

## DIETRICH BONHOEFFER (1906-1945)

“Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”<sup>1</sup>

—Luke 6:46

“Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.”<sup>2</sup>

**The Nazi Cancer.**<sup>3</sup> Germans in the early 1930s wanted solutions—and someone to blame. They had been defeated in World War I, humiliated by the harsh terms of the Versailles Treaty, and lived through the hyperinflation of the German currency in the early 1920s. Then the Great Depression struck in 1929 and unemployment skyrocketed. Many Germans turned to Adolf Hitler and National Socialism (i.e., the Nazis) to save the country. Hitler told them their problems were due to democracy, Communists, and, most of all, the Jews. And he told them the solution required a strong leader—a *Fuhrer*.

On January 30, 1933, Hitler became the German Chancellor. Eighteen months later, through lies, intimidation, skillful maneuvering, and broken promises, he had made himself absolute dictator. In Hitler’s Germany, tyranny reigned, freedoms vanished, corruption flourished, and racism became government policy. But the military grew strong, the economy revived, unemployment declined, and health and living standards improved. In addition, Hitler ignored the Treaty of Versailles, which pleased almost everyone in Germany. Most Germans, including Christians, approved of Hitler enthusiastically. And those who voiced dissent usually wound up in a concentration camp, or dead.

Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer openly opposed the Nazis’ racist agenda—one of the few Germans who did so. He was also a pacifist in a country rushing headlong toward war. So in June 1939, with war on the horizon, Dietrich’s friends arranged for him to escape to the United States, where they knew he would be safe—if only he would stay there. He didn’t.

**A Happy Family.** Dietrich was born in Breslau, Germany, the sixth child of Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer. Karl and Paula met in Breslau in 1896, and were married there on March 5, 1898. Paula was 21 years old, and Karl was almost 30.

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<sup>1</sup> All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard* translation.

<sup>2</sup> From the poem, “Who Am I?,” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written in about July 1944, as quoted in *Letters and Papers From Prison*, pp. 347-348. For the full poem, see Appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the rise of the Nazis in Germany, please see Appendix 2, HITLER’S RISE AND FALL, on this web site.

They had their first child, Karl-Friedrich, only ten months after their wedding date, on January 13, 1899, and then proceeded to have seven more: Walter (December 10, 1899), Klaus (1901), Ursula (1902), Christine (1903), Dietrich and his twin sister Sabine (February 4, 1906), and Susanne (1909).

Dietrich's father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was a successful and well respected psychiatrist. Two years before Dietrich's birth, Karl became a professor of psychiatry at the University of Breslau. In 1912 he accepted the very prestigious position of Chairman of Psychiatry and Neurology at the University of Berlin, and the family relocated to Germany's capital city. Karl valued reason above emotion, science above religion, and strength of character above all. He imposed discipline on his children, but without violence; he was reliable, but not very affectionate. While Karl did not practice religion himself, he tolerated others' religious beliefs, including those of his wife, Paula, who was a devout Christian.

The former Paula von Hase was descended from a pair of theologians. Her father, Karl Alfred von Hase, served as a military chaplain and professor of theology, and her grandfather, Karl August von Hase, had been a Protestant theologian, professor, and writer. Paula seldom attended church, but raised her children in a Christian atmosphere through hymns, prayer, and Bible readings. At a time when few women went to college, Paula graduated in 1896 from the Royal Provincial School College in Breslau. She home-schooled each of her eight children until they started public school at age 7 or 8. She prepared them so well that each of the children excelled in school, and some, like Dietrich, skipped grades and graduated early.

Karl's profession enabled the Bonhoeffers to live a very comfortable lifestyle. In Berlin they hired a staff of five, including a pair of sisters—Maria and Käthe van Horn—to serve as governess for the older children and nursemaid for Dietrich, Sabine, and Susanne. Like Paula, the van Horn sisters were dedicated Christians, and their influence upon young Dietrich was considerable.

As a child, Dietrich was mischievous, full of energy, and considerate of others from an early age. Sabine remembered him as being especially protective of her and their younger sister, Susanne. He was a happy child, for the Bonhoeffers were a happy family. They were also a musical family. Dietrich played the piano from age eight, and became the most proficient pianist in the family.

In 1913, a year after the Bonhoeffers moved to Berlin, Dietrich began public school at the Friedrich-Werder Gymnasium—which provided a classical education to prepare a student for the university (in contrast to a *Realschule*, which emphasized scientific and technical training). In March, 1916, the Bonhoeffers moved to 14 Wangenheimstrasse, in the Grunewald district of Berlin. With the move came many new friends, including four future spouses: Hans von Dohnanyi,

who would marry Dietrich's sister, Christine, in 1925; Gerhard Leibholz, who married Sabine in 1926; Grete von Dohnanyi, who married Karl-Friedrich in 1930; and Emmi Delbrück, who married Klaus in 1930.

**Dietrich's Adolescence.** In the spring of 1919, 13-year-old Dietrich completed his studies at Friedrich-Werder and enrolled in the Grunewald Gymnasium. Sometime that year, he made the momentous decision to become a theologian—although he didn't tell his family until the following year, for fear of their reaction (theology was not a highly respected profession in Germany at that time). Indeed, his brothers and sisters tried to talk him out of it by pointing out the many flaws in the German Evangelical Church (i.e., Germany's Protestant, or Lutheran, Church). But Dietrich simply replied, "In that case I shall reform it."

Despite his obstinacy, Dietrich seems to have chosen theology more for practical or philosophical reasons than as a result of any deeply held religious beliefs. That began to change in March 1921, when he completed his confirmation classes and was confirmed as a member of the Lutheran Church. Paula presented him with the Bible which had belonged to his brother Walter, who had been killed in World War I.<sup>4</sup> This prompted Dietrich to read the Bible for himself. He took Hebrew in school, began occasionally attending church services accompanied by his mother, and even observed Lent. Yet his faith was still quite superficial.

**University Student.** In April 1923, Dietrich and sister Christine enrolled in Tübingen University in southwest Germany,<sup>5</sup> the same university attended by their older brother, Karl-Friedrich, and their brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher (who married Ursula that same year).<sup>6</sup> Dietrich attended for only one year before switching to Berlin University. But before returning to Berlin, he and brother Klaus toured Italy for two months in the Spring of 1924. The faith of the Roman Catholics in Rome deeply impressed Dietrich, and he began to think of Christianity as transcending the boundaries of nations.

In Berlin, Dietrich studied under some of the most distinguished theology professors in Germany, including Adolf von Harnack, Karl Holl, Reinhold Seeberg, and Adolf Deissman. Although Dietrich admired these men, he proved to be an independent thinker. The prevalent paradigm in Berlin adopted a secular approach to the Bible, insisting that scriptural interpretation depends heavily on textual criticism—that is, studying the words and historical context of scripture—and on little else. Dietrich favored the position of Karl Barth at the University of

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<sup>4</sup> Walter died as a soldier in France on April 28, 1917.

<sup>5</sup> The city of Tübingen is located approximately 30 miles south of Stuttgart and 175 miles west of Munich.

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich's youngest sibling, Susanne, married Walter Dress, a Berlin pastor, in 1929.

Göttingen, who began from the stance that God exists, and that we can know little or nothing about Him except what He chooses to reveal to us. Therefore, Barth emphasized the importance of prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to find the spiritual meaning of scripture. Barth and Bonhoeffer also rejected the common wisdom that the truth of Christianity and the Bible is confirmed only through personal experience. They contended that the truth of Christianity is evident and does not require confirmation—it simply must be preached.

In 1925, Dietrich began working on his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* (“Communion of Saints”),<sup>7</sup> in which he would argue that the “church” is more than an institution, an organization, or a historical entity; it is instead no less than “Christ existing as church-community.” This Christ-centered approach would characterize Dietrich’s writings and his faith for the rest of his life. And it had far-reaching implications, because if the church belongs to Christ, then it must include all people, and not merely the Germans or the Gentiles. Bonhoeffer’s position would lead him to embrace the nascent ecumenical movement,<sup>8</sup> and steer him into conflict with the Nazis. *Sanctorum Communio* was accepted by the faculty on August 1, 1927.

About the same time Dietrich began working on his dissertation, he also began teaching a children’s Sunday School class at the Grunewald parish church, to satisfy a requirement that he perform parish work before taking his first theological examination. The class became immensely popular, and in April 1927 led to the Thursday Circle, which consisted of former Sunday School students who met—exclusively by invitation from Bonhoeffer—for an hour-and-a-half each Thursday evening to discuss religion, ethics, politics, and culture.

For most of his student days, Dietrich concentrated on his studies, devoting little time to friends or romance. But as his college career wound down in 1927, both changed. First he met a young lady with whom he would enjoy an eight-year relationship. Like Dietrich, Elizabeth Zinn was a theological student at Berlin University, working on a doctoral degree. They were distant cousins, and they became close friends, but never married. Dietrich finally ended the relationship in early 1936, admitting to himself and to Elizabeth that he could not marry her because he felt God calling him to devote himself completely to the Church. Elizabeth would marry another theologian, Günther Bornkamm, in 1938.

In December 1927, Dietrich met a man who would become his best friend for the next eight years. Most Germans considered Franz Hildebrandt a Jew, since

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<sup>7</sup> The full title was *Sanctorum Communio: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*.

<sup>8</sup> The ecumenical movement is the worldwide effort to bring about friendship, understanding, and cooperation among Christians of various denominations, languages, and cultures.

his mother was Jewish. Franz considered himself a Christian. He was ordained as a Lutheran minister in 1933 and would prove to be a valuable ally for Dietrich in the struggle within the German Evangelical Church in the early 1930s.

Dietrich received his doctorate, *summa cum laude*, from Berlin University on December 17, 1927. A month later he passed his first theological examination, which opened the door for him to train for the ministry. As another step in that direction, he accepted a one-year position as assistant pastor and children's minister for a German congregation in Barcelona, Spain, beginning in February 1928.

**Barcelona.** Dietrich's duties in Barcelona included organizing a children's ministry, preaching when Pastor Friedrich "Fritz" Olbricht was absent, helping to run the *Deutsche Hilfsverein* (a German charity for the poor),<sup>9</sup> and occasionally taking Olbricht's place on official visits to Majorca and Madrid. Bonhoeffer also started a religious discussion group for students at a nearby secondary school. In all that he did, he succeeded. The children's ministry grew from one little girl to more than 30. When he preached, which he did 19 times during 1928, church attendance increased—even during the summer months when it normally slumped. (This eventually led Olbricht to stop publicizing in advance who would preach each Sunday.) Dietrich's successes with the charity were less obvious, but he did help many of the down-trodden through his customary patience and diligence.

Dietrich and Olbricht got along well most of the time. Olbricht was grateful for this energetic young man who was both competent and hard-working, and Dietrich was grateful for the freedom which Olbricht gave him. Perhaps another reason they got along well was Dietrich's humility. Despite his many successes in Barcelona, he insisted that it was all due to God's grace.

