Till the Night Be Past

The Life and Times
of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Scripture quotations taken from the King James or Authorized Version of the Bible.

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Foreword

The fascination with Dietrich Bonhoeffer continues in the 21st century. One cannot help admiring his persistence in the faith to the point of martyrdom. To some Christians today, he appears to be a Protestant saint, to others a modern theologian, his life's work, unfortunately, unfinished. The differing views may be the very problem in evaluating this German churchman, theological scholar, dedicated ecumenicist, instructor of opponent vicars, and, finally, anti-Nazi conspirator.

In his Letters and Papers from Prison, some nontraditional terms give the impression Bonhoeffer was on the verge of reconstructing Christian thought. Indeed, expressions such as cheap grace, religionless Christianity, a world come of age, Christian worldliness, or the idea that "Christians [should] participate in the suffering of God in the life of the world" may seem strange to the eyes of readers who are used to more traditional, particularly Lutheran, terminology.

There are many contradictions and tensions in Bonhoeffer's life and writings, but much continuity and significance. In prison, he once styled himself a "liberal" theologian. Indeed, he went through a process of theological development at the Berlin university under the guidance

of one of the most famous liberal theologians in Germany, Reinhold Seeberg. Following that, Bonhoeffer became more acquainted with the Book of Concord of the Lutheran Church, particularly with the Formula of Concord. During his work as an instructor of vicars of the Confessing Church in the mid-1930s, he began weighing with a great deal of respect the solutions to the theological and ecclesiastical problems of the late Reformation era developed by the second-generation Lutheran theologians.

Bonhoeffer was ordained a pastor of the Old Prussian Church, a "united" church body of Lutherans and Reformed brought together at the beginning of the 19th century under the Prussian Union. However, Bonhoeffer criticized the proposals of the Halle synod of the Confessing Church as theologically immature because they advocated church fellowship with all its members, whether Lutheran, Reformed, or "united."

One of the crucial issues in Bonhoeffer's theological development was how to convey the Gospel message to modern, secular human beings. He was consumed by a desire to apply the Gospel to his world, to make it understandable and relevant for the men and women of his day. Traditional ways of expressing the faith appeared no longer helpful. Religion as he understood it—in a way similar to Karl Barth's view—was an old-fashioned, unsuitable form of piety, cut off from real life and the needs of the modern world. Given these presuppositions, traditional Christian language seemed to make God appear ineffective and makeshift (Lückenbüßer, "stopgap"). In the modern worldview, God became important only at the borders of life, yet Bonhoeffer was deeply convinced that God belongs right in the center of human activity. Bonhoeffer was eager for Christianity to be contemporary. What he, therefore, proposed was an expression of the faith intelligible to post-Christian, secular humankind. In his thinking, this was merely the

logical consequence of defining Jesus Christ as "a man for others"—a new Christological title invented by Bonhoeffer himself. Transferred into ecclesiastical language, this included the church of Christ becoming a "church for others." In this manner, he tried to explain common Christian terms such as sacrifice or devotion.

In the modern environment, as Bonhoeffer analyzed it, intellectuals, teachers, engineers, and lawyers were abandoning the church because it no longer answered the questions that disturbed them. They were incapable of understanding the traditional terms the church was using. Bonhoeffer contended the church, therefore, should not object to reformulating central Christian issues for modern seekers of religious truth. He believed the crisis was not the fault of his fellow citizens, but of the church and its leaders' inability to demonstrate the relevance of biblical truths. That forced modern intellectuals to abandon an obsolete and antiquated church.

One might conclude that Bonhoeffer underestimated the real meaning of religion (which should not to be confused with faith) as a part of the human condition. From one point of view, even the Nazi parades and the staging of their annual party meetings at Nuremberg were "religious," using a horrifying, worldly kind of liturgy. The popularity of Eastern religions (touted as post-Christian) and their influence on Western people today clearly demonstrate a similar strong yearning for something satisfying and transcendental shared even by secularized people of our day.

One might even question the suggestion by Bonhoeffer to reformulate Christian faith to gain a convincing contemporary witness to the Bible's truth. His attempts to solve the problems of Christian witness in post-Christian times remain controversial. Yet Bonhoeffer's life and writings are still important and ought to be thoroughly considered, unless we, too, want to lose contact with real people.

Bonhoeffer was certainly not a confessional Lutheran in the traditional sense of the term, but today he encourages us to focus anew on a convincing and satisfying witness of the Gospel. The least we can say is that he authenticated this quest and testified to it by his death.

