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Equipping End-Time Saints

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DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: THE REAL MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

By Carol Rushton

Note: This article is in honor of the 71st anniversary of the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

"SILENCE IN THE FACE
OF EVIL IS ITSELF EVIL:
GOD WILL NOT HOLD US
GUILTY. NOT TO
SPEAK IS TO SPEAK.
NOT TO ACT IS TO ACT."
- DIETRICH BONHOEFFER



A Man for All Seasons tells the story of Thomas More, the Chancellor of England, who refused to sanction King Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon so he could marry his mistress, Anne Boleyn, whom Henry hoped would give him the son and heir Catherine could not. More refused to compromise his biblical principles, and King Henry rewarded More by having him executed.



While no one can argue that More was certainly a man of principle, standing up to an egotistical, out-of-control despot, More was not facing the multiple threats to life and liberty that we are today. The governments of most countries are led by petty, narcissistic officials who have no problem threatening and imprisoning their own citizens but cower and cave when confronted by dictators. If these countries have legislatures at all, they are usually little more than rubber stamps for the nation's leader and his agenda, no matter which political party (or parties) is in power. Candidates running in elections almost always promise their constituents what they know in advance they will never do once they are sworn into office, leaving citizens feeling frustrated and disillusioned with the political process and with no way to change it.

ISIS, Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, PLO, Hamas, Hezbollah, Al Nusra Front, PFLP, Al Shaba'ab, or any of their other half-dozen splinter groups are taking over portions of countries, terrorizing populaces through car and human suicide bombings, IEDs, crucifixions, and beheadings. Each new terror group that pops up tries to outdo its predecessors, becoming more hideous, more grotesque, more inhumane than the ones before it.

Christians and non-Muslim religious minorities are especially targeted by these terror groups, facing either death if they refuse to convert to Islam, forced to pay a crushing jizya tax that will not enable them to survive, or flee to who knows where. The women are sold as sex slaves to Muslims where they are raped repeatedly. One told a BBC reporter sobbing, "If you know where we are please bomb us . . . There is no life after this. I'm going to kill myself anyway - others have killed themselves this morning . . . I've been raped 30 times and it's not even lunchtime. I can't go to the toilet. Please bomb us."

Attacks against traditional moral institutions like marriage and the family that have been the bedrocks of civilization for thousands of years are commonplace. The onslaught of an increasingly perverse and lawless society now

celebrates what has always been considered depraved and corrupt while demonizing and destroying those who only want to quietly live out the Judeo-Christian principles of their faith as God has revealed it to them.

The bane of anti-Semitism is raising its ugly head once again, like a dog returning to its vomit. Not limited to just Europe, the cry, "Let's blame the Jews!" with its corresponding violent acts can be heard in every corner of the world, including shamefully in our own country.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived in a time not so long ago, not so very different from today. Hitler and those who followed him would first lead and destroy Bonhoeffer's nation, and then engulf the entire world in an insanity that could never find fulfillment and satisfaction without destroying everything and everyone in its path and still thirst for more. Hitler's ability to convince the German people to cast aside their traditional religious and moral values to reshape their country into something it was never supposed to be is much like what is going on in the United States today.

When others in Germany's Christian church wavered and hesitated, Bonhoeffer stood fast. When many German Christians worshipped at the altar of Hitler and the Nazis, Bonhoeffer continued kneeling at the cross of Christ. When Hitler persecuted and then killed the Jews, Bonhoeffer defended and aided the Jews. When Hitler threatened his opponents, Bonhoeffer condemned and continued condemning Hitler and the Nazis for what they were doing, even though Bonhoeffer knew it might someday cost him his life.

Even before Hitler became chancellor, the Bonhoeffer family knew Hitler was evil. In a speech he gave - coincidentally? - two days after Hitler was elected chancellor, Bonhoeffer explained the true meaning of leadership.

"If he [the leader] understands his function in any other way than as it is rooted in fact, if he does not continually tell his followers quite clearly of the limited nature of his task and of their own responsibility, if he allows himself to surrender to the wishes of his followers, who would always make him their idol - then the image of the Leader will pass over into the image of the mis-leader, and he will be acting in a criminal way not only toward those he leads, but also toward himself. The true Leader must always be able to disillusion. It is just this that is his responsibility and his real object. He must lead his following away from the authority of his person to the recognition of the real authority of orders and offices. . .He must radically refuse to become the appeal, the idol, i.e. the ultimate authority of those whom he leads. . .He serves the order of the state, of the community, and his service can be of incomparable value. But only so long as he keeps strictly in his place. . .He must let himself be controlled, ordered, restricted. . .

"Only when a man sees that office is a penultimate authority in the face of an ultimate, indescribable authority, in the face of the authority of God, has the real situation been reached. And before this Authority the individual knows himself to be completely alone. The individual is responsible before God. And this solitude of man's position before God, this subjection to an ultimate authority, is destroyed when the authority of the Leader or of the office is seen as ultimate authority . . . Alone before God, man becomes what he is, free and committed in responsibility at the same time.

