

# The Incarnational Leadership of Dietrich Bonhöffer

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## Introduction

On April 9, 1945, a kingdom of man collided with the kingdom of God resulting in the execution of Dietrich Bonhöffer. Bonhöffer was not alone in what he believed or in the actions he took to stop Hitler and the violent indiscretions of National Socialism. When compared to the church-going public in Germany during that time, Bonhöffer's group of likeminded individuals counted very few. While some specific reasons for this condition are presented in this paper, Captain S. Payne Best, who spent much of WWII incarcerated by the Germans and was one of the last to see Bonhöffer alive, entertains another reason that is worthy of mention:

From earliest youth all Germans are brought up to believe that blind and unreasoning obedience to orders is the highest human virtue and even thought must be directed along lines ordained by higher authority. . . . Every German has burnt into his soul the memory of countless occasions when he has been shouted at and insulted by someone in authority and, however high the rank he may attain, a certain feeling of inferiority and insecurity never really deserts him. This fact is to my mind the real explanation of Hitler's rise to power and his complete dominance over everyone with whom he came in contact.<sup>1</sup>

What is most extraordinary about Bonhöffer and his family is they saw and understood the threat Hitler and National Socialism posed to the Christian faith and to democratic freedom in Germany before anyone else. Not only did Bonhöffer see the problem, but, like a watchman on the wall, he gave warning in both voice and pen. From a church perspective, he led organized resistance against it. Bethge writes, "Families like the Bonhöffers were extraordinary exceptions. Voices calling us in this direction were simply not heard in 1934, neither from Bonn where Barth then taught, nor from the Synods of Barmen and Dahlem themselves."<sup>2</sup>

Bonhöffer wrote of the political inaction of his countrymen in his essay, *After Ten Years*:

Who would wish to deny that in obedience, commitment, in vocation, the German has again and again produced the utmost bravery and commitment of life. . . . He did not reckon with the fact that his readiness for subordination, for commitment of life to a task, could be misused for evil. . . . It necessarily became evident that the Germans still lacked a decisive basic insight: that of the necessity of free, responsible action, even in the opposition to calling and commission.<sup>3</sup>

Bonhöffer's faith and the theological foundation of that faith provided insight and the ability to influence his countrymen during such challenging times. It does not matter whether one has a formal education in theology, or has gained the knowledge of theology through fragmentary exposure from religious music, books, or some type of worship service. Ultimately, theology reflects what persons of faith believe, what they consider to be truth, and what is worth living and dying for.

Winston Churchill knew this truth quite well. In 1948, he gave a speech in Norway:

Human judgment may fail. You may act very wisely, you think, but it may turn out a great failure. On the other hand, one may do a foolish thing which may turn out well. . . . The fact

remains that human life is presented to us as a simple choice between right and wrong. If you obey the law you will find that that way is far safer in the long run than all calculation which can ever be made, . . . but I certainly do not want you to understand me to say that I have always done the right thing—I should be ashamed to say that. But I do have the feeling that one must act in accordance with what one feels and believes.<sup>4</sup>

For Bonhöffer and the leaders of the Confessional Church, the Church Struggle was essentially a theological struggle. Not only did Bonhöffer's theological foundation enable him to endure the hardships imposed on him by the Nazi state, it also enabled him to lead. Bonhöffer had an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ, as did most of the believers on the confessional side of the Church Struggle. He had a living faith that liberal theology could not destroy and National Socialism could not kill. Geoffrey B. Kelly and Frank Burton Nelson wrote, "Bonhöffer's spirituality and moral leadership are not merely singular aspects of his Christian faith. They emanate from his Christian life in its totality."<sup>5</sup>

This author believes that Bonhöffer's chief motivation in taking leading roles of "responsible action" during the Church Struggle was the phenomenon that Bonhöffer called "deputyship." In his *Ethics*, Bonhöffer uses fatherhood to describe responsible action through deputyship for others:

The father acts for the children, working for them, caring for them, interceding, fighting and suffering for them. Thus in real sense, he is their deputy. He is not an isolated individual, but he combines in himself the selves of a number of human beings. Any attempt to live as though he were alone is a denial of the actual fact of his responsibility. He cannot evade the responsibility which is laid on him with his paternity.<sup>6</sup>

As a believer in Jesus Christ, Bonhöffer did not evade any of the responsibility he had for his church, his nation, his people whether Jews or Christians, or world-wide Christendom. He engaged in calculated responsible action and led others to protect the sanctity of human life, the sanctity of the church and all things he believed to be good concerning the nation of Germany. In speaking of the example Jesus set in this regard, Bonhöffer wrote, "Jesus was not the individual, desiring to achieve a perfection of his own, but He lived only as the one who has taken up into Himself and who bears within Himself the selves of all men. All His living, His action and His dying was deputyship."<sup>7</sup> As Bonhöffer's nation and church crumbled around him, Bonhöffer was preacher, pastor, director of an illegal seminary and conspirator for persons ground under by National Socialism.