***Act and Being.*** When Dietrich's one-year commitment expired, he returned to Berlin, and soon accepted a position as voluntary assistant university lecturer at Berlin University. He also began to work on his post-doctoral thesis, *Akt und Sein—Act and Being*<sup>10</sup>—completion of which would open the door to becoming a university lecturer (since he was still too young to qualify for ordination).

*Act and Being* carried forward the Christ-centered theme of *Sanctorum Communio*, but Bonhoeffer now focused on the difference between theology and philosophy. The latter, in his view, was a search for truth apart from God, which was doomed to fail. Theology was all about faith in Christ, who reveals God's Truth to men. Dietrich submitted *Act and Being* in February 1930, and the faculty

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<sup>9</sup> *Deutsche Hilfsverein* means "German Benevolent Society."

<sup>10</sup> The full name was *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*.

accepted it on July 18<sup>th</sup>. Twelve days later he delivered his first lecture as a university lecturer in Systematic Theology. But his academic career soon took a detour. On September 6, 1930, Dietrich boarded a ship to begin a journey that would change his life and deepen his faith. He was bound for America.

**America.** Dietrich traveled to the United States as an exchange student, financed by a Sloane Fellowship, which provided money for three European students to study for a year at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. He hesitated to go at first, based primarily on two misconceptions: (1) that Americans still hated Germans as a result of World War I, and (2) that Christianity in America was inferior to that of Europe. His experiences at the Seminary initially confirmed the second misconception. Dietrich was shocked to find professors there questioning, and even rejecting, such fundamental articles of faith as the divinity of Christ, the reality of miracles, and Christ's resurrection. But through the Seminary's classes, he also experienced the involvement of American churches in social and political issues, such as helping the poor, opposing racial inequality, and trying to rescue gang members. And he met an African-American student who introduced him to another side of American Christianity.

Albert F. "Frank" Fisher took Dietrich to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, pastored by Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. Dietrich enjoyed the enthusiastic and sincere spirit of worship which he found there, and began attending regularly. He even taught a boys' Sunday School class, participated in various church clubs, and was invited into many African-American homes. Through these contacts, Bonhoeffer witnessed racism and segregation for the first time, and these experiences would color his view of Nazi anti-Semitism. He also learned to appreciate African-American music, so much so that he purchased several recordings of Negro spirituals.

In addition to Frank Fisher, Dietrich made three other enduring friendships while at the Seminary: Jean Lasserre, Erwin Sutz, and Paul Lehmann. The Frenchman Lasserre was a pacifist, and influenced Dietrich heavily in that direction. Sutz, from Switzerland, had been a student of Karl Barth, and helped Bonhoeffer meet him in 1931. Lehmann, an American from New York, invited Bonhoeffer into his home on several occasions, including Dietrich's 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Dietrich's experiences with these four students went beyond class time. He and Sutz traveled together to Florida and Cuba in December, 1930, allowing them to see the racism of the American South first-hand. Dietrich found it repugnant. When a restaurant in New York refused to serve Fisher because of the color of his skin, the five friends all walked out in protest. In May, 1931, Bonhoeffer and Lasserre drove to Mexico. They returned on June 17<sup>th</sup>, and three days later Bonhoeffer boarded a ship for Germany.

**An Eventful Year.** Dietrich returned from America a changed man. His faith seemed deeper, and more real. It infused his whole being. Christianity was no longer merely an occupation, but a way of life. For the first time in his life, he regularly attended church. He now saw the Bible as the key to all moral and political issues, and his sermons emphasized the importance of sincere faith and obedience to God. He had also embraced pacifism, believing that war was simply incompatible with Christian love and charity toward all.

1931 was an eventful year for Bonhoeffer. A month after returning from America, he met the man whose writings probably influenced his theology more than anyone—Karl Barth. Erwin Sutz helped facilitate the meeting by writing to Barth about Bonhoeffer. Barth would become a leading voice in opposition to Nazi theology, as well as a friend and mentor for Bonhoeffer.

1931 also saw the beginning of Dietrich's involvement in the ecumenical movement. In September, he attended the ecumenical conference of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches<sup>11</sup> in Cambridge, England, as a member of the German youth delegation. The conference appointed him as one of three European youth secretaries, enabling him to travel throughout Germany, Austria, Hungary, and northern European countries, at the expense of the World Alliance.<sup>12</sup> In 1932 and 1933, he attended ecumenical conferences in England, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and Bulgaria, and helped organize several ecumenical conferences in Germany.

In joining the ecumenical movement, Dietrich was swimming against the current. Most Germans viewed the movement as a tool of the western powers which were oppressing Germany, and therefore saw German supporters of the movement as unpatriotic. A popular article by Emmanuel Hirsch and Paul Althaus, published on June 1, 1931 in the *Hamburger Nachrichten*, voiced the German view that so long as the injustices of the Versailles treaty remained in effect, "there can be no understanding between us Germans and the victorious nations in the world war."<sup>13</sup> For most Germans, nationalism trumped Christian unity.

Not long after his return from Cambridge, Bonhoeffer accepted the position of university lecturer in theology at the University of Berlin. He lived in the house

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<sup>11</sup> At this time there were two other worldwide ecumenical groups, in addition to the World Alliance: (1) the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work (commonly known as Life and Work), and (2) Faith and Order. The German branch of World Alliance dissolved in 1934.

<sup>12</sup> The other two youth secretaries were (1) F.W. Tom Craske, an Englishman, who had responsibility for the British Empire, the United States, and the Far East, and (2) P.C. Tourelle, a Frenchman, who had France, Latin America, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Balkans.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, p. 195

of his parents, and often invited his students to dine there. He emphasized the importance of music and meditation, and sometimes took his students on retreats.

On Sunday, November 15, 1931, Dietrich was ordained at St. Matthew's Church in Potsdam.<sup>14</sup> At about the same time, he was assigned to teach a confirmation class of 50 rowdy teenage boys at Zionskirche in Wedding, a poor neighborhood in northwestern Berlin. At his first encounter with them, he waited patiently in silence for the boys to calm down, and then began talking softly, forcing them to be quiet in order to hear. He then told them a story from his time in the United States, and promised to tell them more stories in the future if they would listen. He won them over through a combination of patience, compassion, and Bible stories. He taught them the Bible, of course, but also chess and English. Before long he moved to Wedding, and allowed the boys to visit him at his apartment, as well as at his parents' home. After their confirmation on March 13, 1932, Dietrich took many of them to his parents' vacation home in Friedrichsbrunn, at his own expense.

As 1931 drew to a close, life must have seemed good to Dietrich. He could not foresee that thirteen months later Adolf Hitler would take power and life for Christians in Germany would soon become much more difficult.

**Struggle in the German Church.** Hitler was no Christian, although he often pretended to be one for the sake of public opinion. Many of his subordinates made no secret of their contempt for the Church. Heinrich Himmler, head of the infamous S.S.,<sup>15</sup> barred clergy from serving in the S.S., and eventually prohibited S.S. men from attending religious services. He and others—like Alfred Rosenberg, Martin Bormann, and Reinhard Heydrich—wanted to destroy the Church and outlaw Christianity, which they regarded as weak, pacifist, and very un-German. But Hitler would not permit it, fearing the effect on his popularity. So at first the Nazis battled for the soul of Germany through the German Christians.

Ludwig Müller and other Nazi supporters had started the German Christian movement in 1932, as an effort to remake Christianity in the image of the Nazis. They painted Jesus as an Aryan and an anti-Semite, citing such verses as John 8:44: “You are of *your* father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.” While their efforts were less than fully successful, one of their positions would eventually become law: the “Aryan Clause,” which excluded Christians of Jewish ethnicity from membership in the Church.

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<sup>14</sup> Potsdam is located about 20 miles southwest of Berlin.

<sup>15</sup> The S.S.—short for *Schutzstaffeln*, meaning “Protection Squad”—was originally a bodyguard for Hitler. For more on the S.S., see Appendix 2, “Hitler’s Rise and Fall,” on this web site.



Opposing the German Christians were men such as Gerhard Jacobi, Walter Künneht, H.M. Schreiner-Rostock, Hanns Lilje, Martin Niemöller, Karl Barth, and, of course, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They and others became known as the Young Reformation Movement. From the start, Bonhoeffer denounced the German Christians' mutilation of Scripture, as well as their incorporation of Nazi symbols, such as the swastika, into church sanctuaries. Unlike most Christian leaders in Germany, he spoke against Hitler's "Law on Hereditary Health," which authorized the forced sterilization of those the Nazis considered "weak." Dietrich even criticized the "Fuhrer Principle" in a radio address on February 1, 1933.<sup>16</sup> But most of all, he detested the Aryan Clause.

Dietrich despised the racial discrimination he saw in America, and for him Nazi anti-Semitism was the same thing. In addition, his best friend, Franz Hildebrandt, and his brother-in-law, Gerhard Leibholz, were both Christians of Jewish heritage. In 1933 Dietrich wrote essays attacking the Aryan Clause and the German Christians' theology. In an April, 1933 essay, "The Church and the Jewish Question," he urged Christians to help those oppressed by the State—i.e., the Jews—and to oppose the State when its actions are evil.<sup>17</sup> He and Paul Lehmann also wrote a joint letter to Rabbi Stephen Wise of New York, who had connections to President Roosevelt, warning of the Nazi danger. Bonhoeffer was not alone in these efforts, either. Various German religious leaders, including Professor Karl Barth, wrote in opposition to the Aryan Clause and the mistreatment of the Jews during these early days of Hitler's rule.

**The Bethel Confession.** But they were outgunned, because the Nazi party, many German Protestant leaders, and, most important, the German government favored the German Christians. When the honest and devout Friedrich von Bodelschwingh was elected Reich Bishop in May, 1933, a villainous Nazi propaganda campaign and a government take-over of the Church prompted his resignation after only four weeks. Ludwig Müller, the loyal Nazi, quickly replaced him. In church elections in July 1933, the German Christians received about 70%

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<sup>16</sup> The Fuhrer Principle was the belief, which was widely held, that Germany needed a strong, tyrannical leader to pull her out of her difficulties. Bonhoeffer foresaw that the Fuhrer Principle would lead to idolatry and abuse of power because the Fuhrer's authority did not come from God. Bonhoeffer's radio address was cut off for unknown reasons, but was later published in full in the *Kreuzzeitung*, a conservative German newspaper, and repeated at Berlin's College of Political Science in March 1933.

<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer was not yet immune to fears of Nazi intimidation. When Gerhard Leibholz's father died on April 11, 1933, Dietrich, acting on the advice of his district superintendent, declined to preach at the funeral because the deceased was a Jew. Dietrich later regretted this decision and apologized to Gerhard and Sabine.

of the votes and officially gained control of the German Evangelical Church.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Hitler made peace with the Roman Catholic Church, signing a Concordat on July 20<sup>th</sup> that guaranteed Catholic freedom—an agreement he would break a few years later.