"The fearful danger of the present time is that above the cry for authority, be it of a Leader or of an office, we forget that man stands alone before the ultimate authority and that anyone who lays violent hands on man here is infringing eternal laws and taking upon himself superhuman authority which will eventually crush him. The eternal law that the individual stands alone before God takes fearful vengeance where it is attacked and distorted. Thus the Leader points to the office, but Leader and office together point to the final authority itself, before which Reich or state are penultimate authorities. Leaders or offices which set themselves up as gods mock God and the individual who stands alone before him, and must perish" ("The Younger Generation's Altered Concept of Leadership," 1933).

Bonhoeffer was not yet even 27 when he wrote this.

Bonhoeffer never shied away from trying to warn his fellow Germans in his sermons, in his writings, and in his confrontations with less politically and religiously astute colleagues, defying them if necessary, but always politely.

He never stopped working to wake up the German church and save his country, even if it meant eventually becoming involved in one of the plots to kill Hitler, if that's what it took.

During this time, Bonhoeffer wrote his two seminal works, *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Ethics*. It is remarkable that in both books, when Bonhoeffer could have taken the easy way out, he refused to compromise the Christian faith with the Hitler worship that was going on around him. He even found the time to explore in an incredible intense way what actually being a Christian means through his leading a group of young men in an uncompromising commitment to live according to the Sermon on the Mount in what eventually became another book, *Living Together*. He would need this time of profound spiritual reflection to prepare him for what was to come.

Bonhoeffer seemed to know from the beginning what Hitler's rise to power would mean for him personally. Three months after his leadership speech, he wrote the following:

“. . .there are three possible ways in which the church can act toward the state: the first place, as has been said, it can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate and in accordance with its character as state, i.e., it can throw the state back on its responsibilities. Second, it can aid the victims of state action. The church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community. 'Do good to all people.' In both these courses of action, the church serves the free state in its free way, and at times when laws are changed the church may in no way withdraw itself from these two tasks. The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke in the wheel itself."

Bonhoeffer was determined to be that "spoke in the wheel" in spite of the dangers it entailed.

Bonhoeffer was so convinced of the evil of Hitler and the Nazis that he felt his duty as a Christian impelled him to stop Hitler at any cost in order to save his country and the world. Eventually, he became involved in one of the conspiracies to assassinate Hitler.

This was not an easy decision for Bonhoeffer to make. While he supported his brother, Klaus, and one of his brothers-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, who were already involved in the conspiracy Bonhoeffer as a Christian pastor had other concerns besides just himself to consider. Neither Klaus or his wife, Emmi, were Christians but it was her words, accusing him of being so spiritually minded that he was no earthly good, that gave Dietrich pause. "You Christians are glad when someone else does what you know must be done but it seems that somehow you are unwilling to get your own hands dirty and do it," Emmi challenged him.

His best friend, Eberhard Bethge, helps to explain Dietrich's decision to become actively involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler.

"Bonhoeffer introduced us in 1935 to the problem of what we today call political resistance. The levels of confession and of resistance could no longer be kept neatly apart. The escalating persecution of the Jews generated an increasingly intolerable situation, especially for Bonhoeffer himself. We now realized that mere confession, no matter how courageous, inescapably meant complicity with the murderers, even though there would always be new acts of refusing to be co-opted and even though we would preach 'Christ alone' Sunday after Sunday. During the whole time the Nazi state never considered it necessary to prohibit such preaching. Why should it?"

"Thus we were approaching the borderline between confession and resistance, and if we did not cross the border, our confession was going to be no better than cooperation with the criminals. And so it became clear where the problem lay for the Confessing Church: we were resisting by way of confession, but we were not confessing by way of resistance."

Bonhoeffer actually had a chance to escape Germany and his impending draft into the military where he would be forced to fight for Hitler, something he could not tolerate. Declaring himself a conscientious objector was not an option. Under Hitler, those that did were arrested and executed. He left Germany for England, where he had family and friends, literally days before Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia.

In England, he contacted a professor he had studied under at New York City's Union Theological Seminary while on a previous stint in the United States. Through his contacts, the professor was able to secure Bonhoeffer a position at Union and a few other places for two to three years. This, combined with the outbreak of World War II throughout Europe shortly after, would have ensured Bonhoeffer's safety. He would have been forced to stay in the U.S. until the end of the war before being able to return to Germany, probably living an ordinary pastor's life until a ripe old age - nothing exceptional or remarkable, uncelebrated, undistinguished, and unrecognized by most of the world.

However, Bonhoeffer's feet had barely touched American soil before he felt he had made a great mistake. Bonhoeffer came under deep conviction that it was God's will for him to return to Germany, despite the dangers that awaited him there. He didn't have peace until he made the irrevocable decision to leave the safe haven of the United States and return to an uncertain and dangerous future. It was a decision that sealed his destiny.

