

THE DARING OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER by Dan Gribbin UUCOB July 26, 2020

The longest period of peace in modern European history lasted from 1871, at the end of the Franco-Prussian War, to 1914, with the outbreak of World War I. That's over forty years of peace in Europe. That's the good news. The bad news is that the French deeply resented the loss to the Prussians of that territory which became known as Alsace-Lorraine, on their eastern border with Germany, and so they were more than happy to go to war in 1914 in hopes of regaining the territory. They went to war with Germany, but what you and I call Germany is actually a coalition of smaller states brought together by Otto von Bismark in the course of that Franco-Prussian War. That coalition of states had considerable success in generating great wealth through industrialization during those four decades between 1871 and 1914. But there's more bad news, I'm afraid. Industrialization throughout the Western world during that period resulted in the development of weapons that were so destructive to the human body that a large percentage of an entire generation of young men in Europe died when war finally did break out. The weapons I'm referring here included the machine gun, the armored tank, and the airplane.

In 1906, a son was born to one of those prosperous German families, the Bonhoeffers, and they named this little boy Dietrich. Dietrich Bonhoeffer grew up to be a brilliant young man who would become one of the leading theologians of his generation. But there's a catch to that story, too. Because Dietrich would defy the way theology was being pursued in the Lutheran church during his formative years. He would establish a much more personal approach to Christianity which he called the Confessing Church. And, because the Lutheran church in Germany would identify itself exclusively with the Nazi party and Adolph Hitler, Dietrich would be, in effect, excommunicated by the church and then killed at the hands of the Nazis, hanged as an enemy of the state on April 9, 1945. That date gives me a chill for two reasons. Less than one month later, the

war in Europe was over, so Hitler and Goebbels were adamant about executing Bonhoeffer and his confederates before the Nazi leaders committed suicide at the end of that month. Secondly, this wonderful teacher and thinker Dietrich Bonhoeffer died exactly seventeen days before I was born.

What might Bonhoeffer and I have had in common? Well, if we look at the circumstances into which we were born, not much. My parents were married while both were contributing to the war effort, and, when I came along there near the end of the war, we ended up scrambling for housing and food. We went from a trailer in my Aunt Kate's back yard to a small apartment in a veterans' housing project and thought we were really moving up in the world. The Bonhoeffers, on the other hand, enjoyed a cultivated lifestyle that included a summer home in the mountains, box seats at the opera, and a mind-boggling level of expenditure that, when extrapolated to the larger culture in the years prior to WWI, raises one big question: Why in the world would the Germans go to war when they seem to have had it made?

There is quite a lot of talk about what Germany lost in the wake of World War I, but, oddly enough, for people at the socio-economic level of the Bonhoeffers, life went on pretty much as usual. When Dietrich had finished his theological studies and was assigned, in the late 1920s, to a parish church in Barcelona, a Lutheran church for ex-patriots living there, he said he had never seen people so visibly impressed with their own wealth. And that statement is coming from a fellow who periodically petitioned his wealthy parents for a higher allowance for travel and fashionable clothing. If this kid was disgusted by conspicuous consumption among German ex-patriots, you know it had reached epic levels.

The Barcelona experience, which was kind of an internship for Bonhoeffer, brought out a talent for working with young people that would serve him well as he progressed in his career. It also brought him in contact with a group that he might never have been in contact with under other circumstances, small-time

criminals, sex workers, and other individuals from the demimonde who came to him seeking spiritual counsel. It was during this period of preparing and delivering weekly sermons in Barcelona that he began to develop his unique approach to theology. He had previously studied under mostly conservative Lutheran theologians who, in his words, reduced the self “to an empty vessel into which God merely poured his grace.” Dietrich believed in the restless soul that follows its instinct toward morality and self-discovery, in his words “an anxious questioning for divine things.” The one teacher whose ideas rang true for Bonhoeffer was Karl Barth, who interpreted the human condition in the light of the incarnation, humanism infused with the word made flesh. Bonhoeffer would come to feel that God’s merciful gift of grace required a spiritual change of heart on behalf of the individual. This process seems to be referred to as justification, in theological circles, and I take that to mean that the individual justifies God’s confidence in him or her by showing that the gift of grace has transformed the individual into a spiritual questor.

In 1931, Dietrich took advantage of an opportunity to study in America at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He was totally disdainful of the level of theological study in America, but one of his professors, Reinhold Niebuhr, impressed him mightily with his call for social action on behalf of workers devastated by the Great Depression. Niebuhr called for a public theology. In the summer of 1931, he spoke at four black colleges in the South under the sponsorship of the American Missionary Society. Dietrich began reading the works of black writers and became friendly with Franklin Fisher, the son of the pastor of the 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Fisher was a pastoral intern at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, an institution with an astounding 7000 members. At that church, Dietrich came in contact with African-American worship services and with the seriousness of African-American theologians. He has never seen such joy in worship and such a degree of participation in the service.

As fate would have it, the minister of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., had recently undergone a change in emphasis in his ministry. He had begun to dwell on Jesus as the one who wandered into distressed and lonely places to share the struggles of the poor as a friend and counselor. As he did with the ministry of Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich absorbed the practice of Adam Clayton Powell. He taught a Sunday School class at Powell's church and a Wednesday evening women's Bible study. And, on one occasion, he even delivered a sermon from the pulpit on Sunday morning. Moreover, he traveled to Washington D.C. with Franklin Fisher to meet other black writers and theologians, and he took a long trip south with another friend, attending services in small African-American churches. All in all, Dietrich's year in America exposed him to what was missing in German theology—a grounding in everyday reality.