The Young Reformation movement responded with the “Bethel Confession.” It received its name from Bodelschwingh’s Bethel community for disabled persons and orphans. At Martin Niemöller’s request, Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse secluded themselves at Bethel for a month to write the Confession. In it, Bonhoeffer and Sasse sought to contrast the German Christians’ theology with true Biblical Christianity. Unfortunately, twenty German theologians reviewed the rough draft and watered it down into an unrecognizable mess which Bonhoeffer refused to sign.

**The Pastors’ Emergency League.** September 1933 witnessed the apex of the German Christian movement. At a national synod in Berlin on September 5<sup>th</sup>, so many delegates wore the brown uniform of the Nazi S.A. that the meeting became known as the “Brown Synod.” Delegates there voted to impose two new requirements on future candidates for ordination: (1) they must be Aryan, and (2) they must demonstrate their loyalty to the Nazi government and the national German Evangelical Church—now known as the “Reich Church.” Later that month a national synod in Wittenberg confirmed Müller as Reich Bishop, solidifying German Christian control of the Reich Church.

Immediately following the Brown Synod, opposition leaders met at the homes of Gerhard Jacobi and Martin Niemöller. Bonhoeffer was among them. He and Hildebrandt argued that they must resign from the Reich Church, which they now regarded as heretical. But the others refused to go that far, and a few even supported the Aryan Clause, believing all would be better off if the Jewish Christians had their own churches (much like the segregated churches at that time in the American South). In the face of this almost unanimous opposition from pastors whom he deeply respected, Bonhoeffer decided to leave Germany for a time. So he accepted a position in London.

One positive development came from these meetings: the Pastors’ Emergency League, started by Niemöller. Its founding principles were adherence to Scripture, opposition to the Aryan Clause, and help for those persecuted by the Nazi state. The League elected some of its members as a Council of Brethren, to

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<sup>18</sup> As with all elections under the Nazis, the election was much less than fair. Opposition groups were given only one week’s notice, and the German Christians had the full support of Hitler, the Nazi government, and the Nazi press. In addition, opposition efforts were often met with violence and intimidation.

collect contributions and distribute funds. The League formed the basis for what would soon become the Confessing Church.

**London.** In October, 1933, Bonhoeffer became pastor of two small German congregations in London: Sydenham and St. Paul's. He remained there eighteen months, and during that time he educated the German pastors in England about the very real danger posed by the Nazis. News in 1933 often traveled slowly, and news out of Germany was carefully censored by the Nazis. Consequently, most of the German pastors in England still accepted the public image of Hitler as a good and religious man, who had restored law and order to a chaotic country (not realizing that much of the chaos had been caused by the Nazis themselves). To the extent that the pastors knew of Nazi abuses, they attributed them to Hitler's cronies, acting without his knowledge or authority. Bonhoeffer helped them learn the truth.

**The Barmen and Dahlem Declarations.** Meanwhile, Müller began to turn the screws on his opponents in Germany. On January 4, 1934, he issued the "Decree for the Restoration of Orderly Conditions in the German Evangelical Church"—also known as the Muzzling Decree. This order—issued by the Church rather than the State—forbid discussion of church disputes in churches or church publications. Müller threatened to dismiss any pastor who violated it. At the same time, Müller agreed to merge all Protestant youth groups with the Hitler Youth. Shortly thereafter, he forbid Niemöller to preach.

Niemöller decided it was time to take his case to a higher authority, and arranged a meeting with Hitler. Throughout 1933, Niemöller and many other reform-minded pastors had believed their fight was merely against a heretical church. However, in the meeting with Hitler on January 25, 1934, they learned differently. After pleading their case, they were astonished to hear the Fuhrer side with Müller and the German Christians. The next day, Niemöller was suspended. In February, 50 more pastors were suspended because of their opposition to Müller.

In May 1934, Dr. August Jäger, the legal administrator of the Reich Church, ordered all regional churches to be incorporated into the Reich Church. This was the final straw for its opponents. At a national synod at Barmen <sup>19</sup> on May 29-31, the reformers issued their Theological Declaration of Barmen, signaling the birth of the Confessing Church. This Barmen Declaration proclaimed that the teachings of the German Christians were heretical and contrary to Scripture. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, through the efforts of Bonhoeffer and Bishop George Bell of England, the Barmen Declaration was published in the London *Times*.

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<sup>19</sup> Barmen is in western Germany, about 20 miles east of Dusseldorf.

In October, 1934 the Confessing Church went even further. At its second national synod, in Dahlem (a suburb of Berlin), the Confessing Church called on all Germans to repudiate and ignore the teachings of the Reich Church, and to obey only the Confessing Church. The Barmen and Dahlem declarations recognized that reconciliation with the Reich Church was now impossible. Müller recognized it, too. So in November 1934 he forbid pastors to join the Confessing Church.

In England, inoculated by the truth Bonhoeffer had brought, the German pastors criticized both the Muzzling Decree and the merger of youth groups with the Hitler Youth, and refused to obey either one. Nearly all of them joined the Pastors Emergency League. And unlike most German pastors abroad, those in England refused to be intimidated by Nazi threats. In November 1934 they endorsed the Confessing Church.

**The Fifth Decree.** When Müller and the German Christians proved unable to win the church struggle on their own, the State intervened. In July 1934, the Muzzling Decree became law (rather than merely church policy). In March 1935, Hermann Göring set up “finance departments” to bring church property and church leaders under State control. Later that year, all civil servants, including theology professors like Karl Barth, were required to take an oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler. Some, including Barth, refused, and lost their positions.<sup>20</sup> They were of course replaced by people acceptable to the Nazis. By late 1935 pastors had to be ordained and appointed by committees answerable to the State, ensuring that only pastors sympathetic to Nazi views would receive new positions in the Reich Church.

The most severe blow to the Confessing Church fell on December 2, 1935, when the State issued the “Fifth Decree for the Implementation of the Law for the Protection of the German Evangelical Church.” The Fifth Decree mandated that all church government and administration be controlled solely by the State, thus making most of the Confessing Church’s activities illegal, including raising money, training and ordaining ministers, filling Church positions, and making church proclamations. In effect, the Nazis forced Confessing Church pastors to choose between their faith, on the one hand, and their security, freedom, and loyalty to the State on the other. Most compromised their principles and abandoned the Confessing Church. Yet Bonhoeffer, who was back in Germany by then, convinced three-quarters of the pastors in Pomerania to remain loyal to the Confessing Church despite the law. A Confessing Church General Assembly in

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<sup>20</sup> Barth offered to take the oath with the addition, “insofar as I can responsibly do so as a Christian.” The Nazis refused. Barth moved to Switzerland in June 1935.

October 1936 achieved similar results; those present voted 181-58 to remain with the Confessing Church despite Nazi persecution.

**The Illegal Seminaries: Zingst and Finkenwalde.** Bonhoeffer would not take the loyalty oath, so he could not resume his university position, and a job in the Reich Church was unthinkable. So he set up a seminary to train Confessing Church pastors—one of five such seminaries run by the Confessing Church.<sup>21</sup> He started on April 26, 1935, in facilities of the Rhineland Bible School near Zingst, which were only available until June 14<sup>th</sup>. In late June the seminary relocated to Finkenwalde, a small town near Stettin in Pomerania. Both seminaries were against orders from the Reich Church, and when the Fifth Decree was issued in December they became illegal under German law.

Naturally, Dietrich taught his students about preaching, liturgy, and pastoral care, but he went beyond such basics to teach them about discipleship—that is, how to follow Christ. Each day began and ended with a worship service, and included time for prayer and meditation on Scripture. Dietrich frequently allowed time for religious music, sometimes playing the piano or the recordings of Negro spirituals he had brought back from America. And he did not neglect recreation, such as hiking or soccer; Bonhoeffer himself was quite athletic and surprisingly competitive. Breaking with Protestant custom, he encouraged the students to privately confess their sins to another student. Dietrich's own confessor was a student who would become his best friend and biographer—Eberhard Bethge. Like several of the students at Zingst, Bethge had been expelled from the Reich Church seminary at Wittenberg because of his opposition to Nazi policies and his sympathy for the Confessing Church. He would become Dietrich's nephew on May 15, 1943 when he married Dietrich's niece, Renate Schleicher, the daughter of Dietrich's sister Ursula and her husband Rüdiger Schleicher.<sup>22</sup>

Bonhoeffer discussed current events and the political situation openly with his students. He introduced them to his own pacifist leanings, but without requiring them to agree with him. He also shared his concern for the Jews, as well as his belief that Christians must help those who are treated unjustly, whatever the cost.

The Finkenwalde seminary received most of its financial support from wealthy Germans in Pomerania, many of whom opposed Hitler. These supporters

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<sup>21</sup> The other four were: (1) Elberfeld, directed by Pastor Hermann Hesse, which opened in 1934; (2) Bielefeld-Sieker, directed by Professor Otto Schmitz, which opened in November 1934; (3) Bloestau, East Prussia, directed by Professor Hans J. Iwand, which opened in 1935; and (4) Naumburg, Silesia, directed by Pastor Dr. Gerhard Gloege, which opened in 1935.

<sup>22</sup> On February 3, 1944, Renate gave birth to a son whom she named Dietrich, after her Uncle Dietrich, who was then in prison.

included the Wedermeyers of Pätzig, Fabian von Schlabrendorff, and Ruth von Kleist-Retzow. Ruth frequently attended Sunday services at Finkenwalde. Before long, Dietrich called her “Grandmother.” In the spring of 1936, he oversaw the confirmation of three of her grandchildren—Spes von Bismark, Hans-Friedrich von Kleist-Retzow, and Max von Wedemeyer. However, he declined to teach a fourth grandchild, twelve-year-old Maria von Wedemeyer, believing she was too young and immature.

When the first group of students left Finkenwalde in mid-October 1935, six stayed to form the House of Brethren, including Bonhoeffer’s new best friend, Eberhard Bethge. These men helped new students adjust and feel welcome, aided Bonhoeffer with his growing duties, and assisted Confessing Church pastors in nearby communities.

Life at Finkenwalde became increasingly difficult. When the students began evangelization efforts in June, 1936, the German authorities took down names of those involved, confiscated contributions to the seminary, and tried to intimidate those who seemed receptive to the students’ message. Nevertheless, the students’ efforts continued, and even expanded, until the Gestapo shut down Finkenwalde in September 1937.

