



A STUDY GUIDE
FOR
**DIETRICH BONHOEFFER:
MEMORIES AND PERSPECTIVES**

Produced by
TRINITY FILMS, INC.

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BEFORE SEEING THE FILM . . .



SUMMARY

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: MEMORIES AND PERSPECTIVES, a documentary film in three parts, explores Bonhoeffer's life and times in chronological fashion: the American experience, the early years of the Church Struggle, Bonhoeffer's peace sermon at Fanö, the underground seminary at Finkenwalde, the flight to America in 1939, his return to Germany, work in the resistance movement and, finally, prison and death. Filmed in Germany and France over the past two years, the movie features interviews with Bonhoeffer's family, friends and co-workers, highlighting Dr. Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's closest friend and chief biographer. These candid interviews are supported by photographs from the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York City, as well as selections from various European sources.

BIOGRAPHY

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER was born in Breslau, Germany on February 4, 1906 into an educated and aristocratic family. The eight Bonhoeffer children, Dietrich and his twin sister Sabine being the youngest, were subject to the discipline of keeping the family traditions and yet they were encouraged to be creative and original. The Bonhoeffer's were not a church-going family, but Dietrich's mother directed the family in daily prayers, Bible reading and singing of hymns. In 1912 the family moved to Berlin where Dietrich's father was appointed to the prestigious position of Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology at the University of Berlin.

There the Bonhoeffer's moved in academic circles, striking an impressive balance. They were Christians in their faith and yet undogmatic in their beliefs. Always tolerant toward others, Dietrich's family expected high self-discipline from its members. They were proud of their traditions and yet they allowed the most subjective expression of convictions in philosophy and faith. The only expression that was not allowed was the "hollow phrase." In this liberal-Christian family with its emphasis on independence of mind, such freedom of thought and expression was based on a deep sense of responsibility to others.

Dietrich decided early on to be a minister and a theologian. When he was fourteen he stated his intentions to his brothers and sisters. They tried to dissuade him, arguing that the church was a poor, feeble, petty-bourgeois institution. This made Dietrich only more determined. He replied, "In that case, I shall reform it!"

At the age of seventeen he entered Tübingen University and a year later Berlin University where he sat at the feet of the great theologians of his generation. It was, however, the voice of Karl Barth that spoke to him most profoundly. Barth's "dialectic" school demanded an intensive, single-minded search to comprehend and express a central, burning truth. This focus, this intensity, was what Bonhoeffer had been searching for.

After a year as a curate in Barcelona and a period at Union Theological Seminary in New York he became a lecturer in Theology at Berlin University, the then current center of liberal theological thought. Bonhoeffer's undisputed brilliance as a provocative thinker was recognized throughout theological circles and he began to attract a small following.

About this same time the career of another young German was also on the rise. Four weeks after Adolf Hitler's inauguration as Chancellor in 1933, the Nazi's burned down the Reichstag, the Parliament Building in Berlin, blaming the incident on the Communists. Exploiting the fear of a Communist takeover, Hitler then persuaded President Hindenburg to invoke a series of emergency laws for the "Protection of People and State." Within one month all democratic rights and freedoms were destroyed with astonishing ease, and without any noticeable resistance or outcry. These laws were closely followed by the notorious "Decree for the Restitution of the Civil Service" which banned all "non Aryans" from the civil service and so declassified and discriminated against the Jewish population.

Bonhoeffer, now a young pastor and lecturer, was among the first to realize the implications of these measures. Though at this time he confined himself primarily to the realm of church affairs and did not address himself in an overtly political manner, he did attack the last of these fatal decrees, believing it to be the most pernicious and the one which came under the responsibilities of a theologian and churchman. "The church," he said, "has an unconditional obligation towards the victims of any social order, even where those victims do not belong to the Christian community."

In July of 1933 the Nazis in the church, or the "German Christians" as they called themselves, won the recently instituted church elections and secured for themselves key positions in the church government. In resistance to the trend toward the

Nazification of the German Protestant Church, a group of concerned pastors met to establish a church free of this authoritarian rule, confessing Christ, not Adolf Hitler, as its leader. The Synod of Barmen in 1934 was the beginning of the "Confessing Church," as it came to be called, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of its most outspoken members.