One of the last statements from Bonhoeffer celebrates his faith:

> I am so sure of God's guiding hand that I hope I shall always be kept in that certainty. You must never doubt that I am traveling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I am being led. My past life is brimful of God's goodness and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified. I am most thankful for the people I have met, and I only hope that they never have to grieve about me, but that they, too, will always be certain of, and thankful for, God's mercy and forgiveness.

May God give us this confidence and hope in our day.

—Dr. Werner Klän

Oberursel, Germany

Preface

I first became acquainted with Dietrich Bonhoeffer at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1950 through reading The Cost of Discipleship and Letters and Papers from Prison. Upon graduation, I went to work for Stewart Herman and Carl Lund-Quist at the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva. Because Bonhoeffer spent so much time on the common campus of the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, he was at the time of my tenure, and still is today, regarded by many theologians as a courageous social activist and outspoken realist, a member of a rich family who was murdered for his opposition to the Nazis and to Hitler. There were some churchmen who did not think Bonhoeffer's decision to seek a military chaplaincy or later to become a secret operative for the Abwehr were wise.

Later, I came to know more about Bonhoeffer from a young lady I sailed with on the Wannsee in Berlin. She had heard his final sermon at the boarding school at Schoenberg in Bavaria, a location where both of them were interned during Bonhoeffer's final weeks of life. This young lady was a member of one of the high-ranking military families that, after the July 20 plot against Hitler, were interned, whether or not they had any connection with the plotters. As one

prison after another was bombed, Bonhoeffer ended up by mistake at Schoenberg for a few weeks before being taken to Flossenbürg to be hanged in the last days of the war.

What is Bonhoeffer's role in Christianity today? Among some American theologians, he is revered as one whose concepts and theology, in his own words, had "come of age." Among European students of theology, Bonhoeffer is more apt to be thought of as a bold and courageous defender of the church who, as Ingetraut Ludophy once wrote, was not so much concerned about the "other-worldliness" of the church as for its "this-worldliness." They also reflect on his shortened life in which his theology did not have a full opportunity to develop and on his practical protest against the evil of his times.

I was involved to a small degree with shaping a film about Bonhoeffer for broadcast on public television in the summer of 2000. The film, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace, showed some of the conflict in Dietrich's personality: his practical involvement with the world of politics and at the same time his eagerness not to give up the God whom he had come to understand and live with. From the reactions to the film in Germany and in America, it is evident that Bonhoeffer was a highly respected but controversial figure.

Acknowledgments

For many of the insights in this biography, I am indebted to a score of Bonhoeffer disciples. Towering above them all is Dr. Eberhard Bethge, a former fellow pastor in London and Bonhoeffer's definitive biographer and literary executor, as well as friend, confidant, and nephew-in-law. Bethge devoted three decades of love and labor to gathering materials about his former mentor. In turn, Theodore Gill's work provides unusually gifted color, imagination, enthusiasm, and synthesis. Sabine Leibholz, Dietrich's twin sister, offers rich detail about the family relationships. Mary Bosanquet gathered her lively account in part while living with various survivors. Martin Bailey's superb picture album of the Bonhoeffer era arouses one's nostalgia for the way things really were. I am also grateful to the firms of Harper and Row and the Christian Kaiser Verlag, which have kindly authorized the use of copyrighted material.

Page 75: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 1 (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1965–69), 23.

Page 82: Bonhoeffer, Gesammelte Schriften, 1:134.

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1

Naked Came I upon the Earth

The weeks before the hanging had been filled with calm hope. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was only 39 years old and genuinely in love for the first time in his life. The awakening of spring always had brought him a kind of pagan delight, perhaps too primitive for a professor of theology. From the woods around the ruins of his castle prison at Flossenbürg, he could smell the nectar of blossoming linden and hawthorn. At dusk he could hear the nightingales, a pleasant change from the constant rumble of bombs that had been his melody in Berlin. At dawn came the lilting call of mating cuckoos.

For exactly two years, the Third Reich had been playing cat and mouse with Dietrich. Now the Gestapo had solid proof—proof that this professor of theology was involved with those who had plotted the death of Adolf Hitler. After 18 months in the rather lenient military prison at Tegel and four more under the stricter watch of the Gestapo on Prinz Albrecht Strasse, Dietrich now had arrived at the slave labor camp at Flossenbürg. This was usually the end of the line.

