

# DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

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## Introduction

Over the past 50 years, many Christians have been engaged in the process of reexamining the role of the Church in Germany during the Nazi era. What has become evident in this undertaking is the depth of the chasm between the ideals the Church had always set for itself and the way it responded to the brutalization of the German government under Adolf Hitler.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the few church leaders who stood in courageous opposition to the Fuehrer and his policies. To honor his memory, the Church Relations department of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum has asked Victoria Barnett, author of *For the Soul of the People, Protestant Protest Against Hitler*, to write an essay about Bonhoeffer spanning the years from the rise of Nazism until his death in the Flossenbürg concentration camp in 1945. The following story will give the reader some sense of the conflict within the Protestant church, as well as the remarkable response of one pastor/theologian to that conflict and to the turmoil within the nation itself.

*The ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to live.*  
— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "After Ten Years" (December 1942)

## Legacy

In the years since his death, the Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer has become widely known as one of the few Christian martyrs in a history otherwise stained by Christian complicity with Nazism. Executed in the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945 for his role in the resistance against Hitler, Bonhoeffer's letters and theological works still influence Christians throughout the world.

In many respects, however, Bonhoeffer's legacy is complex. His experience under Nazism thrust him into profound conflict with much of his religious tradition, raising questions that he was unable to resolve before his life was ended. These questions continue to confront those who explore Bonhoeffer's relevance today.

This is particularly true with regard to Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Christian-Jewish relationship. In his political insights and public opposition to the Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer certainly went beyond most of his colleagues and compatriots. Still, much of his theological work reflected traditional Christian attitudes toward Judaism. Like most Christians of his generation, Bonhoeffer believed that God's special destiny for the Jewish people included their eventual acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah.

As a result, Christian and Jewish scholars evaluate Bonhoeffer's legacy quite differently. For many Christians, his resistance against Nazism and the profound insights in his writings offer new ethical and theological models. Some Jewish scholars, however, contend that Bonhoeffer acted on behalf of his church and was driven by his own deep sense of patriotism, not for the sake of the European Jews. Because of this, and because the Christian tradition was his central point of reference, much of Bonhoeffer's thought seems irrelevant, at best, to the Jewish community.

How should we understand Dietrich Bonhoeffer's role? What were his motives? What is his legacy to us in the aftermath of the Holocaust?

## **Opposition**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau on February 4, 1906, the sixth child of Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer. His father was a prominent professor of psychiatry and neurology; his mother was one of the few women of her generation to obtain a university degree.

Paula Bonhoeffer chose to educate her children in their early years at home. She had observed that "Germans have their backbones broken twice in life: first in the schools, secondly in the military."<sup>1</sup> Her emphasis on a strong moral and intellectual character was shared throughout the Bonhoeffer family. This became evident in the tragic aftermath of the failed attempt to kill Adolf Hitler, when four members of the immediate family were executed: two sons (Dietrich and Klaus) and two sons-in-law (Hans von Dohnanyi and Rüdiger Schleicher).

From the beginning, Bonhoeffer's interests took him beyond the traditional realm of German academia, and his intellect and theological achievements won him early renown. He completed his studies in Tübingen and Berlin with a 1927 dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, under Reinhold Seeberg. In 1928, he served as vicar in the German parish in Barcelona; in 1930, he completed his theological exams and studied at Union Seminary in New York. He also became active in the fledgling ecumenical movement, making international contacts that would prove crucial to his work in the resistance. In 1931, Bonhoeffer began teaching on the theological faculty in Berlin.

With Hitler's ascent to power at the end of January 1933, Bonhoeffer's church entered the most difficult phase in its history. Since its inception, the German Evangelical Church (the main Protestant church in Germany) had been shaped by nationalism and obedience to state authority. Influenced by these traditions, and relieved that a strong new leader had emerged from the chaos of the Weimar years, many Protestants welcomed the rise of Nazism.

In particular, a group called the *Deutsche Christen* ("German Christians") became the voice of Nazi ideology within the Evangelical Church, even advocating the removal of the Old Testament from the Bible. In the summer of 1933, citing the state Aryan laws that barred all "non-Aryans" from the civil

service, the *Deutsche Christen* proposed a church “Aryan paragraph” to prevent “non-Aryans” from becoming ministers or religious teachers.

