

BONHOEFFER AND THE JEWS

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Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer stands out among German church leaders during the twelve years of The Third Reich. He was one of a small number of churchmen to actively resist the racist policies and actions of the Nazi regime. He called for an uncompromising stand on the Word of God by the Church of Germany in the time of its greatest evil. As a result, Bonhoeffer paid the ultimate price: on April 9, 1945 he was hanged at Flossenbürg Concentration Camp, weeks before World War II ended and the camp was liberated by Allied forces.

Since his death, volumes have been written about Bonhoeffer – the latest a new biography by Eric Metaxas. His best friend, Eberhard Bethge, spent the remainder of his long life documenting and commenting on Bonhoeffer's ideas and theology. Bonhoeffer Societies were formed. The topic, 'Bonhoeffer and the Jews,' figures prominently in these discussions, books and papers beginning in the 1960s.

Have his commentators created a Bonhoeffer of their own persuasion? Did Bethge himself go beyond what Bonhoeffer would have said about himself? Did he carry into his writings anti-Jewish suppositions of his Lutheran heritage? Why hasn't Bonhoeffer been accepted as a "righteous gentile" by the committee at Yad Vashem? Reconstructing Bonhoeffer's view of the Jews and examining that view in the context in which he lived is not an easy task. This paper will attempt to give some thoughts on Bonhoeffer's worldview based on Scripture and his doctrine of the Church and how he acted during those perilous years.

Background

The history of the German Church dating from the 1555 Peace of Augsburg until the rise of the Third Reich under Hitler in 1933 is the backdrop of Bonhoeffer's pleas to the Church of his day to stand firmly on Scripture - not only for holy living but to clarify the role of Church and State.

The Germany in which Bonhoeffer lived – from 1906 to 1945 – was complex in every dimension. His life spanned the multiple metamorphoses that Germany went through in only one generation – from the Empire of Kaiser Wilhelm II to the Weimar Republic following World War I to the Third Reich under Hitler. Under each of these regimes, the state church underwent structural changes until it became the Nazis' *Reichskirche*. Bonhoeffer objected to the Nazis on moral and theological principles, particularly the Nazi state's claim to total control over the person, a right that belongs to God alone.

In 1933, Germany's population stood at 66 million. Of those 45 million were Protestants; less than 1%, 525,000 were Jewish. Pastors numbered 18,842 of which about 150 were Jewish. From 1917 there had arisen a group of fanatic Nazi Protestants who wanted to return to the authoritarian oversight of the church by the Empire, a de-

emphasis of the Old Testament as “too Jewish,” a revival of *völkisch* traditions, and a heightened respect for temporal authority. It is no surprise that so few of his fellow pastors heeded Bonhoeffer’s idea of a biblical church which spoke out against state sin.

Biography

Eric Metaxas commented re Bonhoeffer’s illustrious forebears: “each child seems not only to have stood on the shoulders of giants but also to have danced on them” (Metaxas, 8). When his parents married in 1898, two families with significant places in German society combined and brought into the world eight children – Dietrich and his twin sister Sabine were numbers 6 and 7 of the clan – born February 4, 1906. All of the children were born in Breslau where father Karl held the chair in psychology and neurology at the university and was director of the hospital for nervous disorders. In 1912 Karl was appointed chair of psychiatry at Berlin University, and the family moved to the capital.

In 1918, Dietrich’s two older brothers, Karl-Friedrich and Walter, were at the French front in World War I. Two weeks after leaving home, Walter died of shrapnel wounds. Walter’s death and the German defeat bringing to an end the reign of the Kaiser changed everything for Germany and the Bonhoeffer household.

In 1920, 14 year old Dietrich announced to his family that he would be a theologian – an announcement met with mockery from some of its liberal members. But by the age of 21, Dietrich had completed his PhD dissertation on the doctrine of the Church.

This prodigy/theologian at first studied under Adolf von Harnack, acclaimed German professor of the historical/critical method of biblical interpretation. Bonhoeffer rejected von Harnack’s liberal opinions and was subsequently mentored by Karl Barth. Barth was the author of the Barmen Declaration, the founding document of the Confessing Church which stood in opposition to the “German Christian” Church under the Third Reich.

