



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"Grace and Peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the defining persons of the 20th century. A Lutheran pastor in Germany during the 20's, 30's and 40's, he was a pacifist who eventually concluded that violent action was necessary to remove the horrifically evil Adolph Hitler. After participating in a failed attempt on the life of Hitler, he was consequently executed by the Nazis.

This month National Public Radio is broadcasting a program about Bonhoeffer entitled Ethics and the Will of God: The Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Just this past weekend the program on religion, Speaking of Faith, moderated by Krista Tippett, focused on this upcoming documentary. The featured guest was Martin Doblmeier, the producer of this program. While encouraging people from Hope to watch this program, I would also like to give some basic background material on his life and work.

Bonhoeffer is best known today by his writings; specifically three books.

Letters and Papers From Prison

It's rather ironic that some of the best writing in history has taken place in the confines of a prison, remember both the Apostle Paul and also Martin Luther King Jr. This was the book which changed the life of Martin Doblmeier, with the defining moment coming when he was in high school and his religion teacher introduced the class to Bonhoeffer through Letters and Papers.

Doblmeier says he took the book with him wherever he went, even to the baseball field, where he read it in the dugout. Within a couple of weeks he had made some new commitments in his life, to do social justice programs, to get involved in a soup kitchen, and eventually to study religion at the university.

Cost of Discipleship

Rarely in the history of Christianity has there been such an acerbic denunciation of casual Christianity or just playing church, as Bonhoeffer writes these unforgettable words:

"We (Lutherans) have gathered like eagles around the carcass of cheap grace, and there we have drunk of the poison which has killed the life of following Christ." He rolls on from there, "Cheap grace is the enemy of the church. Today we are fighting for a grace that is precious. Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without penitence, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession of sin, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living incarnated Christ."

With the expansion of Christianity and the growing worldliness of the church, Bonhoeffer asserts, the consciousness of a precious grace is gradually being lost. When the world is Christianized, grace becomes the common property of everyone, and thus very cheap to have.

Life Together

Martin Luther highlighted a theme which has gained much prominence in recent years, "the priesthood of all believers." What he meant is that every believer is a leader, every Christian is called in baptism to be a priest or pastor, to be a disciple. Unfortunately, for most of history since the Reformation this incredible teaching of Luther's has been merely a theoretical construct, not lived out in most churches. For the most part clergy dominated the church, clergy did the ministry, lay persons were relegated to the margins.

In this little book Bonhoeffer is one of the very first to reintroduce the subject of lay ministry, holding it up as central to the nature of the church. Of course living in a time of oppression and persecution the notion of community became even more essential, and so he reflects his situation in this book.

(Ironically, the person most responsible for my own interest in Bonhoeffer has been much in our prayers of late. Dr. Jim Burtness was a professor at Luther Seminary for much of the past generation and he taught several different classes on Bonhoeffer. Tragically, Dr.

Burtness fell recently in his home and broke some vertebrae in his neck, and has been paralyzed. He has now been moved to Sister Kenny in Minneapolis for treatment. Please pray for him and his family.)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born 100 years ago, 1906, to an intellectual and aristocratic German family. As a young man it was clear he was a brilliant student and theologian, and quickly became an effective parish pastor. Well before Germany descended into paroxysms of evil, he was writing about ethics, biblical faith and the nature of the Christian community. When Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer watched with horror the rise of this truly evil empire and the increasing persecution of Jews.

What troubled Bonhoeffer above all was the way the German Lutheran Church became complicit with Hitler in this evil. Hitler was a master at using religious symbolism and language to justify his tyranny, and the church soon became co-opted by the state. Bonhoeffer was so concerned that he helped create the Confessing Church, a group which became the center of Christian resistance to Fascism. For a time he also led an alternative theological seminary.

Bonhoeffer carefully articulated a faithful way for Christians to stand over against an oppressive regime. First, he said, "Christians have an obligation to challenge the power of the state and question the very premise of its authority to engage in evil. Secondly, the church must aid the victims of any state violence, in fact Christ has given us the unconditional obligation to reach out to the victims of state action, even if those victims are not Christian.

And then thirdly, Christians must not just put bandages on the wounds of those who are being crushed by the wheels of injustice, but, as he says, to jam a spoke into the wheel itself."

Bonhoeffer insisted that the will of God is not just a system of rules passed down from generation to generation, but something new and different in each situation of life. In other words, the will of God might be quite different for a Christian living under persecution than in another setting.

Also he emphasized that the will of God may not always lead to our own well-being, perhaps not even to our preservation. Sometimes following the will of God might lead to our own suffering and even death, as it

did for our Lord. Sometimes the will of God leads us not to a higher place, but rather to a downward path.

Bonhoeffer wrote that the great mystery of God is always calling us to challenge our own paradigm, our own world view. Just at the moment when we think we have everything all figured out, it is God who comes to us to say, "This is not the way you had it quite figured out, my way may not be your way."

Bonhoeffer was always searching for more authentic and persuasive models of community. This led him to travel to India and study with Mahatma Gandhi (as did Martin Luther King Jr.) where he learned non-violence. Later he studied in America and was captivated by the African American Christian community, both because of its vibrant worship and also by its passion for social justice.

His last visit to America came in 1939, when many friends entreated him to stay where he might be safe. But he refused to turn his back on the sufferings of his people and he took the last boat back to Germany before America entered the war. When the attempt on Hitler's life failed, he knew it was just a matter of time before he and his fellow conspirators would pay the ultimate price. Thus he wrote, "It is only by living in this world that you learn to have faith. It is not about seeing your own suffering, but the suffering of Christ in the world."

He was executed at Flossenburg Prison in April, 1945, only three weeks before Hitler committed suicide. His final words ring throughout eternity, "This is the end, but for me the beginning of life." Earlier he had written about the essence of the Christian faith, "When Christ calls a person, he calls him/her to come and die." His words proved to be prophetic.

Watch for the program on PBS, or read one of his books. You will be richly blessed by this faithful servant of Jesus Christ.