

## Truth On the Scaffold

“What is truth?” said Pilate, with Jesus, the Truth, capital T, right in front of him. The truth of all life would soon be on the Roman scaffold. It seems, fearfully so to me, that today truth itself is on the scaffold. How shall we live in such unprecedented times as these in our nation? There is such alarm and fear and feeling of helplessness among us as we watch the beginning of the Second Trump Presidency, party affiliation aside. Can we talk about it in church? I do so with some trepidation today. Yet human lives near and far are in new danger and vulnerability.

So on this Sunday I seek to address this political and spiritual hour through the lens of the life and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. During the Third Reich in Germany, he addressed the German Church which had fallen under the spell of Hitler and Nazism. Near the end of his young life, he became part of a plot to assassinate Hitler, and was executed by order of Hitler. What to make of such a life?

His life can give us clarity and urgency as we seek to be followers of Jesus today. I want to be clear; I am not equating President Trump with Hitler. Historical analogies are never exact and sometimes misleading, but the life of a heroic Christian may give us guidance on how we might be Christian today.

Bonhoeffer has been one of the most formative theologians in my life. As a student at Union Theological Seminary in N.Y. City, I would often walk by the Bonhoeffer Room. His presence filled the halls. I took classes from Paul Lehmann who was his personal friend while they were students together at Union. Lehmann begged Bonhoeffer not to return to Germany and meet his almost certain death. I have a personal stake in the truth of who Bonhoeffer was.

Today we are witnessing the thievery of Bonhoeffer's life and witness by the religious and political right, led by a writer and speaker named Eric Metaxas. Metaxas wrote a flawed biography of Bonhoeffer and has followed it up with a 2022 book *Letter to The American Church*. Metaxas was a leader of the "Stop the Steal Rally" in December of 2019 and has used Bonhoeffer to equate the Democratic Party, the Biden Administration and liberalism in general with Hitler. He has called for Christians to eradicate this collective evil by any means necessary. The International Bonhoeffer Society and the Bonhoeffer family has decried his use of Bonhoeffer for these purposes.

Metaxas has called this moment in time a "Bonhoeffer Moment"—a moment to resist the political evils around us. Ironically, progressive Christian leaders have been asking whether this moment is a "Bonhoeffer Moment" since the first Trump Administration. That both sides could claim Bonhoeffer as a hero and guide could only happen when truth itself is in danger.

Today, I offer a short introduction of his life and witness that you may make the connections to your life and our life for yourself.

## I

He grew up in an aristocratic family in Germany, he and his twin sister Sabine the youngest of six children. His father was a professor of psychiatry and his mother was the daughter of a minister, a chaplain in the court of Emperor Wilhelm the Second. Bonhoeffer's grandfather quit his position when Emperor Wilhelm wanted to dictate what he preached, and who one day referred to the proletariat as "rabble". His beloved grandmother Julie Bonhoeffer was an outspoken advocate of women's rights, and when Hitler passed a law forbidding citizens from shopping in stores owned by Jews, she at ninety-one marched right past the military police and shopped. Shopping as a seditious act.

When Bonhoeffer decided to go into theological studies, his father was deeply disappointed, thinking it a waste of his prodigious abilities.

By the age of 24, young Bonhoeffer had received two doctorates and written two dissertations. Studying the nature of the church, always a key concern to him, he traveled at 19 years old to Rome where he discovered the world-wide ecumenical church so much broader than his German Protestant (Lutheran) Church. His dissertation was on "*Christ Existing as Community*". *As community!*

The first sentence of his first sermon was, “Christianity entails decision!” He had set his path.

He traveled to the United States to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, 1930-1931. His first semester he said, “There is no theology here!” In Germany, theological studies focused on the history of doctrine and philosophy. Metaxas and his followers like to pounce here. But Bonhoeffer’s second semester was transformative. He began attending and teaching Sunday School at the great Black church in Harlem, Abyssinian Baptist Church, not far from Union. His Union classes introduced him to the urgency of social justice, and he traveled to the South with his Black classmate Franklin Fisher. He was scandalized by the treatment of Black persons in the segregated South, and this trip gave him new eyes to see what was beginning to happen in Germany. (He did not know, nor did we, that Hitler had sent representatives to the U.S. to study how to subjugate and oppress an entire race of people.)

When he returned to Germany, he wrote a now famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, its first sentence: “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church.” The book took a deep dive into Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Bonhoeffer was undergoing a kind of conversion, he said, from “theologian” to “Christian”. A note to all religious professionals! In a letter to a friend he wrote:

...I do believe that at last I am on the right track.... I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really taking the Sermon on The Mount seriously. Here alone lies the force that can blow all this hocus-pocus [of Nazism] sky high.

During this time in the early 1930's before Hitler came to power, he gave an address on national radio against what he called the "Fuhrer Principle", or political strong-man principle, that was taking over the nation. The producers of the radio program cut him off mid-address.