Realistically Dietrich's chances for avoiding the hangman's noose were slim, but there still was one thin strand of hope. Off to the west rumbled the thunder of American artillery, battering into the heartland of the Third Reich. From the east, hordes of Volks Deutsch poured back into central Germany before the oncoming firepower of the Russians. Maybe, just maybe, the prison camp at Flossenbürg would be overrun by Americans or the line of communication from Berlin would be blasted to smithereens. If Dietrich could only survive through April, by May the Nazi empire might be sunk forever! Then he could once again roam his beloved forests, searching for mushrooms and strawberries.

The makeshift court martial, late at night on the Sunday after Easter, was a mere formality. Dietrich wasn't even present for the beginning of the trial. He had to be fetched from Schönberg, which was across the mountains from Flossenbürg. Among the accused were Admiral Canaris, General Oster, and Judge Advocate General Sack. The evidence against the plotters was conclusive. Every one of them had worked actively for the death of Hitler and the overthrow of the Third Reich. But the trial was only a formality; the verdict already was rendered. As a final act of revenge before he put a pistol to his own head, Hitler wanted all his opponents dead.

The extermination camp at Flossenbürg dominated the landscape. Built on the ruins of a medieval castle on the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia, it boasted a colorful history dating back to the Crusades. There, in the first gray light of dawn on Monday, April 9, 1945, the guards came to Dietrich's cell, rattled his door—just as they did the doors of the cells of Canaris, Oster, and Sack—and called, "Up! Off with the clothes!"

This was it. It was eight days after Easter, not a bad day to die—if one had to die. Naked as he awaited his death,

Dietrich may have thought of a favorite hymn from the pen of Paul Gerhardt, which had been sung for generations by those facing death from plague, war, and famine. The hymn held special meaning for Dietrich because it had been the prayer his 6-year-old godson, Michael Dress, had sung when his Onkel Diet had been taken to prison. The second verse is most striking: "Naked came I upon the earth and naked shall I leave it."

In air perfumed with the blossoms of spring, Dietrich Bonhoeffer marched out under the lindens and firs with his guards. At the gallows, he knelt, prayed, slipped the noose over his neck, and awaited the springing of the trap. Within seconds of his fall, his body went limp, and only the joy of his spirit and the impact of his writings lives on.

At first the story of the Reverend Doctor Dietrich Bonhoeffer seems bizarre and improbable. He was singled out by his mother for her love and affection. He was indecisive. He had serious doubts about his faith. He lived through strange times—the days of Kaiser Wilhelm, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich. Yet Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life appears to be not only logical and orderly, but warm and idealistic and also remarkably fruitful and active.

To those who knew Dietrich as a child, it seemed unlikely that he would achieve great things. He had trouble coming to terms with himself and his world. Decisions came hard for him, and once he had considered every facet and worked things out, he was still not sure. His world always seemed too complex, too unreliable, too changeable —not at all like the warmth and understanding he knew from his mother. Perhaps he also was overshadowed by the outstanding achievements of his father and grandfathers and no less by those of his older brothers.

In his teens, Dietrich was considered a good pianist and composer and nearly devoted his life to music. But among the many amazing facts of Bonhoeffer's life was his choice

to become a pastor and theologian. His family was not a church-going one. Although they said their prayers and listened to the Bible, largely at his mother's urging, Dietrich's psychiatrist father and his scientist brothers were disappointed to see him study theology. But in addition to goldsmithing, law, science, psychology, music, and painting, love of theology also ran in the Bonhoeffer line. In fact, one of Dietrich's grandfathers had served as Kaiser Wilhelm's chaplain. Once he chose his career, though, Dietrich met early success as a professor and theologian, with six books to his credit at the time of his death.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not look like a professor of theology. He was a big man, well over six feet tall, an athlete, round in the face, almost boyish. He had his mother's blue eyes and blond hair. He kept himself trim in a way that would have shocked the typically reserved professors in Germany—by swimming and playing tennis with his students. His physical conditioning eventually would help him to survive the rigors of prison life.

For a man who grew up before the age of the airplane, Dietrich did a remarkable amount of traveling. During his university days, he spent a term in Rome and North Africa. As an exchange student, he studied in New York. He preached in Cuba and lectured in Mexico City. He served a year's vicarage in Barcelona and, like Ernest Hemingway, became something of an aficionado of the bullring. For two years, Dietrich was a pastor in London. Three times he tried to join an ashram of Mahatma Gandhi in India. He traveled endlessly for the World Alliance of Churches—Denmark, Sweden, England, Germany, Switzerland, France, Scotland, Bulgaria.