**Bonhoeffer’s Ecumenical Involvement Declines.** Meanwhile, Bonhoeffer became frustrated with the ecumenical movement. Since late 1933, he had been urging ecumenical leaders to recognize the reformers—later, the Confessing Church—as the one and only true Protestant church in Germany, and to condemn the Reich Church as heretical. For Bonhoeffer, the Aryan Clause and the persecution of the Jews were not merely unjust, but un-Christian, and the German Christians were not Christians in any meaningful sense of the term. But ecumenical leaders viewed these as political issues which they wanted to avoid at all costs. So they repeatedly refused to take sides in the dispute.<sup>23</sup>

The final straw came in February 1937, as Bonhoeffer prepared for an upcoming ecumenical conference in Oxford. As youth secretary, he refused to authorize attendance by any youth delegates from the Reich Church, but was

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<sup>23</sup> For example, at conferences at Fanø, Denmark, in August 1934, and at Chamby, Switzerland, in August 1936, ecumenical leaders refused to condemn the Reich Church. Indeed, Wilhelm Zoellner, who had replaced Ludwig Müller as head of the Reich Church in 1935, spoke at Chamby in favor of the Nazi’s anti-Semitic position. In February, 1937, Zoellner was replaced by Dr. Friedrich Werner, a lawyer and dedicated Nazi, whose theological qualifications for the position were dubious at best.

The Roman Catholic Church was similarly silent. In March 1937, Pope Pius XI published an encyclical, “With Deep Anxiety,” which criticized the Nazis’ treatment of the Church, but said nothing about their anti-Semitism.

overruled. He immediately resigned from his position in protest. Bonhoeffer's frustration with the ecumenical movement's temerity toward Nazi Germany led him to abandon further involvement.

**Nazi Persecution.** Perhaps drawing hope from the easing of Nazi oppression in anticipation of the Berlin Olympics,<sup>24</sup> some Confessing Church pastors wrote a letter to Hitler in May 1936, criticizing the Nazis' anti-Semitism, anti-Christian policies, and many other Nazi practices, such as concentration camps, manipulation of elections, and the oppressive activities of the Gestapo. Many Confessing Church pastors read the letter from their pulpits on August 23<sup>rd</sup>. Hitler did not respond to the letter, but its publication in London in July prompted the Nazis to arrest hundreds of Confessing Church pastors after the Olympics concluded. One of the men responsible for the letter's publication, Dr. Friedrich Weissler, a Jew by heritage, was arrested in October, and died in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in February 1937 as a result of mistreatment.<sup>25</sup>

Until the Gestapo closed Finkenwalde in September 1937, Bonhoeffer did what he could to alleviate the suffering of pastors persecuted by the Nazis. He corresponded with those in prison or in concentration camps, put them on prayer lists, helped care for their dependents, and even attempted to visit some of them. When Willy Süßbach, a Christian pastor of Jewish heritage, was badly beaten by the S.A., Bonhoeffer brought him to Finkenwalde to recuperate and then helped him emigrate. In fact, Bonhoeffer helped many people to escape from Nazi Germany. The affair that would eventually land him in prison—Operation 7—was just such an effort, but in 1937 that plan was still four years away.

In the summer of 1937, the Nazis arrested more than eight-hundred pastors and laymen from the Confessing Church. Among these were Martin Niemöller and Franz Hildebrandt. Niemöller would remain in Nazi custody until 1945. Hildebrandt was more fortunate; he was held for 26 days and released, whereupon he fled Germany with the help of the Bonhoeffer family.<sup>26</sup> Dietrich himself was arrested at a Confessing Church meeting on January 11, 1938. Although the

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<sup>24</sup> The Berlin Olympics took place August 1 – 16, 1936.

<sup>25</sup> The other two men responsible for publication of the letter, Werner Koch and Ernst Tillich, were also arrested in late 1936, but were later released—Koch in December 1938 and Tillich in 1939.

<sup>26</sup> Hildebrandt was arrested because he assumed Niemöller's duties at his church in Dahlem. Hildebrandt was able to escape Germany because the Gestapo did not find and confiscate his passport. He first went to Switzerland, and from there moved on to London, where he became assistant pastor at St. George's. That church was pastored by Julius Rieger, and became a first refuge for many of those who fled Nazi Germany, including Sabine and Gerhard Leibholz (Dietrich Bonhoeffer's sister and brother-in-law).

Gestapo didn't detain him long, they did ban him from coming to Berlin except for family visits.

The Nazis also prohibited worship services and church gatherings unless they took place in a recognized church building, nearly all of which were now in the hands of the Reich Church. The government declared all Confessing Church collections to be illegal, and confiscated Confessing Church funds whenever they could be found. The State also frequently blocked or confiscated the salaries of pastors who supported the Confessing Church. In some places the Nazis prohibited the reading of intercessory prayer lists. University professors who participated in Confessing Church services lost their jobs, and university students who did so faced expulsion. Despite these measures, a Confessing Church synod in Lippstadt in August 1937 continued to urge resistance to Nazi oppression.

In the beginning of 1938, the Nazis changed their tactics, perhaps because their earlier efforts had largely failed—most Confessing Church pastors had held firm. So in 1938 arrests diminished, but the government used other methods to silence Confessing Church pastors, such as bans against public speaking, expulsions (making a pastor move to another part of Germany), banishments (making a pastor live in a specific area of Germany), and travel restrictions (as in Bonhoeffer's exclusion from Berlin).

In April 1938, Dr. Friedrich Werner, the new head of the Reich Church, temporarily split the Confessing Church by ordering all pastors to swear an oath of obedience to Hitler:

In the recognition that only those may hold office in the church who are unswervingly loyal to the Führer, the people and the Reich, it is hereby decreed: Anyone who is called to a spiritual office is to affirm his loyal duty with the following oath: "I swear that I will be faithful and obedient to Adolf Hitler, the Führer of the German Reich and people, that I will conscientiously observe the laws and carry out the duties of my office, so help me God."<sup>27</sup>

Every pastor who was paid by the Reich Church—including those who were sympathetic to the Confessing Church—had to take the oath or lose his position and salary. (Since Bonhoeffer was paid by the Confessing Church, not the Reich Church, he did not have to take the oath.) The Confessing Church decided that its pastors could take the oath subject to certain understandings, including recognition of the supremacy of the pastor's ordination vows. Those Confessing Church pastors who took the oath—and they were a large majority—viewed it as a matter

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, p. 308



of patriotism and practicality. The minority of pastors who opposed taking the oath, including Bonhoeffer, argued that faithfulness to God must preempt even patriotism. Both sides resented the other.

After the Berlin Olympics ended, Nazi oppression of the Jews steadily worsened. They were systematically deprived of their jobs and property, and were subjected to a campaign of State-sponsored threats, violence, arrest, and torture. A law that took effect on January 1, 1939 required that passports of Jews clearly identify them as Jewish. Foreseeing that this law would make it more difficult for Jews to leave Germany, Gerhard and Sabine Leibholz decided to flee in September 1938. They drove to Switzerland, accompanied most of the way by Bonhoeffer and Bethge, and then traveled on to England. Dietrich wrote to his contacts there—including Bishop George Bell, Pastor Julius Rieger,<sup>28</sup> and Franz Hildebrandt—who helped Gerhard obtain a teaching job at Magdalen College, Oxford.

***Discipleship.*** In July 1926, at a youth service at the Grunewald parish church, Bonhoeffer preached a sermon on the theme, “Believe and obey!” Eleven years later this became the theme of his most famous book, *Nachfolge*—that is, *Discipleship*. Much of the book centers on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 through 7 of Matthew’s Gospel) which Bonhoeffer addresses, not as a fanciful ideal for Christian behavior, but as a goal toward which all Christians should strive. For Bonhoeffer, discipleship simply means following Christ, and following Christ requires obedience to Christ:

Humanly speaking, we could understand and interpret the Sermon on the Mount in a thousand different ways. Jesus knows only one possibility: simple surrender and obedience, not interpreting it or applying it, but doing and obeying it. That is the only way to hear his word. But again he does not mean that it is to be discussed as an ideal, he really means us to get on with it.<sup>29</sup>

Bonhoeffer criticized modern antinomianism—the idea that God’s grace allows us to continue our attachments to this world’s evil practices—calling it “theological error of the first magnitude.”<sup>30</sup> To Bonhoeffer, faith and obedience were two sides of a single coin: “*only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.*”<sup>31</sup> Thus, the person who has faith will strive to be

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<sup>28</sup> Julius Rieger was the pastor of a German congregation in London, St. George’s, which became a first refuge for many Germans who came to England from Nazi Germany.

<sup>29</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 218-219

<sup>30</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 108-109

<sup>31</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 69 (emphasis in original)

obedient, and the person who obeys God will find faith. The abuse of God's grace leads to "cheap grace," by which Bonhoeffer meant:

grace sold on the market like cheapjacks' wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessing with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! . . .

Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian "conception" of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins. The Church which holds the correct doctrine of grace has, it is supposed, *ipso facto* a part in that grace. In such a Church the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin.<sup>32</sup>

Bonhoeffer lamented the laxity and worldliness that cheap grace encourages, for it makes no demands and condones all manner of disobedience to Christ. And he decried those whose commitment to Christ doesn't extend beyond the hours they spend in church each week. Here is a 20<sup>th</sup> century Paul reminding us of what he told the Romans: "Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?"<sup>33</sup>

But like Paul, Bonhoeffer was no legalist, for he recognized that righteousness is not a "personal achievement," but a gift from Christ, who embodied perfect righteousness.<sup>34</sup> We simply follow Christ, try to obey His Word, and endure what He endured: shame, rejection, suffering, and persecution. And we do more than merely endure it, for we also forgive those who inflict it upon us. We embrace the suffering of others by sharing it, by relieving it when we can, and by speaking truth on their behalf, even at the risk of our own safety or welfare. We can do all of this only because Christ enables us to do it.

*Discipleship* contained much that was abhorrent to the Nazis and their German Christian allies. For example, Bonhoeffer asserted that the Christian must be humble and non-violent, two virtues which the Nazis scorned as weakness. He denounced all oaths, including an oath of allegiance—undoubtedly with the

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<sup>32</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 45-46

<sup>33</sup> Romans 6:1-2

<sup>34</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 141

loyalty oath in mind. Furthermore, he opposed the German Christians' perverse nationalism, saying: "The Church is not to be a national community like the old Israel, but a community of believers without political or national ties."<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, he left no doubt that he disagreed with the Nazi view of the Jews, as well as the exclusion of Christians of Jewish heritage from the Church:

Jew and Greek, freeman and bondservant, man and woman now stand within the fellowship as part of the community of the Body of Christ. . . . No law of the world can interfere with this fellowship.<sup>36</sup>

Bonhoeffer finished *Discipleship* in August 1937. It was published in German in November, and in English in 1948 under the title, *The Cost of Discipleship*. The book sold well in Germany despite being largely ignored by book reviewers.

**The Collective Pastorates.** On August 29, 1937, Heinrich Himmler ordered the Confessing Church seminaries to be shut down, since they violated the Fifth Decree. A month later, on September 28<sup>th</sup>, the Gestapo closed Finkenwalde. The other illegal seminaries were closed a short time later.<sup>37</sup> So from late 1937 until March 1940, Bonhoeffer operated two collective pastorates, which were really illegal seminaries disguised as pastoral apprenticeships.<sup>38</sup> The students ostensibly worked for local pastors who were sympathetic to the Confessing Church, but they met secretly with Bonhoeffer to receive pastoral training. He initially located the two collective pastorates near Köslin and Schlawe, remote locations about 30 miles apart in eastern Pomerania, and split his time between the two locations, traveling via motorcycle. In April 1939, the group near Schlawe had to relocate to Sigurdshof,<sup>39</sup> which was even more secluded. Bonhoeffer operated these collective pastorates much like the seminary at Finkenwalde, except that both money and his time were in shorter supply.