He represented a deep spiritual form of leadership seldom seen in the world, past or present. Bonhöffer did not lead because he felt he was born to it or trained for it. He led out of a deep moral and spiritual obligation to others. While leadership in its essence is defined as influencing others, it is difficult today to find leadership manuals and books that refer to leadership as a spiritual phenomenon. This author believes that it is just that.

When General Bernard Montgomery was on his way to take command of the British Eighth Army in North Africa in August, 1942, he developed a doctrine of command in which he articulated that a "proper sense of religious truth" was a quality necessary to successful leadership:

For all leadership, I believe, is based on the spiritual quality, the power to inspire others to follow; this spiritual quality may be for good, or evil. In many cases in the past this quality has been devoted towards personal ends, and was partly or wholly evil; whenever this was so, in the end it failed. Leadership which is evil, while it may temporarily succeed, always carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction.<sup>8</sup>

General Montgomery took command of the battered British Eighth Army that was suffering low morale, transformed it. In less than two years, he defeated the Axis forces, placing North Africa firmly in Allied hands. Montgomery's biographer, Nigel Hamilton, wrote of him, "Somehow, despite his own eccentric, if not pathological character, Bernard Montgomery bore in him a spiritual power that accorded with the historical moment at which he was given a great military command—a power of inspiration vital to the Allied nations."<sup>9</sup>

The same can be said about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He possessed a spiritual power and insight that rose in accordance with the historical moment. So powerful was his life that he left a lasting legacy in his faith, his example, his writings—even in those things he wrote that theologians are still trying to understand. The most astounding quality about his legacy remains that Bonhoeffer is still attractive to persons inside and outside the Christian faith. Dallas M. Roark writes that Bonhoeffer had a charisma that draws people—even in this growing post-Christian world.<sup>10</sup>

### The Example

Dietrich Bonhoeffer remains attractive because he possessed a superlative strength of character that generated the moral courage necessary to stand for Christ during one of the most horrific periods of human history. Not only did he stand, but he also set the moral context that initially attracted others to the cause. Many of his followers were extolling his virtues decades after his death. The Church Struggle in Germany during WWII was a theological (hence spiritual) struggle between a kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer engaged in that struggle, and, although he did not serve in the leadership capacity as did Martin Niemöller, he set a leadership example of moral courage worthy of examination.

The Church Struggle in Germany involved maintaining a Protestant Church free from Nazi interference and conformed to Reformation doctrines, especially *sola gratia* and *sola scriptura*. Kelly correctly points out, "What he [Bonhoeffer] demanded of the churches in the Nazi years was nothing more than they live up to their claim to be where Christ would be and to teach Jesus Christ by their own example."<sup>11</sup>

In a macro sense, Bonhoeffer labored for a German Protestant Church based on these Reformation doctrines that would be an accurate reflection of all God intended it to be. In a micro sense, Bonhoeffer genuinely cared about people. He maintained a ministry that included writing, preaching, and teaching in pastoral and academic roles. He also engaged in discipleship of young believers and led his seminary students to engage in evangelization efforts to reach non-Christians. Kelly wrote, "Moral leadership has to be expressed in compassionate, sensitive service of others, particularly those unable to help themselves, or it is estranged from Christ and his church."<sup>12</sup> Bonhoeffer set a superb example as a spiritual and moral leader especially during his labors with the Wedding confirmation class and with the Finkenwalde seminary students.

In 1931, newly ordained Bonhoeffer performed a required year of auxiliary service to his consistory. During that time, he was assigned to teach a confirmation class to fifty teenage-boys in the Zion parish of the Wedding district in Berlin. On Christmas Day, 1931, Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend, Erwin Sutz, describing his activities during the semester:

Luckily, I have the practical work; at this time that's not so much the Technical College, but that of course too. But what keeps me busier at the moment is the confirmation class that I am teaching for fifty boys in the north of Berlin. That is about the toughest neighborhood of Berlin, with the most difficult socioeconomic and political conditions. At the beginning the boys were acting wild, so for the first time, I really had discipline problems. But here too one

thing helped, namely, just simple telling the boys Bible stories in massive quantity, and especially eschatological passages. . . . Now it is absolutely quiet, and the boys see to that themselves, so that I no longer have to fear the same fate as my predecessor, whom they rather literally aggravated to death. Recently I took several of them out of the city for two days; tomorrow it's another group's turn. This time together was very enjoyable for us. Since I will be keeping the boys until confirmation, I'll have to visit all fifty parents, and for this purpose I will move to that area for two months. I am looking forward to this time very much. It's really work. Most of the home conditions are indescribable, poverty, disorder, immorality. Yet the children are still open. I am often speechless at how it is possible that a boy is not completely ruined under these conditions, and, of course, you ask yourself at the same time how you would react to an environment like that. These people must have a very strong capacity for resilience—probably morally as well.<sup>13</sup>

This passage speaks volumes concerning Bonhöffer's ability as a spiritual leader. First, he addressed his practical work. He took control of an unruly inner-city confirmation class whose social stratum was far below his own. No doubt Bonhöffer was very comfortable as an academic, but knowledge without service to the community was anathema to Bonhöffer. Bonhöffer was just as comfortable in the practical aspects of pastoral ministry as he was behind a lectern.

Second, this group of boys was not unlike any other group of teenagers one can find in any inner city in the United States. They were unruly, disrespectful, and lacking in many of the social graces of the culture and time period. Bonhöffer assumed responsibility for the class from Pastor Johannes Maller, a senior saint who could not control the class. Bethge reports that when the elderly Maller took Bonhöffer to meet the class,

The elderly minister and Bonhoeffer slowly walked up the stairs of the school building, which was several stories high. The children looked down on them from over the bannisters, making an indescribable din and dropping things on the two men ascending the stairs. When they reached the top, the minister tried to force the throng back into the classroom by shouting and using physical force. He tried to announce that he had brought them a new minister who was going to teach them in the future and that his name was Bonhoeffer, and when they heard the name they started shouting 'Bon! Bon! Bon!' louder and louder. The old man left the scene in despair.<sup>14</sup>

A few weeks after Pastor Maller handed the class over to Bonhöffer, Maller died of a heart attack. Root declares, "So, it's not out of the question to suggest that Bonhöffer was taking over a class that was so out of control that they had killed their last teacher."<sup>15</sup>

Bonhöffer was definitely stepping over socioeconomic lines in order to minister to this class. Based on Bonhöffer's upbringing, it is amazing that Bonhöffer did not find his new charges too repulsive and simply walk away. In fact, he lived among them, took them on outings, and opened up his parents' home for frequent visits for the children. Bonhöffer's apartment was always open to the boys where they could play chess or practice English. He took them on weekend trips and he gave each one a present for Christmas. Bethge reports that Bonhöffer was so taken by the class that he adjusted his schedule to give them more time. All his free evenings were invested in their care.<sup>16</sup>

Through all these measures, Bonhöffer took an unruly and undisciplined group of teenage boys and introduced them to genuine Christian community. Kelly states, "His constant concern was to make Christian community come alive in the lives of his students."<sup>17</sup> Bonhöffer also departed from a strict teaching of the catechism with his boys. He contextualized the Christian message by teaching Scripture and telling Bible stories. He gave an international flavor to his instruction by talking about his trip to America and his time in Harlem. Richard Rother, one of his Wedding

students, reports, “He made us familiar with the Catechism in quite a new way, making it alive for us by telling us of many personal experiences. Our class was hardly ever restless, because all of us were keen to have enough time to hear what he had to say to us.”<sup>18</sup>

His students became his constant companions. Fritz Figur, a local superintendent, reports, “His confirmation class was devoted to him. His room in the Oderberg Strasse was often full of them in the afternoons. Not everybody has had the fun of seeing him cutting up a bale of cloth, which he had probably purchased cheap, for confirmation suits for these boys.”<sup>19</sup>

Bonhöffer’s leadership of this group of boys was pastoral in its essence. No walls separated him and his students. Bethge reports when one of his confirmation students was in the hospital facing surgery, Bonhöffer left his university students waiting in the lecture hall while he visited one of his boys.<sup>20</sup>

While Bonhöffer made superlative progress with his students, he struggled with the home visits. In another letter to Sutz, he wrote,

I had the worst experience during my home visits. I sometimes or even usually stand there and think I really might as well have studied chemistry. Sometimes it seemed to me as if pastoral care was where our work broke down. What hours or minutes of torture often pass by when the other person or I try to have a pastoral conversation, and how hesitatingly and drearily it goes on.<sup>21</sup>

Later Bonhöffer strove to correct this weakness in pastoral ministry during his tenure as the director of the illegal seminary, Finkenwalde. He sent his seminary students into churches and communities for the sole purpose of making home visits for Bible studies, catechism classes, and evangelization. Through Bonhöffer’s exemplary spiritual leadership and example, he created a genuine Christian community where none previously existed. It was a community that he later replicated as the director of Finkenwalde.

