

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the German Resistance

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This spring brings the commemorations of the fiftieth anniversaries of events leading up to the end of World War II in Europe. The massive atrocities committed by Germany under the Nazi dictatorship have made this a particularly difficult period to study for those, including Lutherans, who have connections to Germany. One of the events being commemorated this spring is of particular importance in this connection. April 9th, Palm Sunday this year, is the 50th anniversary of the execution of the German Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We will attempt to describe his significance.

Bonhoeffer is exceptional for recognizing from the beginning the centrality of the question of the fate of the Jews. Adolph Hitler, leader of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party, was appointed Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. By April, Bonhoeffer had written a memorandum against attempts to exclude the Jews. By August, Bonhoeffer was involved in writing a confession of faith based on Lutheran Confessional writings. It is the most comprehensive theological document ever written against National Socialist influence in the Church, and directly addresses the attempts to exclude the Jews. A month later, he initiated a petition against the exclusion of pastors with Jewish background. This eventually led to the formation of the Confessing Church in opposition to National Socialist influence in the Churches.

Although Dietrich Bonhoeffer grew up in a quite exceptional family, his youthful decision to study theology was not necessarily well received. His father, in particular, at first thought the pastorate a waste of Dietrich's talents. He had completely reversed his opinion by early 1934. As the Bonhoeffer family became drawn into resistance to National Socialism, it was drawn back to its origin – Jesus Christ.

Like the Bonhoeffer family, many upright Germans, when forced to examine the basis of their opposition to the immense appeal of National Socialism, were drawn to the cross of Jesus Christ. These “children of the Church,” as Dietrich described them, “who had become independent and gone their own way, now in the hour of danger returned to their mother.” As honorable Germans were drawn into resistance, they “learned to speak the name of Jesus Christ,” although “with hesitation and embarrassment” or even “genuine fear.”

In 1939, in danger of being drafted for military service, Dietrich left Germany for New York. Great opportunities were opening up for him in America. But after just eight days, he cancelled everything. God's will for him had finally become clear. “I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany.” While on the boat back to Germany he wrote, “my inner uncertainty about the future has ceased.”

Though returning to a Germany where the Nazi regime was approaching the pinnacle of its power, Bonhoeffer nevertheless experienced the freedom that is created by

the call of God, “freedom from the fear of decision, freedom from the fear to act.” And act he did. He joined the *Abwehr*, military counterintelligence. Its leader, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, had established within it a resistance center, headed by Dietrich’s brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi and General Hans Oster. From 1933 until 1939, Dietrich had engaged in a public, open, confessional movement focused on the Church. Now he turned his attention to the State, using deception to conceal the true nature of his work

Bonhoeffer returned to Martin Luther’s distinction between the two Kingdoms, the Church and the State. Both are instruments of God in the face of the nihilism and destruction of National Socialism. But their tasks are completely different. The Church must devote herself exclusively to her proper task, “preaching the risen Jesus Christ.” The State, however, may yet be able to block the forces of destruction. Bonhoeffer turned attention to those who retained some form of public authority, especially in the military. He emphasized the Lutheran concept that State authority is a divine mandate, involving divine authority and divine accountability. He strove to enable the resisters to take action against the National Socialist usurpers.

Much of his activity in the resistance was an attempt to convince the Western allies to encourage the German resistance. The resistance gathered evidence of atrocities and understood far better than the allies the murderous nature of the National Socialist regime. The allies, however, did not regard the differences between the National Socialists and the resistance as significant. Likewise they were unable to take seriously and respond effectively to National Socialist atrocities during the war.

In 1943 Dohnanyi and Dietrich were arrested for their involvement in a successful *Abwehr* operation that enabled 14 Jews to escape from Germany. In prison Dietrich’s identification with the German people became more intense. He began to write in Gothic script. He wrote “I have not for a moment regretted coming back in 1939.” “I regard the fact that I now sit in prison as my participation in the fate of Germany.” After the final attempt to assassinate Hitler failed in 1944, Dietrich wrote in a poem about Germany, “I have loved this people, . . . have borne its shame and sin.”

Also involved in resistance were Dietrich’s brother Klaus and brother-in-law Ruediger Schleicher, both later executed. The Gestapo eventually learned the full story of the *Abwehr* resistance group. They singled out Dohnanyi as the primary organizer of plots against Hitler dating back to 1938. Apparently under Hitler’s direct order, Dietrich, Dohnanyi, Canaris, Oster, and three others were executed on April 9, 1945.