The ensuing controversy almost split the German Evangelical Church. Despite widespread antisemitism and enthusiasm for Nazism, most church leaders steadfastly supported the “Judenmission”—the evangelization, conversion and baptism of Jews. But the *Deutsche Christen* were already claiming that Jews, as a “separate race,” could not become members of an “Aryan” German church even through baptism—a clear repudiation of the validity of Gospel teachings.

Protestant opposition to the Aryan paragraph, then, was not based upon disagreement with Nazi racial policies, but upon an important element of Christian doctrine. Nonetheless, the issue led church leaders into a public debate about one of the most crucial aspects of Nazi ideology. In this initial battle to retain church independence, most church leaders avoided the deeper issue: that the civil rights of all German Jews had been attacked. Indeed, many who opposed the church Aryan paragraph otherwise supported the regime’s restrictions on German Jews.

Bonhoeffer bitterly opposed the Aryan paragraph, arguing that its ratification surrendered Christian precepts to political ideology. If “non-Aryans” were banned from the ministry, he argued, then their colleagues should resign in solidarity, even if this meant the establishment of a new church — a “confessing” church that would remain free of Nazi influence. This was a minority view; most German bishops wanted to avoid antagonizing the Nazi regime and to keep their regional churches together.

The strongest opponents of Nazi interference in the churches, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, eventually did form the “Confessing Church.” But, while some Confessing Christians moved toward open resistance against the regime, more moderate Protestants (inside and outside the Confessing Church) made what they saw as necessary compromises. As the Nazi dictatorship tightened its hold, the Confessing Church itself became paralyzed.

### **“The Church and the Jewish Question”**

In an April 1933 essay, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the first to address the new problems the church faced under the Nazi dictatorship. Despite some astonishing insights, this early essay poses many problems for contemporary readers. Although he called upon the church to defend the victims of state persecution, his defense of the Jews was marked by Christian supersessionism—the Christian belief that Christianity had superseded Judaism, in history and in the eyes of God. “The history of the suffering of this people, loved and punished by God, stands under the sign of the final homecoming of the people of Israel to its God,” wrote Bonhoeffer. “And this homecoming happens in the conversion of Israel to Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

But, Bonhoeffer also realized that Nazism posed a very different challenge for the churches, and it was here that he broke new ground. The church was not just being called to clarify its attitudes toward Judaism and the people of Israel, he noted. The real question was how the church would judge and respond to the Nazi state’s actions against the Jews.

On this point, Bonhoeffer was explicit about the church’s obligations to fight political injustice. The church, he wrote, must fight evil in three stages: The first was to question state injustice and call the state to responsibility; the second was to help the victims of injustice, whether they were church members or

not. Ultimately, however, the church might find itself called “not only to help the victims who have fallen under the wheel, but to fall into the spokes of the wheel itself” in order to halt the machinery of injustice.

The essay revealed the two levels that would shape Bonhoeffer’s thought and action throughout the Third Reich. On the one level, he saw that the totalitarian doctrine of Nazism demanded a political response from the churches. Completed in the days following the April 1, 1933, boycott of Jewish businesses, "The Church and the Jewish Question" was an explicit ethical commitment to all those persecuted by Nazism. During the same week, he and his brother Klaus met with American theologian Paul Lehmann and drafted a message to US Jewish leader Rabbi Stephen Wise.<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer clearly viewed the measures against the Jews as a civil liberties issue (some scholars believe that he was influenced here by his close friendship at Union Seminary with an African American colleague, Frank Fisher, and his direct observation of Fisher’s experiences under racism.)

On a theological level, however, Bonhoeffer still believed that the “Jewish question” would be resolved ultimately through the conversion of the Jews. He never explicitly abandoned this view, which was widespread throughout the Christian church—even in the ecumenical circles that became most active in helping the Jewish refugees of Nazism.

By the fall of 1933, the *Deutsche Christen* had gained control of many Protestant church governments throughout Germany. Their policy of excluding those with “Jewish blood” from the ministry was approved, in September 1933, by the national church synod at Wittenberg. The next day, Bonhoeffer sent a telegram to an ecumenical organization in Switzerland: “Aryan paragraph now in effect, please work out memorandum against this and inform press at once.”<sup>4</sup>

Bonhoeffer had realized immediately the importance of informing the international Christian community about what was occurring within Nazi Germany. Within the German Evangelical Church, a power struggle began over which faction would represent the church internationally. Bonhoeffer began to send regular messages to his ecumenical friends, who—not least because of their respect for Bonhoeffer—refused to accept the official church’s version of events in Germany.