Bonhoeffer’s worldview used two lenses: the Scripture as the Word of God that should be read and obeyed and the Church as God’s creation. To say that Bonhoeffer stood against the German state church and against Hitler’s diabolical plot against the Jews is true. But the WHY of his stance rests on his understanding of the Word, the Church and the role that God ordained for the State. The prophetic voice that Bonhoeffer became to the Church immediately following Hitler’s meteoric rise to power on January 30, 1933 was based on this worldview.

The Aryan Clauses and Bonhoeffer’s “The Church and the Jewish Question”

Hitler believed that Nietzsche prophesied his coming in his book *The Will to Power* in which Nietzsche wrote of the coming of a race of rulers “a particularly strong kind of man, most highly gifted in intellect and will.” He believed that the Aryan race

was this “race of rulers” (Metaxas, 168). As soon as his National Socialist Party began its rule in January 1933, Hitler presented the Aryan Paragraph to take effect on April 7 of that year. Euphemistically titled the “Restoration of the Civil Service,” this legislation stated that all government workers must be of “Aryan” stock. Those of Jewish origin or married to a Jew could no longer be employed. Therefore, all ordained pastors of Jewish blood would be excluded from ministry. Immediately, Bonhoeffer wrote and circulated his essay, “The Church and the Jewish Question” (Metaxas, 151).

The pressure to line up with the reordering of all of society along National Socialist lines was enormous. Confusion reigned in the church. Some thought the church should stand with the Fuehrer’s principles and Nazi racial laws; others that the church could fight injustice from the inside. Many were linked to the government not only by their salaries but through their nationalistic urge to see Germany’s honor restored to pre-World War I levels. They wanted to be part of “a strong, unified *Reichskirche* and a ‘Christianity’ that was strong and masculine, that would stand up to and defeat the godless and degenerate forces of Bolshevism” (Metaxas, 151). The German Christian’s (*Deutsche Christen*) acceptance of the Aryan Paragraph, legislating the firing of clergy of Jewish descent, accepted a “separate but equal” status in the national church. They said, let the Jewish pastors form their own church, and let the German church be truly “German” (Swords, 217).

A minority, led by Bonhoeffer, believed they must stand against Hitler’s program. This was more than an academic exercise. Bonhoeffer’s friends Franz Hildebrandt and Gerhard Jacobi were among those Jewish pastors who would lose their positions and state salaries.

Bonhoeffer had written his doctoral dissertation on the subject of the nature of the Church. Titled *Sanctorum Communio* and called by Karl Barth “a theological miracle,” this thesis and his post-doctoral thesis, *Act and Being*, were Bonhoeffer’s answer to the question “What is the church?” The idea of excluding from the church those of Jewish descent who were baptized believers and ordained clergy was outside of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the Church. The idea of a church defined by racial identity and blood (much less “racial purity”) which the Nazis espoused “was anathema to the idea of the universal church” (Metaxas, 53). His idea of the church brought Bonhoeffer in direct opposition to the National Socialists.

In August 1933, Bonhoeffer wrote to his believing grandmother from Bethel, a home for over 1,600 disabled persons, “It has become ever more evident to me that we are to be given a great popular national Church, whose nature cannot be reconciled with Christianity, and that we must prepare our minds for the entirely new paths which we shall then have to follow” (Metaxas, 185). At Bethel, Bonhoeffer saw that the anti-gospel of Hitler would call these helpless people, like the Jews, *useless eaters and life unworthy of life*.

The Bethel Confession and “The Aryan Clause in the Church”

Bonhoeffer was greatly disappointed in his fellow clergy and theologians because of their unwillingness to take a sharp, clear stand against the German Christian church and Hitler’s appointee as head of the national church, Ludwig Müller. In September 1933, he first presented his Bethel Confession to twenty eminent theologians for their comments. “By the time they were through, every bright line was blurred, every sharp edge of difference filed down, and every point blunted” (Metaxas, 185). A discouraged Bonhoeffer accepted a call to pastor a church in London. Before he left he attended the church Synod in the hope of fighting against the Aryan Paragraph. Prior to the Synod, he circulated a pamphlet titled, “The Aryan Clause in the Church.” His thesis was entirely based upon a clearly understood doctrine of the church and its relation to the state. In logical argument, Bonhoeffer set forth the three roles which the church is to exercise *vis a vis* the state.