Under the directives of the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer founded a clandestine seminary at Zingst which moved to Finkenwalde several months later where it flourished. There he established a community of Christian brothers which would explore, discover and teach the demands of the Christian life. These demands, at once gentle and stringent, simple and revolutionary, were becoming for Bonhoeffer the increasingly solid basis of his thought and action. It is from this enriching time that his book **Life Together** was generated.

When President Hindenburg died in 1934, Hitler combined in himself the functions of Chancellor and President under the title "Der Führer." With the armed forces in his complete control, Hitler stepped up his plans for war. At the same time, the Nazis started launching a full scale assault on the Jewish people. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 were introduced, robbing the Jews of their German citizenship and of their basic human rights. To quell any opposition to Hitler's programs that might arise from the church, the State Church ordered all pastors to take a personal oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler in celebration of his annexation of Austria in 1938. On November 10th of the same year the Nazis destroyed and looted thousands of Jewish shops, homes and synagogues. The riot would be remembered as the "Crystal Night" or the Night of Broken Glass.

It was becoming clear to Bonhoeffer that even with a faith which rejected accommodation to Nazism, he was still an accomplice to the atrocities of the "Crystal Night," of the war and of Auschwitz unless he took action. Protests from the pulpit had lost all weight; it was no longer a time for words which only went unheeded. A desperate situation demanded decisive action, and so Bonhoeffer launched into the second phase of his resistance to Hitler's tyranny, his involvement in the political conspiracy against the Nazi regime. "Christians in Germany face the terrible alternative," he wrote at this time, "of willing the defeat of their nation in order that civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose. . . ."

The center of the resistance movement was, ironically, Hitler's own military intelligence organization, the Abwehr. In 1938 Bonhoeffer made his first and fateful contact with several officers of the Abwehr — Sack, Oster, Beck and Canaris — through his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi. He learned of their secret plots to assassinate the Führer and to establish a new government, and, contrary to his strong pacifist inclinations, he joined

Bonhoeffer was stationed at the Benedictine Monastery in Etal where he awaited assignments from the resistance headquarters in Munich. His primary mission for the conspiracy was to use his international church connections to make contact with the Allies, seeking peace terms should their overthrow of Hitler be successful. It was at this time that he began writing his book, **Ethics**, which boldly assesses his church's share in the national guilt. "The church confesses that it has witnessed the lawless application of brute force, the physical and spiritual suffering of countless innocent people, oppression, hatred, and murder, and that it has not raised its voice on behalf of the victims and has not found ways to hasten to their aid. It is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenseless brothers of Jesus Christ."

Finally, on April 5, 1943, the inevitable happened. Without any notice of arrest, Bonhoeffer was handcuffed and taken to

prison. Though the existence of the larger conspiracy was not discovered at this time, he was charged for his involvement in "Operation 7," a rescue mission that had helped a small group of distinguished Jews over the German border and into Switzerland.

His prison years were eventful and complex, comprising the final chapter of his life. Those who were in prison with him speak of his strength and perseverance. He gave guidance and spiritual inspiration not only to fellow inmates, but to the prison guards as well.



Tragically, in the very last weeks of the war, a diary was found, full of material damning to the conspirators. Three weeks before Hitler committed suicide, on April 8, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was taken to the dreaded Flossenburg concentration camp where he was interrogated late into the night. On the morning of the following day, he and the other condemned prisoners were led out of their cells. In the words of the prison doctor:

Through the half-open door I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, still in his prison clothes, kneeling in fervent prayer to the Lord his God. The devotion and evident conviction of being heard that I saw in the prayer of this intensely captivating man moved me to the depths.

The prisoners were ordered to strip. Naked under the scaffold, Bonhoeffer knelt for the last time to pray. Five minutes later, he was dead.