## 1933-1940

Bonhoeffer’s activities on this front intensified rapidly. Several days before the Wittenberg Synod, he attended the ecumenical World Alliance meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he “spoke completely openly about the Jewish question, the Aryan paragraph in the church . . . and over the question of the future of minorities” in Germany. Prompted by Bonhoeffer, the delegates passed a resolution condemning the Nazi actions against the Jews:

*We especially deplore the fact that the State measures against the Jews in Germany have had such an effect on public opinion that in some circles the Jewish race is considered a race of inferior status.*<sup>5</sup>

Bonhoeffer took a copy of the resolution to the German consul in Sofia, to prove that Nazi policies toward the Jews were damaging Germany’s image abroad. The leaders of the German Evangelical Church in Berlin angrily demanded that he withdraw from ecumenical activities; Bonhoeffer refused. The Sofia resolution even prompted a protest from the German Foreign Office:

*Provocation against Germany because of the Jewish question has been taken into circles that were previously genuinely favorable to us, and has been expressed loudly and publicly at the very moment when Germany, because of the upcoming meeting of the League of Nations, will probably be viciously attacked because of the Jewish question...<sup>6</sup>*

The criticism only strengthened Bonhoeffer's resolve. Personally, too, he grew more decisive. In April of 1933, he had been asked by his sister and her husband, Gerhard Leibholz, to conduct the funeral of Leibholz's father. The Leibholzes, although converted Jews, were affected by the Nazi racial laws; Gerhard Leibholz had already lost his teaching position. The elder Leibholz had belonged to neither church nor synagogue, however, and Bonhoeffer, warned by his church superintendent not to conduct the funeral of a non-church member, refused.

By November, Bonhoeffer regretted this. In a moving letter to his sister and her husband, he apologized: "How could I have been so terribly afraid? . . . I must ask you both to forgive me my weakness. Today I know for certain that I should have done otherwise."<sup>7</sup>

In the fall of 1933, Bonhoeffer turned down a parish post in Berlin, saying that he could not accept at a time when his "non-Aryan" colleagues were barred from such positions. He decided to accept a position at one of the German-speaking congregations in London. In a letter to Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer wrote that he suddenly found himself in opposition to all of his friends and had decided that "it was time to go for a while into the desert."<sup>8</sup> He left Germany despondent over his church's cowardice.

Bonhoeffer's London parish became a haven for Christian and Jewish refugees, and a close friendship grew between Bonhoeffer and Bishop George Bell of Chichester. Bonhoeffer continued his battle for ecumenical recognition of the Confessing Church, achieving victory at the August 1934 World Alliance conference in Fanö, Denmark, where the ecumenical organization decided, despite protests from the official German church, to recognize delegates from both German church factions. In late 1934, Bonhoeffer's London parish and several other German parishes in England withdrew from the official German Evangelical Church, declaring their support for the Confessing Church.

In April 1935, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, where the Confessing Church was under increasing pressure from the Gestapo. Yet most church leaders, including some in the Confessing Church, not only refused to openly oppose the Nazi regime, but criticized their colleagues who did. As a result, more radical Confessing Christians found themselves embattled on all sides.

In September 1935—less than two weeks after the announcement of the Nuremberg Laws, which eliminated all remaining civil rights for Jews—Confessing Church leaders convened in the Berlin suburb of Steglitz. In their midst was a small group of activists who had already begun, in small ways, to help Jews. One was a Berlin deaconess, Marga Meusel. While most who sought her help were Jewish Christians, Meusel was angered by the persecution of all those affected by Nazi racial laws.

In fact, Meusel had written a memo to church leaders about the plight of "non-Aryan" Christians in May 1935. But four months later, she rewrote it, referring no longer to "non-Aryan Christians," but to all Jews, and denouncing the church's silence on the matter. She particularly condemned those who saw the Nazi persecution of the Jews as God's will: "Since when has the evildoer the right to portray his evil deeds as the will of God?"<sup>9</sup> It was imperative, she continued, that the church publicly oppose these measures and help everyone—Christian or not—affected by them.

Berlin church superintendent Martin Albertz fought to put Meusel's statement on the Steglitz Synod agenda. But, most delegates wanted to avoid the issue entirely; several, in fact, threatened to leave the meeting if the "Jewish question" came up. Some even proposed a resolution explicitly supporting the state's right to regulate Jewish affairs; this, of course, would have given the Confessing Church's sanction to the Nuremberg Laws.

