acts of resistance to current injustice and tyranny will reveal most clearly our answer to Bonhoeffer’s gnawing question. Our acts of resistance are a faith response, understood as this-worldliness. There is no formula for resistance. There is no shortcut around “living fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities.” It is good to name any failures of our political leaders to fulfill their responsibilities. It is good to aid the victims of unjust government policies and practices. It is good to engage in direct political action to overcome injustice and tyranny.

It is not enough to point out that President Trump and his supporters are unjust and unreasonable and act shocked when they do not seem to be changing. Bonhoeffer himself warned against the limits of such a strategy of resistance. Due to his imprisonment, he was not able to attend his godson’s baptism in May 1944. He did, however, compose the ten-page “Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge.” In this text he admits: “We believed we could make our way in life with reason and justice [*Recht*], and when both failed us, we no longer saw any way forward. We have also overestimated, time and again, the importance of reasonableness and justice in influencing the course of history.

<sup>35</sup> Hale and Williams, “Is This a Bonhoeffer Moment?” 18.

You who are growing up in the midst of a world war, which 90 percent of human-kind doesn't want but for which they are giving their lives and goods, will learn from childhood on that this world is ruled by forces against which reason can do nothing. Thus your generation will deal with these powers more soberly and successfully."<sup>36</sup> This text can be read as a plea for savvy followers of Jesus to step up and risk everything for the real world God so deeply loves.

Bonhoeffer's courageous words and deeds are not a plea for people of faith to get involved in a conspiracy. His involvement in a conspiracy against Hitler and the Nazis came after he had exhausted other more ordinary forms of resistance. In our context an immediate act of resistance for people of faith is to exhaust themselves at the ballot box seeking to elect responsible political leaders who deeply care about the world and all its inhabitants. Furthermore, as people of faith resist unjust policies and practices of the current administration, they need to keep in mind an issue that threatens to destroy all life on Earth: impending ecological catastrophe. That issue is not going away soon, no matter who is in power in our nation. In Bonhoeffer's time the major challenge for him and other insightful leaders "was to wake people up to the destructive path Germany was going down." The major challenge in our time "is to wake people up to the destructive ecological path we are on."<sup>37</sup> But it is not enough simply to wake people up. To change an entrenched way of life, people need to be moved by something way down deep. For Bonhoeffer that something was God's deep love for the world. In this Christ moment, God's deep love for this world will truly be the driving motivation for people of faith intent on engaging in acts of resistance. ⊕

*MARK S. BROCKER is the lead pastor of St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Beaverton, Oregon. He has served as the president of the International Bonhoeffer Society—English Language Section. He is the author of Coming Home to Earth (Cascade, 2016).*

<sup>36</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 388.

<sup>37</sup> Brockner, *Coming Home to Earth*, 50.