The experience of Finkenwalde left lasting impressions on the students. By the time Finkenwalde began, the Church Struggle was in full swing. Instinctively Bonhöffer knew that an immense spiritual battle lay before his students. For the German Protestant Church to move forward and resist nazification, leaders with inner spiritual strength were required. Bonhöffer knew leaders of that caliber could not be produced by academic instruction alone.

In order to prepare his students for the struggles ahead, Bonhöffer focused his training on a discipleship model that taught his students how to live harmoniously in Christian community and how to communicate with the living God. To produce leaders that possessed these qualities, Bonhöffer made prayer and meditation on the Word of God centerpieces of the Finkenwalde experience.

The daily schedule at Finkenwalde required students to spend time in prayer, Bible reading, Bible meditation, and corporate worship. The students found this almost monastic way of life to be repulsive at first. However, as Bonhöffer took the lead and made some adjustments to the schedule, student attitude began to change. Kelly observes,

Gradually their opposition waned and they began to appreciate with him what the daily meditation was all about. They who were being prepared to be moral leaders of their respective communities would later consider themselves personally gifted by the Word of God in this form of prayer given to nourish their faith, strengthen them in their ministry, and empower them to preach the gospel with greater conviction.<sup>22</sup>

As his students left the seminary for churches or were conscripted into the armed forces pursuant to WWII, Bonhöffer continued to publish circular letters to his alumni that contained biblical references for daily meditation. One of his Finkenwalde students, Wilhelm Rott testifies, “But I

learned to train myself with lasting profit in biblical meditation, and above all I learned to admire and respect our ‘principals’ gift of teaching and his unique success as a teacher . . . and what Dietrich Bonhöffer inculcated in the motley crew of students during that time was truly amazing.”<sup>23</sup> Another student, Wolf Dieter Zimmermann reports,

All of us had been too much bent on exegesis and application of the text. We had not known what it means that the word preaches itself. Only through long times of waiting and quiet did we learn that the text ‘may be our master.’ . . . It taught us all that the biblical word is more than a ‘subject’ which can be handled *ad libitum* . . . the power of the word, just as it is transmitted, is only felt by him who bows before that word.<sup>24</sup>

Jensen adds, “For Bonhöffer, the daily meditation was one of the first and foremost tasks of the theologian, and an essential part of this was the psalms. . . . I saw the meaning of the psalms as the prayers of the church, of the people of God in the desert. I was happy to learn this in the Preacher’s Seminary, for I was able to practice it later in a Gestapo prison.”<sup>25</sup>

The element that stopped the student revolt was Bonhöffer’s own personal example. As the students pushed back against the practices, Bonhöffer made it clear that even though the majority may be against the requirements, they would continue. In discussing the half-hour of meditation before breakfast, Bethge writes,

His [Bonhoeffer’s] suggestions were always made in such a way that those addressed felt obliged to comply; in this case, however, the resentment, perplexity, and general discontent were so intense that they eventually had to come out. This did not happen immediately, since the ordinands felt entitled to spend the half hour as they saw fit. On the other hand, their director’s evident ability to concentrate upon this exercise put them to shame.<sup>26</sup>

Bethge states that the greatest incentive for the reluctant seminarians was the example of Bonhöffer’s own personal prayer life.<sup>27</sup> Bethge relates that during corporate worship, Bonhöffer led all the prayers himself. He prayed long, but from the heart and his prayers contained thanks, intercession for the Confessing Church, for persons who were imprisoned, and for enemies. His prayers also contained confession. According to Bethge, Bonhöffer’s daily example gradually began to bear fruit.<sup>28</sup>

Spiritual leaders are concerned primarily with transformation. Transformation of people and organizations involves a supernatural event accomplished solely by God. God’s primary tools are the Word of God and prayer. Prayer remains one of the most neglected elements of the Christian faith, both corporately and privately. In this writer’s experience, weekly church prayer meetings are the most poorly attended of any corporate meeting of the church body.

In the Christian faith, prayerlessness equates to powerlessness, and Bonhöffer did not need powerless pastors during the Church Struggle. Wilkes argues, “Prayer should permeate every step to equip others. Prayer gives discernment, protection, and power to those who lead. Prayer is God’s answer to our weakness as leaders.”<sup>29</sup> With the Church Struggle raging, Bonhöffer did not see spiritual weakness as an option for his seminarians.