Bonhoeffer had just begun teaching at Finkenwalde, a Confessing Church seminary; now he received an urgent request from his friends in Berlin to come to Steglitz. Their efforts at the synod met with mixed success. Meusel's memorandum and the deeper issue of what was happening politically in Nazi Germany were avoided; the debate bogged down on the old issue of whether baptized Jews could remain in the church. The synod finally passed a statement supporting the baptism of Jews; Meusel and Bonhoeffer condemned its failure to move beyond a very limited concern for "non-Aryan" Christians.

Bonhoeffer returned to Finkenwalde and quietly continued to train young clergy in the Confessing Church. Most of his students were prevented by the official church from getting positions; their future was uncertain. Gestapo pressures culminated in the August 1937 Himmler Decree, which declared the education and examination of Confessing ministry candidates illegal. In September 1937, the Gestapo closed Finkenwalde; by November, 27 of Bonhoeffer's former students had been arrested.

Bonhoeffer spent the next two years secretly travelling from one eastern German village to another to supervise his students, most of whom were working illegally in small parishes. Under growing Gestapo observation, he limited his public pronouncements. The Gestapo banned him from Berlin in January 1938, and in September 1940 issued an order forbidding him from speaking in public.

## **Relationship between Judaism and Christianity**

During this period, Bonhoeffer's own theological views were deepening, even as he searched for what his practical role as a Christian in Nazi Germany should be. The relationship between Judaism and Christianity became a focal point in his teaching and own reflection. At a Confessing Church meeting in October 1938, he asked his colleagues whether, "instead of talking of the same old questions again and again, we can finally speak of that which truly is pressing on us: what the Confessing Church has to say to the question of church and synagogue?"<sup>10</sup> Here, for the first time, he described Judaism using the same terminology as he did for Christianity: he spoke of the equivalence, in God's eyes, of "church and synagogue," of the Jews as "brothers of Christians" and "children of the covenant."<sup>11</sup> These were radical statements at a time when the leaders of the German Evangelical Church were denying all links between Christianity and Judaism (culminating in the establishment, in 1939, of the "Institute for the Research and Removal of Jewish Influence on the Religious Life of the German People.")

On November 9, 1938, when the synagogues burned throughout Germany, Bonhoeffer was with students in the hinterlands of Pomerania. Only a telephone call the next day alerted them to what had happened; Bonhoeffer immediately traveled to Berlin to learn more details. Upon his return, his students began debating the theological significance of the Kristallnacht. As one later recalled, several of the students "spoke of the curse which had haunted the Jews since Jesus' death on the cross." Bonhoeffer rejected this vehemently, stating that the pogrom was a case of "sheer violence" that only revealed Nazism's "godless face."<sup>12</sup>

Bonhoeffer's response to the November 9 pogrom reflected his growing conviction of the significance, for Christians, of the persecution of the Jews. In the margin of his Bible, he wrote the date November 10, 1938 (it is the only date marked in his Bible) next to the words of Psalm 74, verse 8: "They said in their hearts, let us plunder their goods! They burn all the houses of God in the land . . . O God, how long is the foe to scoff? How long will the enemy revile your name?"

Outside of Germany, too, ecumenical leaders abroad were shifting their focus from the problems of the Confessing Church to the intensifying persecution of the Jews. After the November pogrom, the three leading ecumenical organizations in Geneva sent a joint letter to their member churches, stating:

*At the moment when the terrible persecution of the Jewish population in Germany and in other Central European countries has come to a violent climax, it is our duty to remind ourselves of the stand which we have taken as an ecumenical movement against anti-Semitism in all its forms.*<sup>13</sup>

The ecumenical movement had, until then, focused on the plight of "non-Aryan" Christian refugees; now this focus broadened. The letter urged churches to press their governments to take in more Jewish refugees. Both in Geneva and in New York, ecumenical leaders, for the first time working together with Jewish organizations, intensified their efforts on behalf of refugees.<sup>14</sup> Contacts were established with the "Grüber Office," a Berlin organization led by Confessing pastor Heinrich Grüber, which eventually helped 2,000 refugees leave Germany. Several Confessing Christians who had been forced to leave Germany worked actively with their former colleagues in Germany.