The significance of Bonhoeffer's life and death, and particularly of this second stage of his resistance to the powerfully destructive and inhuman state system of his time, does not lie primarily in the sphere of politics. This was not his field of expertise. It is rather in the domain of the ethical that Bonhoeffer's contribution is of major significance. His strength of mind, the integrity of his relations to the realities around him and the force of his language, all enabled him to give expression and unforgettable clarity to the extraordinary situation that existed. Further, what he had to say was not handed down from the privileged and theoretical calm of a professor's study. He spoke from the midst of the turmoil of action and in the shadow of the waiting gallows, opening the way to a more responsible faith.

THE PEOPLE WHO APPEAR IN THE FILM



Eberhard Bethge

Dr. Bethge was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's closest friend. He was Bonhoeffer's student and assistant in the underground seminary at both Zingst and Finkenwalde. When Dietrich was imprisoned in 1943 Dr. Bethge became the recipient of the majority of Bonhoeffer's letters and papers from prison. After the war's end, Dr. Bethge wrote and published the definitive biography of Bonhoeffer's life, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage**. He was also responsible for the publication of Bonhoeffer's writings including **Life Together**, **The Cost of Discipleship** and **Ethics**. Dr. Bethge is married to Bonhoeffer's niece, Renate Schleicher.



Renate Bethge

Dr. Bethge's wife, Renate, is the daughter of Dietrich's sister, Ursula. Her father, Rudiger Schleicher, was the head of Lufthansa Airlines when Hitler came to power. Opposed to the Hitler regime, he played an active role in the political conspiracy. He was murdered by the Nazis in the spring of 1945. Renate has co-authored with her husband a short biography of Bonhoeffer's life, **Costly Grace**.



Paul Lehmann

Dr. Lehmann, an American, was a fellow student of Bonhoeffer's at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. One of Bonhoeffer's closest friends, he and his wife, Marion, visited the Bonhoeffer family in Berlin just after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. Dr. Lehmann is a professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary and is well known both as a lecturer and as a theologian.



Marion Lehmann

Dr. Lehmann's wife, Marion, was a close friend of Dietrich's during his year at Union Theological Seminary in 1930. Upon many occasions Dietrich was a guest in her home.



Suzanne (Bonhoeffer) Dress

Dietrich's youngest sister, Suzanne, was married to a young pastor, Walter Dress. She was actively involved in the Confessing Church and after the war was the first member of her family to visit the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp where Dietrich was executed.



Emmi Bonhoeffer

Emmi Bonhoeffer was married to Dietrich's older brother, Klaus, a lawyer with Lufthansa Airlines and one of the key men in the political resistance to Hitler. He was executed by the Gestapo with Renate Bethge's father in the spring of 1945.



Jean Lassere

Dr. Lassere, well known French pacifist, was a close friend of Dietrich's at Union Theological Seminary. During the summer holiday these two students undertook a journey to Mexico which helped Dietrich to discover the Gospel call for peace among men.



Joachim Kanitz

Kanitz was a young seminarian at Finkenwalde under Bonhoeffer's tutelage. He was drafted in 1938 into Hitler's army and spent the following eight years doing military service. This experience of serving as a soldier defending a political system to which he was utterly opposed, formed a motivational perspective for this young man which continued to direct his later life. His resolve to fight dictatorship and facism in its many forms has brought him into the struggle for human rights throughout the world.



Werner Koch

As a young man Dr. Koch had been a student of Karl Barth's and then, in 1935, he became one of the first young theology students to study with Bonhoeffer in the underground seminary at Zingst. Later, he became the "foreign correspondent" for the Confessing Church. In 1936 he was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen for his "treasonous" activities. Since the war Dr. Koch has become well known as a lecturer on the church struggle and on political resistance. In 1982 he traveled the U.S. sharing his perspectives and observations. Dr. Koch is significantly involved in the international peace movement.



Winfried Maechler

Maechler was a student of Bonhoeffer's both at the University of Berlin and later at Finkenwalde. He attended the Fanö Youth Conference in 1935 where he heard Bonhoeffer deliver his famous peace sermon. He was drafted into the German Army in 1939 and served as a medic.