How could a boy who had almost never warmed the seat of a pew grow up to preach in Berlin's most illustrious pulpits? How could a young theologian who hated war and fled to America rush home and apply for a chaplaincy just

before the Nazi panzers trampled Poland? How could a preacher volunteer to work as a spy for the German Wehrmacht? How could a professor of theology plot to blow up Hitler? Despite his inability to arrive quickly at unassailable answers, of one thing Dietrich was quite certain. Not as a politician, not as a humanitarian, but strictly on moral grounds, he was willing to stake his life to fight Hitler.

So it was that in the first months of 1945, as World War II was rapidly drawing to a close and Germany was being pounded out of existence, Dietrich was shuttled under a rain of bombs from Berlin to Buchenwald to Schönberg to Flossenbürg. In the disruptions of wartime travel, he almost missed his own court martial. And even as he tried to cheer up other high-ranking prisoners by celebrating informal Easter services, his dark night on earth was coming to an end.

2

Marked for Greatness?

The Bonhoeffer clan had its roots in the Netherlands at Nymwegen. They always had been wealthy burghers, just below nobility. In 1513, Caspar von Bonhoeffer left Holland to escape the religious oppression that climaxed when Charles V was elected Holy Roman Emperor. Honest Dutchmen had never been fond of the Spanish throne nor its repressive brand of religion.

The traditional German home of the Bonhoeffers was the free city of Schwäbisch Hall in Württemberg. Originally goldsmiths, the family branched out to become doctors, lawyers, judges, professors, and preachers. Even in the rich city of Schwäbisch Hall, the Bonhoeffers were citizens of substance. To this day, despite the destruction of war after war, the Bonhoeffer burial sites in St. Michael's Church still mark the family as an important one: Life-size statues of saints and angels, oil portraits of half a dozen ancestors, marble columns and brass plaques, rich ornaments in gold and ivory—all in the best rococo style—grace the church and the crypts.

The Napoleanic invasion of 1806 broke up this idyll of rich medieval burghers and scattered the Bonhoeffer family. One hundred years later, however, Schwäbisch Hall re-

mained something of a romantic shrine for Dietrich. He loved to visit the old patrician houses and climb their gabled stairways, finger the gold and pearl brooches that were family heirlooms, and eat the spiced cookies so characteristic of Swabia.

Dietrich's parents were of a generation that had seen Germany's birth as a nation. In the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Otto von Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor, finally had brought together what had long been a strange jumble of independent duchies and kingdoms, making the new Germany equal with Great Britain and France.

Dietrich was born on February 4, 1906, the sixth of eight children. The eight children—Karl-Friedrich, Walter, Klaus, Ursula, Christine (also called Christel), twins Dietrich and Sabine, and Susanne were all born within a single decade, close enough in age to know one another well. Karl-Friedrich became a physicist of considerable reputation, Walter a naturalist, and Klaus a lawyer. Three of the four girls married lawyers, and Susanne wed a pastor.

The Bonhoeffer family had ancient and respected roots, and each child came to know and love the family's history. Dietrich's paternal grandfather, Friedrich Bonhoeffer, had long served as president of the Tübingen High Court and had a reputation as a strict law-and-order man. Dietrich's paternal grandmother, Julie, came from a more liberal family. Even as a grand old lady in her 90s, she thought nothing of walking through a cordon of storm troopers blocking off a Jewish store.

On Dietrich's mother's side, there also was ample reason to be proud of family heritage. His maternal grandfather, Karl von Hase, had been chaplain to Kaiser Wilhelm. In a sermon at the royal chapel at Potsdam, Pastor von Hase publicly objected to the emperor calling the French a "pack of dogs." This outspokenness cost him his appointment as chaplain, and he wound up professor of church history at

the University of Breslau. Dietrich's maternal grandmother, Clara von Hase, born a von Kalckreuth and a countess, brought culture to the family. Her father and brother were two of Germany's best-known painters. She had studied piano with Klara Schumann and Franz Liszt.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's father, Karl, was a professor of psychiatry in Breslau, on the Oder River, now a part of Poland. Dietrich spent the first six years of his life in a huge mansion in a forest of birch trees situated next door to the mental hospital in Scheitniger Park. The staff included a cook, a housemaid, a parlor maid, a governess, a French governess, a chauffeur, a receptionist, and a gardener. Dietrich's mother insisted on having a schoolroom, and his father set aside one room as a zoo where the children could keep lizards, snakes, rabbits, squirrels, guinea pigs, and pigeons. The garden was big enough for ice-skating, cave digging, and tent pitching, and it included an orchard and a tennis court.