He saw early the dangers of Nazism and the evil of anti-Semitism. He began to help Jews escape from Germany. "Only the one who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants", he said with characteristic sharpness. He had begun to see the great dividing line between the institutional church in Germany and a true following of Jesus. He helped form "The Confessing Church", a community of pastors and Christians formed in resistance to Hitler and in repudiation of the German Christian Church which had given its allegiance to Hitler and fallen under the sway of Nazism. The German Christian Church had become in their own words the "Reich Church." (Today a number of American churches have started up calling themselves "Patriot Churches".)

Bonhoeffer raised the question and its stakes: "*The question is really: Christianity or Germanism?*" We face the same question today: Christianity or

Americanism. White Christian Nationalism is on the move to turn our pluralistic democracy into a “theocracy”, and they know exactly who “Theo” is!

In 1939 Bonhoeffer faced induction into the German army. He was not yet ready to be arrested, so he traveled back to the United States and to Union Seminary. But as soon as he got there, he realized he had made a mistake. Against the pleading of his friends he went back to Germany. He wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr, his professor and friend at Union:

I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.

As the clouds darkened, Bonhoeffer wrote with remarkable clarity and prescience that the church had three responsibilities toward the state:

1. The first was to call the state to be the state as God ordained it to be, that is to maintain justice and stability.
2. The second was its “unconditional obligation” to come to the aid of victims of state actions, all victims, every victim.
3. The third was not only to bind up the wounds of victims underneath the wheel, but to seize the wheel itself. If a train is hurtling down upon a

person, we must try to stop the train, in his words “put a spoke in the wheel”

He had been moving toward putting a spoke in the wheel. On November 9, 1938, the government’s violence against the Jews turned official and public. On the night remembered as “Kristallnacht”, the Night of Broken Glass, Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues were looted and burned. Holy objects were desecrated in the streets.

That night Bonhoeffer opened the Bible and read Psalm 74: “Your foes have roared in your holy place; they set up their emblems there.... They set your sanctuary on fire.” Bonhoeffer wrote in the margin of his Bible: “How long, O God, shall I be a bystander?” These are searing words for our consciences today. Here is one meaning of taking up the cross: to no longer be a bystander.

On April 15, 1943, he was arrested for being part of a plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer had chosen his path as *HIS* path, not as a model for Christian action, but as the witness he chose tremblingly to give. He was willing to take upon himself the guilt of murder and place himself outside Christian teaching for the sake of the Jews and other innocent victims of the Nazi reign of terror.

On February 7, 1945, 80 years ago this week, he was transferred to Buchenwald Concentration Camp for execution. On April 9, 1945, he was

executed by order of Hitler. He was 39. During his two years in prison, his friends carried letters out which we know now as *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In one of them he wrote, “*The church is church only when it is there for others.*”

Never parading himself as a spiritual superior, his poem from prison shows his remarkable humanity and humility:

Who Am I?

Who am I? They often tell me  
I step out from my cell  
calm and peaceful and poised  
like a squire from his manor.

Who am I? They often tell me  
I speak with my guards  
freely, friendly and clear,  
as though I was the one in charge.

Who am I? They also tell me  
I bear the days of my calamity  
serenely, smiling and proud  
like one accustomed to winning.

Am I really what others say of me?



Or am I only what I know of myself?  
 Restless, yearning, sick, like a caged bird,  
 struggling for breath, as if I were being strangled,  
 starving for colors, for flowers, for birdsong,  
 thirsting for kind words, human closeness,  
 shaking with rage toward power lust and pettiest insult,  
 tossed about, waiting for great things to happen,  
 helplessly fearing for friends so far away,  
 too tired and empty to pray, to think, to work,  
 weary and ready to take my leave of it all?

Who am I? This one or the other?  
 Am I this one today and tomorrow another?  
 Am I both at once? Before others a hypocrite  
 and in my own eyes a pitiful, whimpering weakling?  
 Or is what remains in me like a defeated army,  
 fleeing in disarray from a victory already won?  
 Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
 Whoever I am, thou knowest me; O God, I am thine.

The key question of our lives, being tested in this moment, is not “Who am I?”, but “Whose am I?” Will we take up the “unconditional obligation” to the present victims of state action? Trans people, demonized by almost 300 million

dollars worth of political ads during the last Presidential Campaign, whose rights are now being taken, and all LGBTQ persons. Immigrants, legal and undocumented, now living in terror? Women of child bearing age living in restrictive states on abortion and women's health care? We start there, we have already started there, standing by victims of state action and official cruelty and social hatred. Wherever people are in danger in our community, we will be there.

Will we commit ourselves to what Bonhoeffer hoped he would be able to in Germany, to the "reconstruction of Christian life" in America? A reconstruction which will be for us as it was for him, a new centrality of Jesus' Sermon on The Mount in the life of the church. Your pastors Gary West and David Comer have challenged us through the years to let the Sermon on the Mount be the heart of our Christian lives. Not the religion *about* Jesus but the religion *of* Jesus. Will we follow Jesus of Nazareth as we live in a time where truth is every day and every hour now on the scaffold?