THE CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

	Feb. 4, 1906	Dietrich and twin sister Sabine born in Breslau, Germany
	1912	The Bonhoeffer family moves to Berlin
	1927	Dietrich (age 17) receives Licentiate in Theology from the University of Berlin
	1930	Doctoral dissertation published, Communion of Saints
	Sept. 5, 1930	Dietrich (age 24) leaves for New York City to study at Union Theological Seminary
	Summer 1931	Travels to Mexico with fellow student, Frenchman, Jean Lassere
	Aug. 1, 1931	Becomes lecturer in Theology at the University of Berlin
	1931	Second dissertation published, Act and Being
	Nov. 15, 1931	Ordained (age 25) at Matthais Church in Berlin
Adolf Hitler is appointed Reich Chancellor	Jan. 30, 1933	
Nazis burn the Reichstag, the parliament building in Berlin	Feb. 27, 1933	
Hitler invokes a series of "emergency laws"	Feb. 29, 1933	
One-day boycott of Jewish businesses	Apr. 1, 1933	
Hitler introduces Aryan Clause into government legislation	Apr. 1933	
Book burnings by students and Storm Troopers	May 10, 1933	
Nazis win majority in Lutheran Church elections	Jul. 23, 1933	
	Aug. 1933	Dietrich goes to Bethel to help write Bethel Confession
	Sept. 1933	Dietrich collaborates with Martin Niemöller on Pastors' Emergency League
	Oct. 1933	Begins two year pastorate at two small German speaking congregations in London
	May 1934	Barmen Declaration
Hindenburg dies; Hitler combines offices of Chancellor and President into one: Führer, Reich Chancellor of the German People	Aug. 2, 1934	
	Aug. 1934	Bonhoeffer (age 28) delivers "Peace Sermon" at international ecumenical conference in Fanö, Denmark
	Oct. 19, 1934	Dahlem Synod in Berlin
	Apr. 26, 1935	Bonhoeffer founds clandestine seminary for the Confessing Church at Zingst, which in June moves to Finkenwalde
	Sept. 1935	
	Dec. 2, 1935	
Nuremberg Laws cancel German citizenship for the Jewish people	Aug. 5, 1936	Dietrich forbidden to lecture at the University of Berlin
The Reich Church declares the seminaries of the Confessing Church illegal	1937	Finkenwalde Seminary closed by Gestapo; twenty seven former Finkenwalde students imprisoned; Dietrich publishes Cost of Discipleship
	Feb. 1938	Dietrich makes first contact with conspirators in connection with political resistance against Hitler

Germany annexes Austria; pastors give oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler	Mar. 1938	
Munich agreement for peace in Europe signed by Hitler and Chamberlain	Sept. 1938	Bonhoeffer (age 32) writes Life Together
Crystal Night (Night of Broken Glass)	Nov. 9, 1938	
Hitler marches into Czechoslovakia	Mar. 14, 1939	
	Jun. 2, 1939	Dietrich leaves for New York City
	Jul. 27, 1939	Returns to Germany and joins the political resistance
Germany invades Poland	Sept. 1, 1939	
France and Great Britain declare war	Sept. 2, 1939	
Germany invades Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium and France	Apr. & May 1940	
Chamberlain resigns and Churchill becomes Prime Minister of England	May 10, 1940	
Paris falls	Jun. 14, 1940	
	Nov. 1940	Dietrich (age 34) guest at Benedictine Abbey in Ettal while awaiting orders from resistance headquarters in Munich
	Mar. 27, 1941	Dietrich forbidden to print or publish
Germany invades Soviet Union	Jun. 22, 1941	
	Sept. 1941	Dietrich part of Jewish rescue action (Operation 7)
Japan bombs Pearl Harbor	Dec. 7, 1941	
Germany declares war on USA	Dec. 11, 1941	
Hitler commits to the "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem" at Wannsee Conference	Jan. 1942	Dietrich undertakes two journeys to Switzerland for the resistance; later also goes to Norway, Sweden and Switzerland again for resistance
German army surrenders at Stalingrad	Jan. 1943	Dietrich (age 36) engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer
Two assassination attempts on Hitler's life fail	Mar. 13 & 21, 1943	
	Apr. 5, 1943	Dietrich (age 37) arrested and taken to Tegel Prison, Berlin; Dohnanyi and Dietrich's sister, Christine, also arrested
Last attempt on Hitler's life fails	Jul. 20, 1944	
	Oct. 1944	Arrest of Rudiger Schleicher, Klaus Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge
	Oct. 8, 1944	Dietrich transferred to Gestapo Prison in the Prinz Albrecht Strasse, Berlin
	Feb. 7, 1945	Moved to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp
	Apr. 1945	Discovery of Admiral Canaris' diary; Hitler orders annihilation of the Canaris group which includes Dietrich Bonhoeffer
	Apr. 9, 1945	Bonhoeffer (age 39), Oster, Sach, Canaris, Strünck, and Gehre hanged at Flossenbürg; Dohnanyi killed at the Sachsenhausen Camp
	Apr. 23, 1945	Klaus Bonhoeffer and Rudiger Schleicher murdered by the Gestapo in Berlin
Hitler commits suicide	Apr. 30, 1945	
Germany surrenders	May 7, 1945	
Atom bomb test in New Mexico	Jul 16, 1945	
Hiroshima	Aug. 6, 1945	
Russia declares war on Japan	Aug. 8, 1945	
Nagasaki	Aug. 9, 1945	
Japan surrenders	Aug. 14, 1945	

