

Conviction and courage, even to the death

by David Wilson

About 75 years ago—on April 5, 1943—Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned in Germany.

He was—in essence—jailed for following what he felt were his Christian convictions.

It was a troubling time in Germany.

Many of us have genuine, heartfelt religious beliefs. But few of us, if any, have had to hold to those beliefs knowing that death as a very real possibility.

But Dr. Bonhoeffer did.

He was a German pastor and a theologian who believed strongly in a practical application of Christianity in life and he practiced what he preached, even during dangerous circumstances.

Bonhoeffer had grown up in Germany and was a young pastor and teacher when Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist (Nazi) Party took control.

He could have gone along quietly with everything, just as many German church members did at the time.

But instead, Bonhoeffer made it clear that what was happening in his country in the 1930s was morally wrong and completely incompatible with Christianity.

Author Eric Metaxas has written extensively about Bonhoeffer and explained his role in Germany during those difficult days.

“He [Bonhoeffer] had an innate sense,” Metaxas wrote, “that the National Socialists would lead Germans into far darker places than they had yet been, and he was one of the very few voices who spoke out against it.”

As we know from history, speaking out against Hitler and the Nazi regime was not a safe thing to do.

A Christian in America at that time could condemn what was happening in Germany and not fear any repercussions.

After all, it was relatively safe to speak out from the other side of the Atlantic.

But to do it in Germany, even when having the higher moral ground, wasn't advisable.

Bonhoeffer's courage is even more admirable when we realize that he could have safely lived through the war in the safety of the United States.

But his conscience wouldn't allow it.

As a leader in the Confessing Church, his activities had already placed him under the watchful eye of the German authorities before World War II broke out, and some of his Christian friends arranged for him to come

to America to teach and escape possible persecution.

Bonhoeffer came to the United States in the summer of 1939 but he soon concluded that he should be back in Germany.

After much prayer, he wrote in a letter that it was a mistake to come to America: “I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will 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.”

“In the end,” Metaxas wrote, “he really believed that God wanted him to go back, to stand with his people, come what may. He knew that danger and possibly death lay ahead, but he went nonetheless.”

Upon his return to Germany, Bonhoeffer ministered to others and, as discreetly as possible, became more and more involved in opposing the German government.

He and his colleagues worked quietly, knowing that the Nazi regime could come down upon them at any moment.

Eventually, Bonhoeffer was indirectly involved in an effort to remove Hitler by assassination.

Earlier in his life, Bonhoeffer's Christian beliefs had prevented him from opposing any existing authority, but as he worked through the issues in his own heart and mind, he became more and more convinced that a Christian was obligated to do what he could to stop abuses of power and to oppose injustices against an innocent populace.

And when his actions were discovered it cost him his freedom, and eventually his life.

In April of 1945 he was hanged. Bonhoeffer had ministered to other prisoners during his captivity and was faithful to the end, calling death “the last station on the road to freedom.”

His death was one of millions that came at the hands of the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s. Twenty-eight days after Bonhoeffer's execution, Germany surrendered.



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