1. The State is under the authority of God and is to be respected according to Romans 13 (as Luther had stated in the 16th century). The work of the state is to keep order and restrain evil in a godless world. However, the Church must question the state about whether it is being the instrument that God ordained.
2. If the state should overstep its authority and militate against its citizens, the Church is “to aid the victims of state action – *even if they do not belong to the Christian community.*” Everyone knew he had the Jews in mind.
3. Besides taking care of the victims of state oppression, in extreme cases the Church must “put a spoke in the wheel itself.” In other words, the Church must take action to put a stop to the state’s evil actions when the very existence of the church is threatened. Bonhoeffer added that this is the condition if the state forces the “exclusion of baptized Jews from our Christian congregations or in the prohibition of our mission to the Jews” (Metaxas, 153-4).

He declared that it was the duty of the church to stand up for the Jews. His ideas were rejected by almost everyone present. Metaxas wrote: “Bonhoeffer knew that a church that did not stand with the Jews was not the church of Jesus Christ and to evangelize people into a church that was not the church of Jesus Christ was foolishness and heresy” (156). Bonhoeffer wrote: “The state which endangers the Christian proclamation negates itself” (*Rusty Swords*, 221).

He pointed out that “the forced exclusion of baptized Jews from our Christian congregations or the prohibition of our mission to the Jews” must not be tolerated (RS, 221). He quoted Luther who wrote in 1523: “If the Apostles, who also were Jews, had dealt with us Gentiles as we Gentiles deal with the Jews, there would have been no Christians among the Gentiles. But seeing that they have acted in such a brotherly way towards us, we in turn should act in a brotherly way towards the Jews in case we might convert some” (RS, 217-18).

Bonhoeffer’s high view of the Church as God’s creation and of Jesus as its Head, reflected on Jewish believers from this vantage point. “As it [the church] looks at the

rejected people [the Jews], it humbly recognizes itself as a church continually unfaithful to its Lord and looks full of hope to those of the people of Israel who have come home, to those who have come to believe in the one true God in Christ, and knows itself to be bound to them in brotherhood. . . Judaism is never a racial concept but a religious one. . . It is not the “Jewish race” as the state sees it, but the “people of God” that the church sees. “The concept of Jewish Christianity has religious, not biological content” (RS, 223).

Bonhoeffer wrote: “What is at stake is by no means the question whether our German members of congregations can still tolerate church fellowship with the Jews. It is rather the task of Christian preaching to say: here is the church, where Jew and German stand together under the Word of God; here is the proof whether a church is still the church or not” (RS, 225). He proposed an immediate removal from the *Reichskirche* and the full establishment of a Free Church, the Confessing Church.

The question has been asked: How committed to the Jewish people was Bonhoeffer? Was he concerned only for Jewish believers and the Jewish clergy of his Lutheran Church? The following facts demonstrate Bonhoeffer’s courage and commitment to the Jews regardless of their belief.

- Two days after Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, on February 1, 1933, twenty-six year old Bonhoeffer gave a national radio speech distinguishing between a leader (“Führer”) and a misleader (“Verführer”) who becomes an idol for the people. Midway through his speech, the broadcast was cut off.
- In March of that year, before Hitler’s newly formed *Reichstag* could pass its Aryan Paragraph, Bonhoeffer published his paper, “The Church and the Jewish Question” which stated that “the Church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community.”
- A few weeks later, Bonhoeffer violated the High Treason Law by sending descriptions of Berlin procedures against leftists and Jews to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise in New York who conveyed the message to President Roosevelt with whom he had ties.
- In September 1933, Bonhoeffer attended the World Conference of Churches meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria where he successfully sponsored a resolution stating that “we especially deplore the fact that the State measures against the Jews in Germany have had such an effect on public opinion that in some circles the Jewish race is considered a race of inferior status.”
- In 1935 Bonhoeffer became head of an underground seminary for the Confessing Church. He told his students, “Only he who cries out for the Jews can sing Gregorian chants.” The Gestapo closed the seminary in 1937 and wrote that Bonhoeffer “represented the world’s enemy, Juda, as the ‘eternal nation,’ the true ‘noble people,’ the ‘people of God.’”
- In 1940 (after returning from New York where he could have had safe haven), he wrote that the Lutheran Church had “not raised her voice on

behalf of the victims . . . and is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenseless brothers of Jesus Christ.”