AFTER SEEING THE FILM . . .

Questions For Discussion

1. Although the spirit of Anti-Christ is easier to identify in some past event or person, (Hitler's Nazism, Spain's Inquisition, Amin's Uganda) where is the witness of Christ needed today to confront evil?
2. Bonhoeffer's solidarity with the Jews represented by his vocal and active resistance to Nazi persecution has given many oppressed people hope and renewed strength. What individuals or groups of people are oppressed and cry for the church's solidarity?
3. What would have happened if all Germans who confessed Christ had refused to cooperate with Hitler even at the risk of their lives? What does this suggest concerning methods of non-violent resistance to oppression?
4. Bonhoeffer believed the church to be the church only when it "existed for others." He believed the Confessing Church forfeited its authenticity when it became more concerned about its own existence than the plight of Christ's brethren, the Jews. What are examples today of the church existing only for itself? For others?
5. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians suffering under the persecution of the Roman Empire: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God. . . .Therefore, he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." (Romans 13:1-2) How does Bonhoeffer fare in relation to this injunction?
6. When asked about paying taxes Christ replied, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matt. 22:21) What do we owe Caesar and what do we owe God?
7. It has been said, "Victims become victimizers and the oppressed become oppressors." Is this true? If so, share examples.
8. From prison Bonhoeffer wrote, "Being a Christian means living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, perplexities . . ." How is Bonhoeffer's affirmation of the "world" to be compared with St. James' dictum to remain "unstained from the world"?
9. The Trident Submarine has been called "the Auschwitz of Puget Sound" and others have said that there is another Dachau in every MIRVED missile warhead. Do you agree with these metaphors? Why? Why not?
10. Some believe that we and the Soviets are preparing an ultimate "final solution" to our "communist" and "capitalist" problems that is worse than anything Hitler could even have imagined, let alone have devised. Do you agree? Disagree?

Books by Bonhoeffer

Christ the Center. New translation by Edwin H. Robertson. New York: Harper and Row, 1978.

The Cost of Discipleship. Translated by R. H. Fuller, revised by Irmgard Booth. New York: Macmillan, 1963.

Ethics. Translated by Neville Horton Smith from the sixth German edition. New York: Macmillan, 1965.

Letters and Papers from Prison. The Enlarged Edition. Translated by R. H. Fuller, John Bowden, et al. New York: Macmillan, 1971.

Life Together. Translated by John W. Doberstein. New York: Harper and Row, 1954.

Prayers from Prison. Interpreted by Johann Christoph Hampe. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979.

Books about Bonhoeffer

Eberhard Bethge. **Costly Grace.** Translated by Rosaleen Ockenden. New York: Harper and Row, 1979.

Eberhard Bethge. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage.** Translated by Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, and William Glen-Doepel, under the editorship of Edwin Robertson. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

Mary Bosanquet. **The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.** New York: Harper and Row, 1968.

Larry Rasmussen. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance.** Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972.

Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith. **I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer.** New York: Fontana Books, 1973.

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