In episodes with the Wedding confirmation class and at Finkenwalde, Bonhöffer’s example played a critical role in taking his subordinates to the place God wanted them. In both cases, he faced initial opposition. His actions as a spiritual leader spoke far louder than his words because he lived out everything in real life situations. At Finkenwalde, Bonhöffer used prayer and the Word of God to teach his students how to gain access to all the riches available in a relationship with Christ. How Bonhöffer lived and loved earned him both a hearing and, later, a following.

## The Final Analysis

During the 1960s, many books and articles were devoted to Bonhöffer's writings, actions and overall memory. A resurgence in Bonhöffer interest occurred during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Apparently it is continuing into the second decade, with new books and articles appearing regularly. Also revisited are the themes that occupied much of Bonhöffer's attention during his very short life. As Evangelical churches decline in attendance and baptisms, is there a need to communicate Christ in a different way? As the world becomes more anti-Christ, is there a new need to restructure discipleship efforts and concentrate more energy on prayer and Scripture? Should churches develop evangelism teams and send them out for short stints into unevangelized areas? Is the day approaching in which believers in Jesus Christ will be required to shape their faith to governmental standards or endure persecution? If so, will that persecution incorporate incarceration, interrogation, and possibly martyrdom?

These questions are the reality of the world in which modern believers live, making Bonhöffer a stalwart example for study and emulation. Bonhöffer lived through times such as these, and his example through it all bore no shame to himself or to the Christ he served so faithfully. It is easy to walk beside Bonhöffer and feel all the emotions associated with standing for Christ during very dark times, because he wrote so vociferously and so descriptively of his own emotions. One can feel the heights of his successes and the pit of failure, loneliness, and despair. One can sense how Christ was very close to him and how Bonhöffer was very close to others.

Not only did Bonhöffer stand against evil, he engaged in spiritual leadership. He did so not only to expand God's kingdom on earth, but also to make sure that God's kingdom touched others in a very personal way. It did not matter if one were a poor teenager living in the slums of Berlin or a seminary colleague. Bonhöffer lived out the faith that he communicated with his tongue, pen, and typewriter, and demonstrated what ministering to others on behalf of Christ means. It is a very attractive legacy indeed.

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<sup>1</sup>Payne S. Best, *The Venlo Incident* (New York: Skyhorse, 2009), 33-4.

<sup>2</sup>Eberhard Bethge, "The Confessing Church, Then and Now: The Barmen Declaration, 1934 and 1984," in *The Barmen Confession: Papers from The Seattle Assembly*, ed. Hubert G. Locke, vol 26, Toronto Studies in Theology (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 211.

<sup>3</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "After Ten Years," in *I loved This People* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1965), 22.

<sup>4</sup>Steven F. Hayward, *Churchill on Leadership: Executive Success in the Face of Adversity* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1998), 150-1.

<sup>5</sup>Geffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), xiv.

<sup>6</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 221.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>8</sup>Cited in Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: The Making of a General, 1887-1942*, vol. 2 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 618.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 619.

<sup>10</sup>Dallas M. Roark, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, ed. Bob E. Patterson (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 124.

<sup>11</sup>Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership*, 97.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>13</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932*. Edited by Eberhard Amelung, Christoph Strohm, Victoria J. Barnett, Mark S. Brocker and Michael B. Lukens. Translated by Anne Schmidt-Lange with Isabel Best, Nicholas Humphrey and Marion Pauck. Vol. 11 of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, Ernst Feil, Christian Gremmels, Wolfgang Huber, Hans Pfeifer, Albrecht Schoenherr, Heinz Eduard Toedt and Ilse Toedt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 76-7.

<sup>14</sup>Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography*, Rev. ed. (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 2000), 226.

<sup>15</sup>Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 98.

<sup>16</sup>Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography*, 227.

<sup>17</sup>Kelly and Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership*, 16.

<sup>18</sup>Richard Rother, "A Confirmation Class in Wedding," Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, and Ronald Gregor Smith, eds. *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 57.

<sup>19</sup>Fritz Figur, "At Zion Church," In Zimmermann, 56.

<sup>20</sup>Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography*, 229.

<sup>21</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932*, 98.

<sup>22</sup>Kelly and Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership*, 228-9.

<sup>23</sup>Wilhelm Rott, "Something Always Occurred to Him," In Zimmermann, 130.

<sup>24</sup>Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, "Finkenwalde," In Zimmermann, 108.

<sup>25</sup>Hans-Werner Jensen, "Life Together," In Zimmermann, 153.

<sup>26</sup>Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer A Biography*, 462-63.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 464.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Wilkes, *Jesus on Leadership*, 199.