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<sup>35</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 157

<sup>36</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 288-289

<sup>37</sup> The Confessing church seminaries at Dortmund, Elberfeld, and Bielefeld were all closed by the end of November 1937. (The seminary at Dortmund had originally been at Bloestau, in East Prussia, but was shut down by the Gestapo and reopened in Dortmund.) The last seminary to be closed was Gerhard Gloege's in Naumburg-on-Queis, which remained open until March 1938.

<sup>38</sup> Similar illegal collective pastorates operated in Elberfeld, directed by Hermann Hesse, and Frankfurt-am-Main, directed by Walter Krek and Karl Gerhard Steck. The Gestapo shut them down on March 18, 1940.

<sup>39</sup> The students at Schlawe were living in a parsonage in Gross-Schlönwitz, but had to relocate when the pastor got married and needed the parsonage.

**Hans von Dohnanyi.** As Nazi oppression grew, Dietrich changed his views about the most effective way to resist Hitler. He had initially counseled students and friends to stand on principle and refuse to compromise with the Nazis, despite the obvious risks to freedom, safety, and worldly success. But by the late 1930s, he advocated keeping private views private, in an effort to obtain (or retain) influence, power, and positions of trust, for only in that way could anyone get close enough to Hitler to forcibly remove him from power.<sup>40</sup> In this new outlook, Dietrich found many friends and allies, including his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi.

Dohnanyi, a lawyer, had worked his way up in the German government. In May 1933 he became an assistant to Franz Gürtner, Reich Minister of Justice. In this position he gained access to reliable information about Nazi abuses, atrocities, scandals, and corruption. He also met several future conspirators against Hitler, including Dr. Karl Sack, head of the army legal department; Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the head of Military Intelligence (the *Abwehr*), and his chief assistant, Colonel Hans Oster; and General Ludwig Beck, the leader of the principle conspiracy to depose or kill Hitler.<sup>41</sup> In August 1939, Dohnanyi joined the *Abwehr* and soon became one of the leading figures in the conspiracy against Hitler. Through Dohnanyi, Bonhoeffer met many members of the conspiracy as

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<sup>40</sup> Eberhard Bethge relates a story which illustrates this change. On June 17, 1940, he and Dietrich were sitting at a café near the village of Memel when a loudspeaker announced the surrender of France. As people cheered, sang, and exulted, Dietrich raised his arm in the Nazi salute, and then turned to Bethge and said, "Raise your arm! Are you crazy?" Later Dietrich whispered to him, "We shall have to run risks for very different things now, but not for that salute!" See *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, p. 681.

<sup>41</sup> The primary conspiracy against Hitler was centered around the German military, and included many members and former members of the German army, led by General Beck. There was, however, a second conspiracy, known as the Kreisau Circle, which was mostly civilians, including Count Helmuth James Graf von Moltke, and Count Peter Graf Yorck von Wartenburg. Many of its members were devout Christians. What distinguished this second group of conspirators was their opposition to the removal of Hitler through assassination, for moral and religious reasons. Bonhoeffer did not trust the members of the Kreisau Circle, and therefore had little contact with them.

Hitler had other opponents, as well. In August 1942, the Germans discovered a spy ring called the *Rote Kapelle* (Red Orchestra), which was passing military information to the Soviets. All 46 members of the spy ring, including one American, Mildred Harnack, were executed. Another spy, code-named "Lucy," managed to elude German intelligence while passing on German battle plans to the Soviets. In February 1943, a small group of Christian war protestors led by Hans and Sophie Scholl, known as the "White Rose," were arrested and later executed.

early as 1938 and became actively involved in about May 1940. Dietrich's brother, Klaus, and his brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher, also joined the conspiracy.

**The Approach of War.** On March 12, 1938 Hitler realized his dream of uniting Austria, the place of his birth, with Germany, his adopted homeland, when Germany invaded and annexed Austria.<sup>42</sup> Next Hitler demanded that Czechoslovakia relinquish the Sudetenland, which was predominantly German in ethnicity. On September 30, 1938, France and Great Britain forced Czechoslovakia to yield to Hitler's demand, banking on Hitler's promise that he would make no more territorial demands in Europe. Six months later he broke his promise by devouring what was left of Czechoslovakia. France and Britain now acted quickly by giving Poland, Rumania, and Greece guarantees of support if Germany should attack.

With war on the horizon, Bonhoeffer faced the very real threat of compulsory military service.<sup>43</sup> (Unlike their counterparts in the Reich Church, Confessing Church pastors were not exempt from the draft.) This state of affairs repulsed him on two levels, since he opposed both war and Hitler. He could have applied to be a conscientious objector, but doing so would have risked the same fate as Hermann Stöhr, whom the Nazis arrested and shot after he asked for such status. With this in mind, in March 1939 Bonhoeffer traveled to England with Eberhard Bethge for consultations with Bishop Bell, Franz Hildebrandt, Julius Rieger, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others.<sup>44</sup> They advised Dietrich to travel to the United States, where they knew he would be safe, and Niebuhr wrote letters to help secure a position for him there. Accepting this advice, Bonhoeffer agreed to go to America for a year, and dutifully applied for permission from the German government.

**Back in America.** On June 4, 1939, Bonhoeffer flew to London, where he boarded a ship for the United States. He arrived in New York on June 12<sup>th</sup>, and immediately had second thoughts about his decision to leave Germany. His writings from that time reveal feelings of homesickness, isolation, and discomfort

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<sup>42</sup> Germany's annexation of Austria in 1938 is known as the *Anschluss*, which in German means "union."

<sup>43</sup> In fact, Bonhoeffer received a notice to report for military duty in May 1939, but was able to get a one-year deferment.

<sup>44</sup> While Bonhoeffer and Bethge were in England, Dr. Werner, head of the Reich Church, foolishly issued the Godesberg Declaration. In it, he asserted that Christianity is "the unbridgeable religious opposite to Judaism," and that the effort to unite Christians under either the Roman Catholic Church or the Protestant ecumenical movement "is a political degeneration of Christianity." This frankly anti-Semitic pronouncement was not well received, and served to reunite the previously divided Confessing Church pastors and leaders.

that he had never felt before. He found the lack of news from Germany frustrating. He worried about the collective pastorates he had left behind in an unsettled condition. He felt useless. And he realized that if hostilities broke out in Europe, he would not be able to return to Germany for the duration of the war.

Dietrich decided his trip to America had been a mistake, and therefore he must return to Germany. The decision was difficult, and not without some second-guessing, for he was fully aware of the risks he was assuming, but he felt compelled to go back. In a diary entry he compared himself to a soldier home on leave during war who feels an irresistible urge to return to the front, “simply because that is where our life is.”<sup>45</sup> And in a letter to Reinhold Niebuhr, he discussed his obligations to the German people: “I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right 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.”<sup>46</sup> In the end, Bonhoeffer decided that God wanted him to return to Germany, and he knew he must obey. He left America on July 7<sup>th</sup>, spent ten days in England, and arrived back in Germany on July 25<sup>th</sup>. While he was en route, Paul Schneider, a Confessing Church pastor, was beaten to death at Buchenwald concentration camp.

**Nazi Atrocities and the Zossen Files.** World War II began with Germany’s invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939.<sup>47</sup> Germany’s initial victories in the War gave Hitler the freedom to implement his diabolical plan to rid Europe of those he considered inferior. Nazi atrocities during the War are discussed in greater detail in Appendix 2, but briefly they included: the murder of five- to six-million people in Nazi death camps; the execution of Russian Jews and Communist leaders; the murder, slow starvation, and forced labor of prisoners and conquered peoples; cruel medical “experiments” that tortured, maimed, and killed hundreds; the T-4 euthanasia program which murdered the physically and mentally handicapped; and the destruction of whole towns and the murder of entire populations in retaliation for local partisan resistance against Nazi rule. Those who tried to oppose these atrocities usually ended up dead or imprisoned.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Diary entry of June 26, 1939, quoted in *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, p. 340

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, p. 655

<sup>47</sup> One of Bonhoeffer’s seminary students, Theodor Maass, was killed during the invasion of Poland. Before the war ended, 80 of Bonhoeffer’s 150 former students would die in the war.

<sup>48</sup> For example, Bernhard Lichtenberg, a Catholic priest, was imprisoned in October 1941 for his criticism of the T4 euthanasia program and the persecution of the Jews. He died in 1943. Heinrich Grüber, a Confessing Church pastor, protested the deportation of German Jews from Stettin in February 1940; he was arrested and placed in a concentration camp. Another

In October 1939, Admiral Canaris directed Hans von Dohnanyi to compile reports, photographs, and films documenting these Nazi crimes. This compilation later became known as the “Zossen files,” or the “Chronicle of Shame.” The conspirators showed portions of this file to military and government leaders who were sympathetic to the interests and goals of the conspiracy, in an effort to obtain their cooperation. While many members of the German army high command dropped out of the conspiracy in 1940, believing Hitler was too successful and too popular to challenge, some of them returned in 1941 and later years because of Hitler’s brutality—and because reversals on the battlefield led them to believe that Germany was going to lose the war.

**Bonhoeffer Joins the Conspiracy Against Hitler.** Because of Hitler’s invasion of nearby Poland, Bonhoeffer suspended the collective pastorates from August 26<sup>th</sup> until mid-October, 1939. During this time he acted as a consultant on Christian faith and ethics for the conspirators against Hitler. This gave him access to some of the information Dohnanyi was gathering about Nazi atrocities, and drew him into the conspirators’ plans and discussions. In August 1940, Dohnanyi helped Dietrich join the *Abwehr*, which provided him with an exemption from military service. With Dohnanyi’s help, Bonhoeffer obtained similar exemptions and deferments for his friend Eberhard Bethge and other Confessing Church pastors. Such exemptions were critical, because in November 1940 the Reich Minister of Labor ordered all Confessing Church pastors and students to be “directed immediately into a suitable occupation”—which usually meant factory work (since most of those fit for military duty had already been drafted). However, most were offered the opportunity to resume their full-time pastoral duties if they would join the Reich Church—and many did so.

In May 1941, the Nazis arrested the 23 members of the Confessing Church’s examination committee—the committee that was responsible for training and ordaining new pastors—and invalidated all Confessing Church ordinations. Bonhoeffer sympathized with the Confessing Church pastors who had lost their livelihood under Nazi rule, and counseled many of them to pursue another line of work for the time being. However, he refused to endorse submission to the Reich Church—for others, or for himself.

**The Conspiracy.** While ostensibly working on behalf of the German war effort, the conspirators were secretly working to undermine it,<sup>49</sup> for they had

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Confessing Church pastor, Katharina Staritz, was arrested for publishing a statement critical of a law which required Jews to wear a yellow star.