One was Adolf Freudenberg, who had fled to Switzerland in 1939, and directed the World Council of Church's special office for church refugee work there. In New York, Henry Smith Leiper, Executive Secretary of the Federal Council of Churches, sought to establish a similar office on American soil. Leiper, who had visited Germany in 1932 because of his concerns about antisemitism, was an outspoken critic of Nazism. He had called for a boycott of the 1936 Olympics because of the Nuremberg Laws, and worked closely with Christian and Jewish groups in the US to spread awareness about what was happening in Nazi Germany.

By 1939, then, the international ecumenical community was closely watching developments in Nazi Germany. At the same time, the first meetings among the German resistance were taking place. Among them was Hans von Dohnanyi, a lawyer married to Bonhoeffer's sister. Dohnanyi, a passionate enemy of Nazism, moved in 1939 from the Justice Department to the Armed Forces High Command office of Military Intelligence. This office, led by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris and Major-General Hans Oster, soon became a center of the conspiracy.

In early 1939, Dohnanyi approached Bonhoeffer about possible resistance against the regime. It was a time of personal uncertainty for Bonhoeffer, who was seriously considering leaving Germany. From Dohnanyi, he knew that war was imminent. He also knew that he could never fight in Hitler's army. Troubled, he wrote to friends in the ecumenical movement, who soon responded with a formal offer of a position at Union Seminary in New York. Bonhoeffer left for New York in June 1939.

Believing that Bonhoeffer wished to leave Germany permanently, Henry Smith Leiper asked him to lead the Federal Council's office to help refugees in the US. By the time he arrived in the US, however, Bonhoeffer had decided that his place was in Germany. His misgivings were confirmed by a letter he

received from Freudenberg, who told him that the Federal Council position should be given to a permanent emigrant. Bonhoeffer wrote Reinhold Niebuhr:

*I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. . . I shall have no right to take part in the restoration of Christian life in Germany after the war unless I share the trials of this time with my people.*<sup>15</sup>

His return to Germany in July 1939 marked a new stage in his life: active resistance. Virtually the only man in a position to do so, Bonhoeffer became the crucial link between international ecumenical efforts and the German conspiracy against Nazism.<sup>16</sup>

## **Resistance and Execution**

Even before the war, German opponents of Hitler had considered overthrowing the Nazi regime; the first unrealized plan to overthrow Hitler was during the Sudeten crisis in 1938. A successful coup, however, depended upon the support of key German military figures; their readiness to take such risks diminished with the German victories in Poland and on the western front. This was maddening to civilian conspirators like Dohnanyi, who distrusted the military leaders and condemned their reluctance to move decisively against Hitler.

German resistance groups hoped to convince their Allied contacts of their seriousness and win foreign support for the overthrow of the Nazi regime. In October 1940, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began work as an agent for Military Intelligence, supposedly using his ecumenical contacts to help the cause of the Reich. In reality, he used his contacts to spread information about the resistance movement. In trips to Italy, Switzerland, and Scandinavia in 1941 and 1942, he informed them of resistance activities and tried, in turn, to gain foreign support for the German resistance.

Dohnanyi and others put great hopes in Bonhoeffer's foreign contacts, particularly in Bishop George Bell's ability to carry messages to the high levels of British government. In turn, Bonhoeffer tried to convince his foreign contacts that some Allied signal of support for the German conspiracy was crucial, since only this would convince the German military to move against Hitler.

The Allied governments greeted these peace feelers with distrust. The military members of the resistance wanted guarantees of German territorial integrity and of their own position as leaders of a postwar Germany. Allied diplomats and leaders found this demand unacceptable, and never seriously considered support for a German coup. In January 1943, Churchill and Roosevelt announced that only the unconditional military defeat of Germany would eradicate Nazism.

Despite these rebuffs, the conspirators continued to plan Hitler's downfall. But, as prospects for an early coup dimmed, some also searched for ways to help the victims of Nazism. On September 5, 1941, all Jews in the Reich were ordered to wear the yellow star; the first deportations to the East from Berlin occurred on October 15. On October 17 or 18, Bonhoeffer and Friedrich Perels, a Confessing Church lawyer, wrote a memo giving details of these first deportations.<sup>17</sup> The memo was sent to trusted German military officials in the hope that it might move them to action, as well as to ecumenical contacts and the US State Department.