- Bonhoeffer joined the staff of the military intelligence apparatus, the *Abwehr*, and became a double agent, using his overseas contacts to stand against Hitler’s rule.
- October, 1941, Bonhoeffer petitioned his army friends to attempt to interdict the government orders that all Jews must leave Berlin. Having failed in this attempt, he wrote a report documenting the Third Reich’s deportation policy.
- In 1942, he met secretly with the Bishop of Chichester, George Bell, to discuss the opposition movement in Germany that was pledged to repeal the anti-Jewish Nuremburg laws.
- He helped rescue a group of Jews from deportation for the “final solution” – known as Operation 7 – by disguising the group as special agents of the *Abwehr* on assignment in Switzerland. Bonhoeffer obtained a letter of permission from the president of the Federation of Swiss Churches to make this escape possible.
- It was Bonhoeffer’s connection to the conspirators of a failed assassination attempt against Hitler on July 20, 1944 which led to his imprisonment and death.

Theological/Scriptural Basis for a Stand with the Jews

In a sermon given on July 11, 1937 on Psalm 58, verse one (“Are you then dumb, that you will not speak what is right, and judge the children of men with equity?”), Bonhoeffer spoke out about men standing by while political injustice was rampant in a society. That year the Gestapo’s net tightened around Confessing Church members. By the end of that year, 804 of its members had been imprisoned. Pastor Martin Niemöeller was imprisoned on July 1 of that year and would not return home for eight years. A mother of one of Bonhoeffer’s seminarians who had been jailed recorded that the words “Evangelical Pastor” were written in large letters above his cell door. Bonhoeffer referred in a letter that year to the “increasingly impatient attacks by the forces of the Antichrist.”

It was in this context that Bonhoeffer wrote his sermon on Psalm 58. He said:

It is an evil time when the world allows injustice to occur and keeps silent. When the oppression of the poor and afflicted cries out to heaven, and the judges and rulers of the earth keep quiet. When the persecuted congregation in its hour of need calls to God for help and to humanity for justice, and no mouth on earth is opened to support its cause. “*Are you then dumb, that you will not speak what is right, and judge the children of men with equity?*” It is the children of men who suffer injustice. Must that always be forgotten in such times? Hear it: human beings, God’s creatures like us, experiencing pain and misery like us – it is to them you do violence. They have their happiness and hopes like you, they feel honor and shame like you, children of men who are sinners like you and need

God's mercy like you, your brothers and sisters~! "Are you then dumb?" O no, you are not dumb; one hears your voice clearly on the earth. But it is an unmerciful, a biased word that you speak. You judge not according to equity, but with respect to the person.

"If the mouths of the rulers of the world are silent about injustice, at the same time their hands are dealing out violence, how frightful are the lawless actions of these human hands, causing suffering and bodily pain. The persecuted, imprisoned, beaten congregation is made to yearn for deliverance. Let me fall into the hands of God, but not the hands of men!" (*Meditating on the Word*, 88).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has become a hero for me as I have read again his life of integrity and faith in a time of unimaginable horror. Born into a family well situated in German society, offered many doors of escape during his country's and church's darkest hour, he not only stood firm in the face of the enemy, but he used every possible tool – teaching, preaching, travelling abroad to find allies for the righteous cause. Above all, he determined to hear no voice but God's through Scripture. He escaped the allure of the ferocious nationalism of his day, party loyalty to church leaders, instead taking the fearful prospect of standing against a murderous dictator, Hitler, even in the face of the death and destruction he saw all around him. Bonhoeffer presents a challenge to our day. Will Yeshua find faith when He returns to the earth in our generation? Will I stand with the Jews, saved or unsaved, in this day of rising anti-Semitism? Will I declare that my Jewish brethren in the faith and gentile believers are fully one in Christ?

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