<sup>49</sup> Colonel Oster, for example, attempted to warn the Allies of Hitler’s plans to invade Holland, Belgium, and Norway, but his warnings were not taken seriously.

concluded that Hitler and the Nazis had to be defeated for the greater good of all. The conspirators' plans in 1939 involved deposing Hitler, rather than assassination. They enlisted the help of numerous high-ranking Army generals who were concerned about Nazi atrocities as well as Germany's chances in the war. In an effort to encourage the generals to act, the conspirators sent out peace feelers to the British and French, seeking assurances that Germany would be treated leniently if Hitler were deposed. These messages were communicated through the Vatican, with the help of a Munich lawyer, Dr. Josef Müller, who had contacts there. Dohnanyi soon brought Dr. Müller into the *Abwehr*, where he met and became friends with Bonhoeffer.

During 1940 the Nazis placed increasing restrictions upon Bonhoeffer. In March they shut down the collective pastorates. Later that year he published *The Prayerbook of the Bible*, a book focusing on the Psalms and therefore emphasizing the importance of the Jewish Old Testament. Since the Nazis were trying to suppress everything Jewish, they prohibited Bonhoeffer from publishing anything else. Finally, in August 1940 they banned him from speaking in public and ordered him to report regularly to the Gestapo in Schlawe, in eastern Pomerania.<sup>50</sup> As his religious duties necessarily decreased, he had more time to visit Confessing churches, write to his former students, and work on his next book, *Ethics*, which of course could not then be published. And he had time to do certain tasks for the *Abwehr*—that is, for the conspiracy against Hitler.

Dietrich's usefulness to the conspiracy primarily lay in his extensive contacts outside of Germany, some of whom were very influential (such as Bishop Bell). Beginning in 1941, the conspirators asked him to use these contacts to let the Allies know about the conspiracy and to seek assurances that the conspirators could expect reasonable peace terms if Hitler and the Nazis were eliminated.<sup>51</sup> Bonhoeffer did so during 1941 and 1942 while traveling to Sweden, Italy, and Switzerland. During these trips, Bonhoeffer provided information to his contacts abroad about Nazi persecution of the Confessing Church, as well as what he knew of German atrocities, such as the T4 euthanasia program and the deportations of German Jews. He also traveled to Norway in April 1942 to encourage the Norwegian church leaders to resist the Nazi government.

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<sup>50</sup> This requirement to report to the Gestapo was cancelled in January 1941, about five months after Dietrich joined the *Abwehr*.

<sup>51</sup> Official British and American policy was to ignore the conspirators and give them no encouragement, in part to avoid inflaming Soviet suspicions that their allies were seeking a separate peace.



**Operation 7.** In September 1941, Bonhoeffer, Dohnanyi, Admiral Canaris, and other members of the *Abwehr* began work on Operation 7, an effort to smuggle seven Jews to safety in Switzerland. The matter was not as simple as it might seem. A Swiss entry visa did not permit the Jews to work there, so Switzerland would not accept Jews unless they had sufficient resources to support themselves. Since German Jews by this time had been deprived of virtually all of their money and property, the *Abwehr* had to raise enough foreign currency to satisfy Swiss demands. Their task was complicated by the fact that the list of Jews to be saved soon grew from seven to fifteen. Nevertheless, the operation succeeded, as all of the Jews were able to cross into Switzerland during September and October 1942. Shortly thereafter, the Gestapo began to get wise.

The plot came to light in October 1942, when the Gestapo arrested Wilhelm Schmidhuber for smuggling foreign currency abroad. Schmidhuber knew about Operation 7, and under interrogation he implicated Oster, Dohnanyi, and Bonhoeffer. Schmidhuber also told the Gestapo about Bonhoeffer's exemption from military service. Fortunately, the Gestapo's investigation moved slowly, in part because the *Abwehr* resisted the intrusion into its activities, for national security reasons, but also because the Gestapo was searching for evidence that the perpetrators had profited from the venture, and could find none.

**Bonhoeffer in Love.** In June 1942, while Dietrich was visiting his friend and former patron, Ruth von Kleist-Retzow, he was reintroduced to her 18-year-old granddaughter, Maria von Wedemeyer, who had now grown into a beautiful and intelligent young woman. According to Maria, "the rapport was immediate."<sup>52</sup> In early October, Dietrich visited Ruth in a Berlin hospital, where she was recovering from an eye operation. Maria was helping take care of her grandmother, and she and Dietrich spent a lot of time together. Maria even attended a Bonhoeffer family gathering at the residence of Rüdiger and Ursula Schleicher (Dietrich's sister and brother-in-law). Tragedy suddenly overshadowed this blossoming romance when Maria's brother, Max von Wedemeyer, was killed on the eastern front on October 26, 1942. Then Maria's mother intervened.

Maria was the daughter of Hans and Ruth von Wedemeyer. Hans had been killed at Stalingrad on August 21, 1942, and Max's death only two months later must have been devastating for Ruth. In addition, she became alarmed by reports from Maria's grandmother about the relationship between Maria and Dietrich—a relationship which the grandmother was encouraging. Perhaps Ruth worried that things were moving too fast, or that Maria was too young, or perhaps Ruth just couldn't face "losing" a daughter so soon after the death of her husband and son.

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Letters & Papers From Prison*, p. 413

In any event, Ruth asked Dietrich not to attend Max's funeral. A month later she asked Dietrich to stop writing to Maria, and when he asked for permission to propose marriage, Ruth asked him to wait a year. Unfortunately, Dietrich and Maria did not have a year.

During the next several months, Dietrich and Maria had little contact, and he contented himself with helping to craft the Freiburg memorandum, which was a plan for a post-war Germany after the Nazis. Several experts contributed to the effort. So did Friedrich Justus Perels, who had been the attorney for the Confessing Church, and Carl Goerdeler, the former mayor of Leipzig who had resigned in protest against Nazi anti-Semitism.

While Dietrich was content to wait, out of respect for Maria's family, Maria would not be so easily put off. By January 1943 she convinced her mother to relent. Maria and Dietrich became engaged on January 17<sup>th</sup>. For several months the engagement was kept very low-key, at the request of her mother. Dietrich informed only his parents and his closest friend, Eberhard Bethge. But everything changed for the lovers on April 5, 1943.

**Bonhoeffer Under Arrest.** On that day, Judge Advocate Manfred Roeder and Gestapo agent Sonderegger arrested Bonhoeffer at his parents' residence. That same day, the Gestapo also arrested Hans von Dohnanyi, Christine von Dohnanyi, and Josef Müller and his wife Anni Müller,<sup>53</sup> and placed Colonel Oster under house arrest. The arrests were in connection with several relatively trivial matters: Operation 7, the military exemptions, and Bonhoeffer's trips abroad. Fortunately, the Gestapo was not yet aware of the conspiracy, much less two assassination attempts against Hitler less than a month earlier.<sup>54</sup>

Eighteen days after their arrests, Dohnanyi wrote a letter to Dietrich expressing his regret at being the reason for the arrests of Dietrich and Christine. This was in part for the ears of Judge Advocate Roeder, since the plan all along

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<sup>53</sup> Christine was held until April 30<sup>th</sup>, and then released. Anni Müller was also released after a relatively short period of detention. Josef Müller was tried and acquitted in March, 1944, but was then moved to a concentration camp. As discussed below, he survived the War.

<sup>54</sup> The first was Operation Flash, on March 13, 1943. Dohnanyi carried a bomb disguised as a bottle of brandy to Smolensk, where General Henning von Tresckow and his aide, Fabian von Schlabrendorff, got it on board Hitler's plane. The bomb was supposed to explode during the flight back to Germany, but it failed to detonate. Eight days later, Major Rudolf-Christoph von Gersdorff volunteered to carry out a suicide mission, using two bombs in his overcoat, each with a ten-minute fuse. He planned to get close to Hitler at a Heroes' Memorial Day celebration, where the Fuhrer was scheduled to spend 30 minutes inspecting captured Soviet weaponry. But Hitler cut the visit short before the bombs could explode. Bonhoeffer, Colonel Oster, Hans and Christine Dohnanyi, and Rüdiger Schleicher were fully aware of these attempts.

had been for Dohnanyi to take responsibility if any of the others were caught. But Dietrich's response, in a letter dated May 5<sup>th</sup>, demonstrates his compassionate spirit:

For you must know that there is not even an atom of reproach or bitterness in me about what has befallen the two of us. Such things come from God and from him alone, and I know that I am one with you and Christel in believing that before him there can only be subjection, perseverance, patience—and gratitude.<sup>55</sup>

The Gestapo took Dietrich to the Wehrmacht Interrogation Prison at Tegel, where he was interrogated by Judge Advocate Roeder for several months. By pre-arrangement with Dohnanyi and others, Dietrich played dumb. He portrayed himself as a naïve pastor trying to do his patriotic duty by carrying out the instructions of those with far more knowledge of military intelligence than himself. Of course, he said nothing that would hint at the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. The strategy worked well. At the end of July the only charge Roeder filed against Dohnanyi and Bonhoeffer addressed the military exemptions for Dietrich and another Confessing Church pastor. The remaining allegations were dropped.

By this time, Germany's ultimate defeat was becoming apparent. The Allies had taken North Africa and landed in Sicily, Mussolini had been deposed in Italy, and the Germans were beginning the long retreat from Russia after suffering a catastrophic defeat at Kursk. Dietrich's family hired Dr. Kurt Wergin as Dietrich's attorney and pressed for a quick trial. However, Admiral Canaris and Dr. Sack frustrated these desires by repeatedly getting the trial date postponed. Germany's changing fortunes had given the conspiracy new life, and another assassination attempt began to take shape. Canaris and Sack hoped Hitler's death would remove the Nazis from power and render Dietrich's trial unnecessary.

**Bonhoeffer in Prison.** Dietrich's cell at Tegel prison was Spartan by any standards: a seven foot by ten foot cell, with a bed, bench, stool, and a bucket instead of a toilet. Bread and meat were scarce, and soup often consisted of little more than broth. For twelve days Dietrich remained in his cell 24 hours a day. The guards opened the cell door only to bring in food and empty the bucket. His Bible was returned after 48 hours, but not his books or cigarettes, two of his favorite pastimes.

The prisoners had few books, no games, and no religious services. During winter months they often had to sit in the dark for hours simply because the guards would not turn on the lights. Many of the guards were abusive, and those who

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<sup>55</sup> As quoted in *Letters and Papers From Prison*, p. 32 ("Christel" refers to Christine Dohnanyi).

weren't could do nothing about those who were. All requests had to be made to the guards, who frequently ignored them.

