

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Formula of Concord

Eberhard Bethge

After July 1935 the seminary's work focused almost entirely on the confessional writings, which were discussed . . . passionately . . . With each passing semester Bonhoeffer devoted more time to classes on the confessions than to any other subject. The students tested the authenticity of the commitments made in the Reformation churches' declarations in light of the concepts of ministry, church, state, *adiaphora*, and scriptural doctrine.

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In his final lectures of this series Bonhoeffer dealt exclusively with [the] *Formula of Concord*. He discussed the articles on free will, predestination, the doctrine of original sin, good works, Law and Gospel, *tertius usus legis*, and justification. The *Formula of Concord* had not been part of his own studies, nor that of his ordinands during their university studies. When Bonhoeffer was a student interest centered mainly on the "genuine" Luther and the premises of Troeltsch; now it had become necessary to listen to the central voices within the church in an era of its most passionate disputes. Every page of the *Formula of Concord* in Bonhoeffer's copy of the confessional writings is covered with underlined passages, exclamation marks, and question marks. During the later courses at Finkenwalde it became the predominant theme in this series of lectures. His notes from the entire seminary period contain no fewer than eighty-one themes and questions on this subject that he assigned the ordinands to work on. He loved the *Formula of Concord* and enjoyed exploring its tendency, through traditional philosophical formulas, to express saving truth and the comforting meaning to be found in the the confessional teaching about the "true distinctions."

The more deeply the world of the confessional writings impressed Bonhoeffer, the more freely he moved into the realm of ecclesiological, ethical, and confessional questions. . . .

In 1940 Edmund Schlink's *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* finally appeared. Bonhoeffer welcomed it and recommended it everywhere. But his own time and attention were already directed toward other matters.

Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A biography*, Revised edition, Revised and edited by Victoria J. Barnett, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999, pages 447 and 449.

Excerpt by Charles E. Ford on Friday 16 July 2004