In Dohnanyi's office, a plan was conceived to get Jews out of Germany by giving them papers as foreign agents. The plan was not that far-fetched: in several cases, Nazi intelligence offices had used Jewish agents as a cover. There was also a steady underground business that helped Jews emigrate in exchange for large sums of money.

The Dohnanyi/Canaris effort, termed "Operation Seven," eventually spirited fourteen Jews out to Switzerland (eleven had converted to Christianity; three had not).<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer used his ecumenical contacts to arrange visas and sponsors for the group.<sup>19</sup> At his instigation, one of those rescued was Charlotte Friedenthal, who had worked with Marga Meusel and with the Grüber office.

Friedenthal reached Switzerland in August 1942; the others arrived in September. Dohnanyi's office immediately began plans for a new rescue attempt; before anything could come of these, the Gestapo traced the vast amounts of money that the conspirators had sent abroad for the emigrants. The arrests of Dohnanyi and Bonhoeffer followed in April 1943.

Initially, the Gestapo treated it as a corruption case, accusing Dohnanyi and his colleagues of lining their own pockets. They soon realized, however, that the rescue attempt was the tip of a larger iceberg. Bonhoeffer was charged with conspiring to rescue Jews; of using his travels abroad for non-intelligence matters; and of misusing his intelligence position to keep Confessing Church pastors out of the military and for his own ecumenical work. The Gestapo report on Bonhoeffer described him as "completely in the opposition."<sup>20</sup> Still, even after the failure of the July 20, 1944, attempt to kill Hitler, it was months before the Nazis realized the extent of Bonhoeffer's involvement in resistance circles.

In October 1944, Bonhoeffer was moved to the dreaded Gestapo prison in Berlin; in February 1945, he was taken to Buchenwald. He was then moved to the Flossenbürg concentration camp where, on April 9, he was hanged, together with Canaris, Oster, and other conspirators. Hans von Dohnanyi and Klaus Bonhoeffer were executed days later. The SS doctor who witnessed Bonhoeffer's death later recalled a man "devout . . . brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds . . . I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God." Bonhoeffer sent one final message, to George Bell in England: "This is the end, for me the beginning of life."<sup>21</sup>

## **"After Ten Years"**

In December 1942, Bonhoeffer sent a Christmas letter ("After Ten Years") to his closest friends in the resistance. In a bitterly realistic tone, he faced the prospect that they might fail, and that his own life's work might remain incomplete. He may have wondered, too, whether his decision to return to Germany and to work in military intelligence had been the right one. "Are we still of any use?" he wrote:

*We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds: we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the arts of equivocation and pretence; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use?*<sup>22</sup>

The necessities of subterfuge and compromise had already cost him a great deal. He pondered the different motives for fighting evil, noting that even the finest intentions could prove insufficient. "Who stands firm?" Bonhoeffer asked:

*Only the one for whom the final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all these, when in faith and sole allegiance to God he is called to obedient and responsible action: the responsible person, whose life will be nothing but an answer to God's question and call.* <sup>23</sup>

In this letter, one of Bonhoeffer's most moving and powerful writings, the various threads of Bonhoeffer's life and work came together. He had been one of the few in his church to demand protection for the persecuted as a necessary **political** step. He had called upon his church, traditionally aligned with the state, to confront the consequences of that alliance. The church struggle, as he wrote Bishop George Bell in 1934, was "not something that occurs just within the church, but it attacks the very roots of National Socialism. The point is freedom. . . ." <sup>24</sup>

Bonhoeffer's focus remained more theological and political. The church debates about the Aryan paragraph had convinced him that the old traditions were bankrupt. Instead, Bonhoeffer called for the practice of "religionless Christianity" in "a world come of age"—a world in which the old certainties and values had been replaced by cynicism and ideology. He tried to determine what kind of Christian faith was viable in this new world—not in order to "extricate himself heroically from the affair," but to arrive at a new understanding of faith, to pass on to future generations.

It is in this context that his ongoing reflections on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity must be understood. His insights were less about Judaism, more about his own Christianity. His 1941 statement that "The Jew keeps the question of Christ open," (published in his *Ethics*) was a final acknowledgment that the persecution of the religion most historically bound to his own had led him to rethink his own faith fundamentally.

For this reason, Bonhoeffer's greatest influence today is precisely in those critical Christian circles that have sought to reformulate Christian theology after Auschwitz. Nonetheless, we cannot know for sure whether he would have abandoned his early supersessionism, or how he would have dealt with the theological questions raised in the aftermath of the Holocaust. He was unable to complete his theological journey.