Understandably, Dietrich was at times despondent, homesick, and lonely, and in the beginning he even considered suicide. He missed his family terribly, and longed for the quiet life he and Maria had dreamed of. He expressed this internal turmoil in the poem, "Who Am I?," which is reproduced in Appendix 1, below. His inability to force his case to trial frustrated him, for he believed—perhaps naively—that it would lead to his freedom.<sup>56</sup> In addition, he suffered from some physical afflictions, including severe rheumatism and occasional bouts of influenza. Nevertheless, he eventually became accustomed to the privations of prison life, and came to view his confinement as part of God's plan, which he knew he must simply accept. In fact, he found it embarrassing when conditions improved slightly for him after the prison staff learned that his maternal uncle, General Paul von Hase, was the military commandant of Berlin—and therefore the boss of the Tegel Prison warden.<sup>57</sup> Dietrich reluctantly accepted the better treatment except when it came at the expense of his fellow prisoners.<sup>58</sup>

Dietrich tried to use his new status to help others. He often confronted abusive guards and attempted to persuade—or intimidate—they into moderating their behavior toward the inmates. He helped some of his fellow inmates with their cases by raising money to pay for their defense or by asking his father to help them obtain a psychiatric report. Through this type of assistance, Dietrich saved a few from the death penalty. In the spring of 1944, he wrote a "Report on Prison Life" detailing the abuses he and others had suffered, in the hope that his Uncle Paul would read it and take action. Bonhoeffer freely shared both his food and his advice, prayed with those facing execution, and sometimes wrote prayers to help the prison chaplains. He was no less generous with the money he had saved prior to his arrest, insisting that Eberhard and Renate Bethge help themselves to whatever they needed.

Throughout his imprisonment, Dietrich followed a routine similar to that of the illegal seminaries and the collective pastorates: physical exercise, meditation,

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<sup>56</sup> In Nazi Germany, acquittal did not necessarily mean freedom. Martin Niemöller was tried and acquitted in 1938, and Josef Müller was tried and acquitted in 1944, but neither was freed. Instead, they were simply moved to a concentration camp.

<sup>57</sup> Paul von Hase came to visit Dietrich on June 30, 1944, staying for about five hours. Soon thereafter, on August 8<sup>th</sup>, General von Hase was hanged by the Nazis for his role in the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life.

<sup>58</sup> For example, he refused larger food rations, because they were taken from the portions of other prisoners. And he refused to be moved to a cooler cell, since someone else would have to endure his own hotter cell.

and Bible reading. He could not write to anyone until April 14<sup>th</sup>, when he wrote his parents, and he could not write to Maria until July. At first he could write only one letter every ten days. Beginning in July he was allowed to write once every four days, and alternated between his parents and Maria. Of course, the prison authorities read all correspondence going out or coming in, so he had to be very careful what he said.<sup>59</sup> However, the Bonhoeffers had planned for this contingency in advance, and were able to send and receive short messages hidden in the lids of jars or in books.<sup>60</sup> In this way, Dietrich was able to learn valuable information about the Gestapo's investigation.

Maria did not learn of Dietrich's arrest until April 18<sup>th</sup>, nearly two weeks after it happened, and could not visit him until June 24<sup>th</sup>. She would visit him a total of seventeen times, the last on August 23, 1944. Sixteen of these visits were supervised.<sup>61</sup> Judge Advocate Roeder denied Dietrich's parents permission to visit him until September 1943, although once a week they brought him food, clean clothes, and books.

Bonhoeffer's patience and compassion won him many friends among the guards, especially those with no love for the Nazis. This led to some special privileges, like ministering to his fellow prisoners—and even to some of the guards. He gained almost unlimited access to the prison sick-bay and its radio, on which he enjoyed listening to music. From November 1943 until September 1944, a friendly guard smuggled letters to and from Bethge, and sometimes Maria, which prison officials never read.<sup>62</sup> This allowed Dietrich to be much more open and direct with them than was possible in the normal prison correspondence.

**Waiting for July 20<sup>th</sup>.** The conspiracy suffered a serious setback with the arrests of Dohnanyi and Oster in April 1943, since it lost two of its most active and influential members. Many months passed before the conspirators were able to reorganize and move on with the plot to kill Hitler. They suffered another blow in February 1944, when the *Abwehr* was dissolved. But Germany's looming defeat in the war, and the Nazis' brutality, brought more and more military leaders into the

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<sup>59</sup> Two subjects were never discussed in these letters, for obvious reasons: (1) the facts underlying the charges against Bonhoeffer, and (2) the progress of the War, including the possibility of defeat.

<sup>60</sup> In books, the Bonhoeffers would place a single pencil mark under a letter of a word every 3 or 10 pages, from back to front, in order to spell out a message.

<sup>61</sup> During one of Maria's visits, a Corporal Holzendorf locked Dietrich and Maria in the visitor's cell so they could talk alone.

<sup>62</sup> The last letter that we have from Bonhoeffer to Bethge is dated August 23, 1944. Although Bonhoeffer wrote letters to Bethge during September, also, Bethge destroyed them when his own arrest seemed imminent.

plot, in the hope that the war could be ended before Germany's ruin was complete. Among them was Colonel Count Klaus Philip Schenk von Stauffenberg, who soon became the prime mover among the conspirators. He would almost succeed.

By April 1944, Dietrich had become resigned to the fact that his fate would not be decided in a trial, but by the attempt to overthrow Hitler. So during the final six months of his imprisonment at Tegel, he read books and worked on *Ethics*, as well as another book which has been lost. His letters from this time reflect his growing discontent with the Christianity of his day. He was highly critical of "religion" which turns God into little more than a benevolent charity, giving away solutions, assistance, and ultimately salvation, but who is otherwise irrelevant to most people's lives. To Bonhoeffer, Christianity is Christ, who impacts every aspect of a person's life, and who is as relevant today as He has ever been. Dietrich rejected the false choice between God and science, for science seeks truth and Christ is Truth.

Bonhoeffer wanted the Church to stop being aloof and dogmatic. He wanted the Church to talk about tough questions. He wanted the Church to reach out to those outside the Church. Most of all, he wanted the Church to help and serve people, just as Christ did.

While Dietrich sometimes looked forward to the possibility of peace and freedom, he often seemed unconcerned about his own fate. He knew that death might be his ultimate end, and he accepted that possibility. In a letter to Bethge on April 11, 1944, Dietrich insisted that he did not regret his decision to return to Germany in July 1939.<sup>63</sup>

**July 20, 1944.** As the Russians marched through Poland and the Americans prepared to break out from their coastal positions in France, Colonel Stauffenberg entered *Wolfsschanze* (Wolf's Lair), Hitler's military headquarters in East Prussia, ostensibly to make a presentation to the Fuhrer at 1:00 p.m. Stauffenberg carried a briefcase containing a powerful bomb, with which he planned to assassinate Hitler. After Hitler's death was confirmed, various senior military officers would seize power, depose the Nazis, and open peace negotiations with the Allies. The plan almost worked, but for two unfortunate circumstances.

First, the meeting was moved from an underground bunker to an above-ground conference barracks. The bunker would have contained the blast and

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<sup>63</sup> Here is an excerpt from that letter: "I heard someone say yesterday that the last years had been completely wasted as far as he was concerned. I'm very glad that I have never yet had that feeling, even for a moment. Nor have I ever regretted my decision in the summer of 1939, for I'm firmly convinced—however strange it may seem—that my life has followed a straight and unbroken course, at any rate in its outward conduct. It has been an uninterrupted enrichment of experience, for which I can only be thankful." *Letters and Papers From Prison*, p. 272.

directed its full force against those inside, probably killing everyone. Instead, the barracks allowed the force of the explosion to escape the confines of the room, losing some of its effect. Second, the barracks was furnished with a five-foot by eighteen-foot solid oak table, supported by a wide, sturdy beam at each end. After starting the bomb fuse, Colonel Stauffenberg placed his briefcase near Hitler and then quietly slipped out of the room. But before the bomb went off, somebody moved the briefcase to the other side of one of the beams, shielding the Fuhrer from the full force of the explosion. Hitler received minor wounds, but remained very much alive. He regarded his survival as the work of Providence—and perhaps it was.

The failure of the assassination plot led to widespread arrests and executions. Some, like General Beck and Colonel Stauffenberg, were killed that same day.<sup>64</sup> Others were arrested and given a show trial in the People's Court, which Hitler had established in 1934 to do the Nazis' bidding. Altogether, almost 5,000 persons were executed in connection with the plot, and many of the conspirators' family members were confined in concentration camps.

Dietrich heard about the failed assassination attempt on the prison sickbay radio on July 21<sup>st</sup>, and must have known that his future was now in serious jeopardy. If the Nazi investigation uncovered his role in the conspiracy, he would be a dead man. Two months later, his fate was sealed.

**Discovery of the Zossen Files.** For years Hans von Dohnanyi had been compiling and indexing the accumulating evidence of Nazi atrocities, scandals, and corruption. In addition, he had files covering the conspirators' activities, including multiple plans for a coup d'état, notes of efforts to win the support of military leaders and foreign dignitaries, and reports on Bonhoeffer's trips abroad. After Dohnanyi's arrest, the files were supposed to be destroyed or buried,<sup>65</sup> but many remained at the army headquarters at Zossen, where the Gestapo discovered them on September 20, 1944.

The Zossen files provided incriminating evidence against Admiral Canaris, Colonel Oster, Josef Müller, Dr. Karl Sack, Dohnanyi, Bonhoeffer, and others. From that moment forward, these men could only try to stall for time in the hope that they might be rescued by the advancing Allied armies. At this, Dohnanyi excelled, due to his deteriorating physical condition. In June 1944 he had

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<sup>64</sup> Colonel Stauffenberg's last words, just before he was shot by a firing squad, were: "Long live our sacred Germany!"

<sup>65</sup> After his arrest, Dohnanyi had sent a message to Colonel Oster, through Christine Dohnanyi, to destroy the files. However, General Beck forbade their destruction, due to their historical importance. He directed that the files be buried instead, but this was only partially accomplished.

contracted diphtheria and suffered partial paralysis of his legs, arms, and back. Now he studied the disease and exaggerated his symptoms, trying to convince the Nazis that he was too ill to be put on trial. He pretended to be helpless, and even tried to contract dysentery so he could be moved to a hospital.

Meanwhile, Dietrich planned an escape. With the help of his family and a friendly guard, Dietrich intended to slip out of the prison and “disappear” along with the guard. However, on October 1<sup>st</sup>, the Gestapo arrested his brother, Klaus. The arrest made Dietrich realize that an escape might provoke retaliation against Maria and his family members, so he abandoned the plan. A week later, it was too late.

**Gestapo Prison.** On October 8<sup>th</sup>, the Nazis moved Dietrich to the Gestapo prison on *Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse* in Berlin, to an underground cell, five-feet by eight-feet. The prison had a community shower with no hot water. Meals consisted of bread or soup, but could sometimes be supplemented with food parcels from loved ones—which Dietrich always shared. The prisoners did not go above ground, and could exercise only in their cells. The inmates could occasionally write letters, but the Gestapo did not permit visits.