Like most prosperous families, the Bonhoeffers owned a summer home. Theirs was at Wolfelsgrund. The woods there were as remote and as dense as those described in "Hansel and Gretel." Often with no supervision except that of the governesses, the Bonhoeffer youngsters clambered up the hunting towers, watched the deer come out to feed, gathered wild strawberries, and told each other haunted stories of the Walpurgisnacht, where the witches traditionally gathered on the night of April 30, on the highest mountain of the Hartz range, to build bonfires, dance, and offer sacrifices.

Yet life in the Bonhoeffer home was not without order and discipline. Although he was a busy man, Karl Bonhoeffer always reserved time for his children. He tried to spend some time with each child every day. He frequently skated, played tennis, and hiked with them. Most of all, he enjoyed talking with them. He wanted their thoughts and words to

be well reasoned, not flighty or hasty. Although he was less cordial than his wife, Karl Bonhoeffer was such a rock of dependability that the children never hesitated to take a problem to him. To some degree, his training as a psychiatrist spilled over into his relationships with his children.

Dietrich's mother, Paula, was the more dominant of the two parents. It was she who insisted on having a classroom and teaching her children personally, though it meant she had to earn a proper license. It was she who invited other children to the classes. In most ways she was more strict than her husband. When one of the toddlers dropped a toy on a dirty floor, she had no compunctions about throwing it away. In fact, Paula Bonhoeffer was almost too fastidious about dirt. Her floors had to sparkle. The bedding had to be sunned and aired daily. She would not tolerate dust. In a hotel or on a train, she scrubbed the wash basin with antiseptic, which she carried in her bag.

Before Dietrich turned 6 years old, his parents moved to Berlin. There his father took an endowed chair as senior professor of neurology and psychiatry. For one who was not a disciple of Freud or Jung, this was a high honor. In the city, the brood of young Bonhoeffers, with their ancient roots in Swabia, Thuringia, and Pomerania, became Berliners through and through, taking advantage of the museums, galleries, theaters, and schools the capital city provided.

As at Breslau, the family did not at first buy a home, but lived in rented quarters. Karl Bonhoeffer found an old mansion near the zoo in Bellevue. With the narrowest of windows overshadowed by tall trees, the house was as gloomy as a prison. An open courtyard separated the reception rooms from the living quarters. Yet Bellevue was considered an address of considerable prestige—the address one would expect of a leading psychiatrist. In fact, the gardens overlooked those of the royal palace.

As he learned to know the city, Karl Bonhoeffer came to like the woods and lakes of the western suburbs best—areas of the city where many of the university professors lived. After three years, he bought a delightful town house in the suburb of Grunewald. The property was not much smaller than a country estate. The house stood on nearly an acre of land and boasted an orchard of apple, pear, and cherry trees. Three-and-a-half stories high, the house provided gracious shelter for Karl Bonhoeffer's study, his consulting rooms, his family, his staff of as many as seven servants, and during vacation time, as many as a dozen relatives and guests.

The choice rooms for family fun seem to have been the dining room and the living room. The surviving Bonhoeffers still have many photographs showing the glories of those two rooms. In the dining room, the parquet flooring was polished daily. The table could seat as many as 20. Paula Bonhoeffer's grandfather, Stanislas von Kalckreuth, who was a professional artist, designed the sideboard. Its serpentine pillars, inlays, and frieze made it look like a Greek temple. Dietrich's sisters recalled that the younger Bonhoeffers liked to climb to the top of this massive oak sideboard, lie eight feet in the air, and gaze out at the comings and goings of cooks and maids.

The reception room was no less grand. The largest grand piano made by Bechstein was not dwarfed by the equally massive furniture and oriental carpets that filled the room. The walls were as crowded with paintings as those of an art gallery. In addition to family portraits, there were huge landscapes of the Alps from the brushes of Dietrich's great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather, Stanislas and Leopold von Kalckreuth, both of whom had paintings in museums all across Europe.

All around him, the young Dietrich was surrounded by the impressive accomplishments of his ancestors—whether

in art, medicine, science, or theology. In a sense, this was a challenge, but also something of a threat. When he grew up, would he be able to measure up? Was he also marked for greatness?