Bonhoeffer's final legacy transcends that of the German resistance circles in which he moved. Their tragedy was not just that they failed, but that their failure revealed the extent to which they were "unfinished." As the decades since 1945 have passed, we become ever more aware that the scope of Nazi evil demanded a more finished kind of heroism—impelled not only by repugnance against the brutality of a dictatorship, but by a deeper awareness of the costs of antisemitism, compromise, and complicity.

But, this is an awareness that we have won only gradually, partly as the result of the growing scope of Holocaust scholarship. Our realization that the pervasive antisemitism and anti-Judaism in Christian circles helped foster the attitudes that culminated in the Holocaust leads us, correctly, to read Bonhoeffer's theological writings more critically. This should not blind us to the fact that he leaves a legacy unique among theologians and church activists. As hardly any other Christian thinker in history, Bonhoeffer articulated a theology that truly confronted his times—and he did so not with the benefit of hindsight, but during the Third Reich itself. We are left with many questions about where this life would have led. But, in a very real sense, the questions Bonhoeffer left unresolved are the ones we face today, as we continue to wrestle with the aftermath of the Holocaust.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Siegele-Wenschkewitz, Leonore, “Die Ehre der Frau, dem Manne zu dienen: Zum Frauenbild Dietrich Bonhoeffers” in Jost and Kuberg, eds., *Wie Theologen Frauen sehen—von der Macht der Bilder*. (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1993), 105.
- <sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” in *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928–1936* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 226. [\*]
- <sup>3</sup> Glenthoj, J. *Dietrich Bonhoeffers Kampf gegen den Arierparagraphen*, in *Kirche in der Zeit*, 20, 1966, 440.
- <sup>4</sup> Bethge, Eberhard. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Eine Biographie*. (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag), 362.
- <sup>5</sup> Bethge, *Ibid.*, 369.
- <sup>6</sup> Müller, Christine-Ruth. *Dietrich Bonhoeffers Kampf gegen die nationalsozialistische Verfolgung und Vernichtung der Juden*. (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag), 1990, 60–61.
- <sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. VI. Eberhard Bethge, ed. (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag), 290.
- <sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 134.
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted in Röhm, Eberhard and Thierfelder, Jörg, eds. *Juden, Christen, Deutsche 1933–1945*. Vol. 2. (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1989), 44.
- <sup>10</sup> Christine-Ruth Müller, *Op. cit.*, 228.
- <sup>11</sup> For a thorough discussion of these developments in Bonhoeffer’s thought, see Müller, *Ibid.*, 213–222.
- <sup>12</sup> W. D. Zimmermann, ed. *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. New York: Harper and Row, 1966, p. 150.
- <sup>13</sup> Visser’t Hooft, Willem A. *Memoirs*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973, 91.
- <sup>14</sup> For a study of ecumenical involvement here and in the German resistance, see Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad 1938–1945*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press Oxford, 1992).
- <sup>15</sup> Bethge, *Op. Cit.*, 736.
- <sup>16</sup> Details of his work in this respect can be found, of course, in the Bethge biography. In addition, the memoirs of Visser’t Hooft and the book by Winfried Meyer (both cited above), as well as the two-volume study by Armin Boyens, *Kirchenkampf und Ökumene* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1973) portray in detail the extent to which Bonhoeffer was involved on both fronts.
- <sup>17</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II, 640–643.
- <sup>18</sup> Winfried Meyer, *Unternehmen Sieben: Eine Rettungsaktion*. Frankfurt a. Main: Verlag Anton Hain, 1993, page 24. Meyer’s book is the most detailed account of Operation Seven and Bonhoeffer’s involvement in it.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120–121, 306–335.
- <sup>20</sup> Jacobsen, H. A. *Spiegelbild einer Verschwörung. Die Opposition gegen Hitler und der Staatsstreich vom 20. Juli 1944 in der SD-Berichterstattung*. Vol. I. (Stuttgart: Degerloch), 508.
- <sup>21</sup> Bethge, *Op. Cit.*, 1037–1038.
- <sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. “After Ten Years,” in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Enlarged Edition, Eberhard Bethge, ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company), 1971, 16–17.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, letter dated 15.5.1934 (Munich: Kaiser Verlage, 1958), 194.