Several other conspirators arrived at this prison, including Friedrich Justus Perels, Carl Goerdeler, Admiral Canaris, Josef Müller, Colonel Oster, Dr. Sack, Fabian von Schlabrendorff, and others.<sup>66</sup> Rüdiger Schleicher and Eberhard Bethge had also been arrested,<sup>67</sup> but they were held at the Gestapo prison at Number 3 *Lehrter Strasse*, along with Klaus Bonhoeffer. The Gestapo interrogated many of these persons under excruciating torture for months. Even Dohnanyi, now partially paralyzed and blind due to a stroke, suffered under this Nazi brutality.

From what we know, the Gestapo did not torture Dietrich, although he was interrogated for four months and repeatedly threatened with the arrests of Maria, his parents, and his sisters if he did not cooperate fully. Despite this, he strove to convey as little truthful information as possible. He denied what he could, and

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<sup>66</sup> Hans von Dohnanyi was not among them. He had been initially confined in an army prison. In November 1943 he was hospitalized when he suffered a brain embolism from an Allied bomb. Due to his infirmities, he remained in various hospitals until August 1944, when he was transferred to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. On February 1, 1945, he was taken to the Gestapo prison at *Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse* in Berlin, where he briefly saw Dietrich again. On April 6, 1945, Dohnanyi was returned to Sachsenhausen, where he was tried, condemned, and executed.

<sup>67</sup> According to Bethge, he was not executed because the Gestapo did not know of his close association with Bonhoeffer, and was only interested in Bethge’s relationship with his father-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher, another member of the conspiracy. See Preface to *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*.



sought to explain away what the Nazis knew. In this, he was largely successful. But he did eventually admit that he considered himself to be an enemy of National Socialism, based on his Christian convictions, while maintaining that he was nevertheless a loyal German. The Nazis must have wondered at this—for them, it was a contradiction.

Dietrich accepted his new surroundings with the same calm and peace he had often displayed at Tegel. He treated even the vilest guards politely, and won over many of them with his patience and kindness. He tried to encourage his fellow prisoners, and often quoted Biblical passages to comfort them or give them hope. He continued to read books and work on his writings, and even received a few new books from his family. In mid-December he wrote to Maria—it would be the last letter she would receive from him.

On January 16, 1945, Adolf Hitler entered his Berlin bunker for the last time—he would never again leave it alive. The next day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his last letter to his parents. In it, he urged them to give away any of his possessions that might be of any use to anyone. Perhaps, as his letter states, he felt “a great need to do whatever is possible for the general good within the narrow limits” of his imprisonment.<sup>68</sup> Or perhaps he wrote that for their benefit because he knew that his time was quickly running out.

**Buchenwald.** On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Nazis executed Carl Goerdeler. That same day, the People’s Court sentenced Klaus Bonhoeffer, Rüdiger Schleicher, and Friedrich Justus Perels to death. Allied bombs saved Fabian von Schlabrendorff from a similar judgment the next day when they destroyed the Court and killed its President, Roland Freisler. The bombs also damaged the Gestapo prison at *Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse*, so the Nazis moved the prisoners on February 7<sup>th</sup>. Dietrich and Josef Müller ended up at Buchenwald concentration camp, while Admiral Canaris, Colonel Oster, and Dr. Sack went to Flossenbürg concentration camp. Dietrich’s family learned of the move a week later, but were not told where he had been sent. Maria tried for several weeks to locate him, but without success.

Dietrich and Müller spent the next seven weeks in a cellar which had been converted into a jail. They were confined with 15 others, including two females, two British officers,<sup>69</sup> and a Soviet officer. Food and heat were inadequate, and

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<sup>68</sup> Letter of January 17, 1945 from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to his parents, as quoted in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 401.

<sup>69</sup> One of the British officers was Captain S. Payne Best, whose account provides almost all of the information we have on Bonhoeffer’s last few weeks. Captain Best was a British intelligence officer whom the Germans suspected was behind an attempted assassination of Hitler by a Communist sympathizer on November 8, 1939. German S.S. agents abducted Captain Best from

daylight was non-existent. Dietrich and his cell mate, General Freidrich von Rabenau, another member of the conspiracy, played chess and discussed theology. Dietrich seemed calm and full of joy, never complaining about his circumstances. Captain Payne Best, one of the British officers, wrote to the Bonhoeffer family after the war that Dietrich “was, without exception, the finest and most lovable man I have ever met.”<sup>70</sup> Best also wrote of Dietrich: “He was one of the very few men that I have ever met to whom his God was real and ever close to him.”<sup>71</sup>

**The End Comes.** By the end of March, 1945, the British and Americans were well inside Germany’s western border, and the Soviets were closing in on Berlin. On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, eight days before the Allies liberated Buchenwald, Bonhoeffer, Müller, and 13-14 other prisoners were moved. The Nazis dropped off Müller and two of the other prisoners at Flossenbürg on April 4<sup>th</sup>, and the rest continued on to the state prison at Regensburg. Two days later, the group reached Schönberg, where they spent a relatively comfortable night locked in a school. Dietrich did not know it yet, but Hitler had issued an order for his execution.

The next morning, April 8<sup>th</sup>, was a Sunday, and the other prisoners unanimously insisted that Dietrich perform a church service,<sup>72</sup> even though most of them were Catholic. Soon after the service ended, two men appeared at the door and announced, “Prisoner Bonhoeffer. Get ready to come with us.” The Nazis had discovered their error. Bonhoeffer should have been left at Flossenbürg on April 4<sup>th</sup> so that he could be tried and executed, but another man was dropped off by mistake. Dietrich knew. He turned to Payne Best and said, “This is the end; for me the beginning of life.”<sup>73</sup>

That evening, Dietrich, Admiral Canaris, Colonel Oster, Dr. Sack, Theodor Strünck, and Captain Ludwig Gehre were all given a summary trial and

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Holland, along with his partner, Major R. Stevens, and brought them to Germany, where they remained for the duration of the War. The other British officer with Bonhoeffer at Buchenwald was Hugh Falconer.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted from *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, p. 920

<sup>71</sup> Quoted from *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, p. 514

<sup>72</sup> The Scriptures for Bonhoeffer’s sermon were Isaiah 53:5 and 1 Peter 1:3:

Isaiah 53:5: “But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being *fell* upon him, And by His scourging we are healed.

1 Peter 1:3: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

<sup>73</sup> Quoted from *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, p. 528

condemned by S.S. Judge Dr. Otto Thorbeck. Early the next morning—Monday, April 9, 1945—Dietrich prayed and then bravely walked up the steps to the gallows. After saying another short prayer, he was hanged. The camp doctor at Flossenbürg, H. Fischer-Hüllstrung, observed the scene and commented, “In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.”<sup>74</sup> The Nazis burned Dietrich’s body.

His fellow prisoners—Canaris, Oster, Sack, Strünck, and Gehre—were also executed on April 9<sup>th</sup>. At Sachsenhausen, Hans von Dohnanyi was executed the same day. Two weeks later, on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, the S.S. shot Rüdiger Schleicher, Klaus Bonhoeffer, Friedrich Justus Perels, and a dozen other prisoners at the Lehrter Strasse Gestapo prison. As Germany collapsed into chaos, Josef Müller, Fabian von Schlabrendorff, and Martin Niemöller escaped into Italy, where the American Army took them into custody.

Because communications in Germany broke down in the final days of the War, information about Dietrich’s death had to migrate by word of mouth, where it eventually reached Bishop Bell, Pastor Julius Reiger, and the Leibholz’s in London. Maria von Wedemeyer, who had fled west from the approaching Soviet army, received the news in June.<sup>75</sup> Dietrich’s parents,<sup>76</sup> who remained in Berlin, learned of his fate when they heard a radio broadcast of a London memorial service for their sons, Dietrich and Klaus, on July 27, 1945. On the one-year anniversary of Dietrich’s death—April 9, 1946—a memorial service was held for him in Berlin.

**Conclusion.** We value most highly that which endures—thus, gold and diamonds are more valuable than paper and cardboard. For this reason, Hitler’s philosophy, which valued race and nation above individuals, is the logical outcome of rejecting God. To one like Hitler, for whom God is a fantasy and eternal life a myth, only the nation—the people as a whole—has lasting value. As Hitler said, “Life is the Nation. The individual must die anyway. Beyond the life of the individual is the Nation.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, the welfare of the individual becomes secondary to that of the country. This often leads to oppression of individuals “for the good

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted from *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, p. 532.

<sup>75</sup> Not long after learning of Dietrich’s death, Maria immigrated to the United States, where she went through two marriages and two divorces, and raised two children. She also graduated from Bryn Mawr College, a women’s college in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, and eventually became a department head for Honeywell in Massachusetts. She died of cancer in 1977.

<sup>76</sup> Karl Bonhoeffer died in 1948, and Paula Bonhoeffer died in 1951. Five of Dietrich’s siblings survived the War—Karl-Friedrich died in 1957, Christine in 1965, Ursula in 1983, Susanne in 1991, and Sabine in 1999.

<sup>77</sup> As quoted in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, p. 933

of the nation,” which the Nazis took to extremes in line with their perverted, hate-filled philosophy.

In contrast, the Christian regards individuals as priceless, for although heaven and earth will pass away, <sup>78</sup> the one to whom God grants eternal life will live forever. <sup>79</sup> Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was such a Christian. For him, God was real, people mattered, and obedience to God trumped loyalty to country. As the world turned a blind eye, and as many of his fellow German citizens meekly embraced the Nazi evil in the interest of patriotism or security, Dietrich courageously stood up for what was true and right and good.

I consider C.S. Lewis to be the voice of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christianity, <sup>80</sup> but Dietrich Bonhoeffer was its conscience. He preached faith and obedience to God, and in 1939 he demonstrated both when he answered God’s call to return to the Hell that Nazi Germany had become. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, God’s grace was not cheap, for obedience to God cost him his life. But he would have considered that a small price to pay. As he wrote in 1939: “. . . our death is really only the gateway to the perfect love of God.” <sup>81</sup>

(For more on Hitler and the Nazis, see Appendix 2, HITLER’S RISE AND FALL.)

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<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Matthew 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 21:33, and Revelation 21:1.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Matthew 19:29, 25:46; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30; John 3:15-16, 3:36, 4:14, 5:24, 6:40, 6:47, 6:51, 6:54, 6:58, 10:28, 12:25, 17:2, etc.

<sup>80</sup> For more on the life of C.S. Lewis, see the article, “C.S. Lewis,” on this web site.

<sup>81</sup> From a letter written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1939 to his former Finkenwalde seminary students, quoted in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, p. 661.

APPENDIX 1: "Who Am I?," written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in about July 1944, during his imprisonment in the Wehrmacht Interrogation Prison at Tegel:

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

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

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

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?  
Or am I only what I 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,  
trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation,  
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 today, and tomorrow another?  
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
and before myself a contemptibly 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.

## APPENDIX 2: HITLER'S RISE AND FALL

(See separate document, on this web site.)

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