Upon his return, Bonhoeffer worked undercover for the Abwehr, Germany's military intelligence arm and strongly opposed to Hitler. This enabled Bonhoeffer to fulfill his military service obligation while at the same time concealing his involvement in the assassination plot and helping Jews escape Germany for Switzerland to boot. The various attempts on Hitler's life all failed, and the Gestapo, who had already been investigating Bonhoeffer for some time, actually showed up at the Bonhoeffer family home looking for Dietrich a year before the final "Valkyrie" assassination plot against Hitler in July 1944.

After his arrest and imprisonment in April 1943, Bonhoeffer continually encouraged his family and friends to read Scripture, pray, and trust in God's goodness in the middle of distressing and devastating circumstances. Even when he knew that he was about to be executed, Bonhoeffer confidently told a fellow prisoner, "This is the end - but for me, the beginning of life."

In his great biography, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, Eric Metaxas relates the testimony of the camp doctor at the concentration camp where Bonhoeffer was murdered in April 1945 and who saw Bonhoeffer right before he was hanged. "Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. 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."

Hitler had Bonhoeffer executed for spite, knowing Germany was about to capitulate to the Allied forces before he committed suicide a scant three weeks later. Dietrich's death was not the only loss the Bonhoeffer family suffered in the closing days of World War II. Hitler also ordered the execution of Dietrich's brother Klaus and two brothers-in-law, Dohnanyi and Rudiger Schleicher for their roles in the assassination plot. The Bonhoeffer family paid a very high price for their commitment to liberty and their refusal to accept tyranny.

While we think of Bonhoeffer's murder as a senseless tragedy, Metaxas makes the point that Bonhoeffer probably didn't think of it in this way at all. He quotes one of Bonhoeffer's sermons that he gave while pastoring two German churches in London from 1933 to 1935. "Whether we are young or old makes no difference. What are twenty or thirty or fifty years in the sight of God? And which of us knows how near he or she may already be to the goal? That life only really begins when it ends here on earth, that all that is here is only the prologue before the curtain goes up . . . Death is grace, the greatest gift of grace that God gives to people who believe in him . . . Who knows whether, in our human fear and anguish we are only shivering and shuddering at the most glorious, heavenly, blessed event in the world?"

Bonhoeffer had an eternal view of life and physical death. He was able to look beyond the here and now and focus on what his acts during this earthly life would mean in the light of eternity. That's why Bonhoeffer could also say with equal firmness, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." Bonhoeffer realized that God is more interested in our obedience than in our success.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer came from a brilliant family. His father was the preeminent psychiatrist in Europe at that time. One of his brothers worked with Albert Einstein to split the atom. Each of his immediate family members was equally brilliant in his or her own right. They weren't too impressed upon learning that Dietrich planned to become a theologian at the age of 14.

But it is Dietrich Bonhoeffer who we remember today, not his brilliant psychiatrist father, his equally brilliant scientist brother, or anyone else in his family. It is the written works of this physically unassuming, bespectacled Christian pastor of whom no one should ever have heard of outside his own country that continue to inspire, challenge, and change lives over 70 years after his death.

Bonhoeffer could have lived during the Christian persecution by the Roman Empire, during the Dark of the Middle Ages, the dawn of the new United States, our own Civil War, or the 21st Century, and somehow, I believe he would have made the same principled choices that he did in Hitler's Germany. The outward circumstances would have been different, but the decisions would be the same. He would refuse to be silent, challenging the apathetic, accommodating, liberal Christian church of our day, just as he did in his. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why his words are still as powerful and meaningful today, even more so, as they were in the 1930s and 1940s.

The religious leaders of our day are floundering, seeking to compromise with the evil forces that are trying, very successfully, to destroy the biblical foundations of our society, perhaps not exactly in the same way that Hitler did in Germany, but destroy them nonetheless. Where is the Bonhoeffer of our day? Where is the man or woman who will bravely, courageously, and fearlessly stand up to the religious, secular, and political leaders of our day and not only speak God's truth to them no matter the cost, but inspire others to do likewise?

Near the end of the movie, *Spartacus*, the Roman Empire has captured the slave army and is trying to find its commander. The Roman military offers all the slaves a pardon from crucifixion if they will just turn over their leader. Man after man rises to his feet and shouts, "I am Spartacus! I am Spartacus!" It is one of the most inspiring film scenes I have ever watched.

In the absence of any clear Christian leader today, each of us in our own way must rise to his or her feet and shout, "I am Bonhoeffer! I will not bow down and worship the gods of this age. I will not follow the popular culture that says I must have an abortion, I must be an atheist, I must reject the God of the universe and live a shallow, useless life of materialism. I will stand up for the Lord, whether it is popular, whether it is politically expedient, no matter the cost." Who knows? God may take the most unlikely person and raise them up to become the Dietrich Bonhoeffer of our time.

One day we shall know and see what today we believe; one day we shall hold a service together in eternity - Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

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