Back in Germany, Dietrich locked horns with Karl Barth over Barth's contention that Christian theology bore no responsibility to change society. Dietrich had now come to believe that the true Christian must receive Christ into his or her heart and proceed with the work of "repairing the world in all its brokenness." His arguments with Barth were good-natured, but his dedication to a Christianity guided by the Sermon on the Mount set him on a collision course with the Nazis, as the latter group put more and more pressure on the Lutheran church in Germany to declare its fealty to the Fuhrer. Hitler ascended to power on January 30, 1933, and immediately called for the removal of all Jews from civil service, including those Jews who had converted to Christianity. The Lutheran church accepted what was called the Aryan paragraph and began excluding Jews from communion. This was the first step toward what would come to be known as the Final Solution, and the church was in lockstep with Hitler as he pursued the ultimate descent into inhumanity. In the end, Dietrich was virtually alone among German theologians in denouncing the National Socialist captivity of the Church.

By June of 1933, most of Dietrich's colleagues and former classmates were card-carrying Nazis. In July, he received his first visit from the Gestapo. His spiritual leadership of dissenters began during this period, but he did take the expedient step of accepting a post to minister to two Lutheran churches in London. Thus, he was out of the country when the first loyalty oath to the Fuhrer was required of German clergy. Still, the mere suspicion that he would not be signing caused Dietrich to be declared a Staatsfeind—an enemy of the state.

When he returned to Germany, Dietrich got himself assigned to the task of reviving one of the languishing seminaries located as far north as could be in a place called Finkenwalde. That kept him out of the orbit of the Gestapo for a while, and it permitted him to develop and preach to young ministers his Christ-centered version of their faith. At that point, he wrote to his brother, "I do believe that at last, for the first time in my life, I am on the right track." One of the sermons that he preached during that period was entitled "The Church Is Dead." Little wonder that his books were about to be banned in Germany and his right to practice the ministry terminated.

Finkenwalde proved to be the site of another of his important steps forward in the Christian faith. His biographer Charles Marsh puts it this way: "Bonhoeffer, whose insatiable hunger for intimate fellowship had led him to this lovely tract of land in upper Pomerania, now made community his art, with beauty and discipline as complementary elements." In other words, he found the canvas on which to render his "personal ideal of a Christian community." Oh, and by the way, it was at Finkenwalde that Dietrich fell in love. Among the 23 young men in that first class at the seminary was Eberhard Bethge, a minister's son from rural Saxony. He would be Dietrich's close confidante for the rest of his life.

It's pretty much all downhill from here, I'm afraid. In December 1935, Heinrich Himmler signed a decree declaring that all training centers for the Confessing Church were to be closed, all participants in them liable to punishment. In July 1936, the arrests began. At first, the young ministers were

held in concentration camps and then released. The Berlin Olympics began on August 1, 1936, and Joseph Goebbels ordered the most extreme and obvious practices of the Nazi party against dissenters and Jews to be soft-pedaled in order to insure the best possible treatment of the party in the worldwide press.

But in February 1937, the real crackdown began. One of Dietrich's friends was executed for declaring himself a conscientious objector. Karl Barth was prudent in escaping to a teaching post in Switzerland. In February 1938, Dietrich made his first contact with the German resistance. The people he worked with were in a section of German military intelligence called the Abwehr. Kristallnacht was November 9, 1938. Dietrich actually slipped off to New York for two months in 1939 while his draft status was being finalized, but he returned to Germany in July, determined to do what he could to defeat the Nazis from within.

Dietrich wrote to a friend, during this period, that he was "taking each day as if it were the last and yet living it faithfully and responsibly as if there were to be a great future." I don't mean to belittle the obvious threat to his life, but that description of his state of mind resembles what a lot of people are expressing in America in July 2020. Dietrich's theological attitude at this point is summed up in his statement that to find Christ, a person must become righteous, suffering for the sake of justice, truth, and humanity. He added that discipleship is the path to consummate humanness.

During this period, Dietrich was assigned to try to convince the English and American high commands that they should support the Abwehr in their efforts to do away with Hitler. But the Allies never took seriously the idea of the German resistance. Dietrich was arrested by the Gestapo on April 4, 1943. From prison, he wrote this: In the end, "the world is summed up . . . in a few people one wishes to see and with whom one wishes to be together." He felt that theology's task was to preserve the eternal mystery in a catastrophically demystified time. "Faith begins . . . with simple, grateful praise of God as the mystery of the world,

who exists beyond necessity and desire.” He fervently believed that the Church’s word gains weight and power not through concepts but by example.

On April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and five other members of the resistance were hanged. Though he was willing to die in the effort to oppose the Nazis, he believed strongly in peace and once said that peace is the great adventure, but peace is not found via the way of security. I believe Dietrich Bonhoeffer did find peace. He certainly eschewed the way of security by returning from the safe haven of New York to carry out his part in what he hoped would be the liberation of his country from the grip of evil. There’s an old joke about a person having the confidence of a Christian holding four aces. I think we all know that real confidence, real courage, requires a lot more of us than drawing a lucky hand at poker. Real courage requires action in the face of withering uncertainty. Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave us a shining example of that kind of courage and daring. I mentioned earlier that he died the month I was born. I hope, when my time comes to die, that I will be able to say that, in some small way, I have been worthy of carrying that torch of enlightened humanity that he, in a sense, handed to me.

I would like to add that my late friend Herb Hobbs, who was the chaplain of Ferrum College during the years when Martha and I taught there, was the person who steered me in the direction of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Herb certainly embodied those traits that he admired in Bonhoeffer as he served our community on behalf of the greater good.