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In Search of His Hand

Christian Classics and Devotions



Doug Brown, Editor

In this regular feature column each issue's theme is approached via devotional classics and written prayers. Devotional classics are those reports or interpretations of Christian experience which have transcended their temporal and cultural origins.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. **Cost of Discipleship.**
Trans. R. H. Fuller. New York:
Macmillan, 1959.

You likely have read Bonhoeffer's **Cost of Discipleship**. If not, frequently heard phrases from the first section, such as "cheap grace" and "costly grace," invite you to pull it from a library shelf. However, far fewer persons know much of the context surrounding Bonhoeffer's lectures.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), among the youngest of several siblings, continued the family tradition of leadership. His father made his mark in psychology. His older brothers, in physics and politics. The likes of Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and Adolph Harnack were regular guests in the Bonhoeffer home.

Dietrich, to the surprise but not opposition of his respectfully agnostic or non-institutionally religious family member, decided as a teenager to be a churchman. By 1927, he had earned research and teaching doctorates in theology from the University of Berlin. With dissertations focused on the doctrine of the church, he left clear evidence of his drift from Harnack's cultural optimism to Barth's more recent cultural pessi-

mism as the perception of the human situation against which theology is worked out. He gained experience pertinent to both career options available to him—pastoral and academic.

By 1930 the National Socialist Party had rather suddenly emerged as an influential minority party in German politics. When a coalition made Hitler chancellor in January 1933, Bonhoeffer had already aligned himself with the churchmen who quickly formed the Emergency Pastors League. Most who took this courageous step hoped to stem Hitler's efforts to gain control of the leadership of the Christian community in Germany. Bonhoeffer, moved more by "the Jewish question," hoped that the "confessing churches" would reproduce the effect non-violent resistance was having in India under Gandhi's leadership.

The "confessing churches" needed leaders trained for ethical steadfastness and spiritual resiliency as well as theological acumen. The universities could not be relied upon. The Emergency Pastors League founded Finkenwalde Seminary in 1934. They asked Bonhoeffer to be the president. Among his efforts to prepare these young men for potentially life-threatening ministries, Bonhoeffer lectured on the Sermon on the Mount. He admonished the students to commit themselves to a Christ-centered, categorically non-violent confrontation with the concrete evil that had

gripped Germany. **Cost of Discipleship** is a transcription of notes from these lectures.

Thorough attention to the historical context of this devotional classic must follow the story of Bonhoeffer and the "confessing churches" into the war years. By 1937 these protesting churches had been outlawed. By 1939 they had been contained, left to turn inward with an agenda reduced to survival. Bonhoeffer, facing either flight or conscription, instead joined a covert effort in a branch of the military's secret services determined to bring Hitler down by coup or assassina-

tion. In reflections written before (**Ethics**) and after his 1943 arrest (**Letters and Papers from Prison**), Bonhoeffer felt compelled to account for the violence and duplicity that now marked his discipleship.

After kneeling in prayer, Bonhoeffer died by hanging April 6, 1945.

I recommend without hesitation the life of this martyr to those ready to ponder the call to leadership in the name of Christ (Eberhard Bethge's **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** is the definitive biography.) A prayer from Bonhoeffer's prison months closes this column:

Who Am I
June 1944

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, smiling, 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 colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
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,
faith, 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, though knowest, O God, I am thine.

(**Letters and Papers from Prison**, pp. 347-48)