

A portrait of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The apostle Paul said in one of his letters that his sole motivation in life was to know Christ. Paul had been won over by the Lord and for His sake he counted all else but loss (Phil. 3:8). All religiosity was rubbish in the sight of God. Paul said that he could no longer glory in what he was or what he did or what he had become. What counted was Christ!

Religiosity is rubbish! To really live is Christ! This too, was the main theme of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life. Following an abortive attempt to assassinate Hitler, he was arrested on April 5, 1943, and sent to the military prison, Tegel, in Berlin. He was later removed to Prinz Albrecht-Strasse, shipped next to Buchenwald, and finally to Flossenburg where he was hanged on April 9, 1945, a week before Hitler took his own life.

Bonhoeffer was an academic theologian of high rank. He became a lecturer of systematic theology at Berlin University when he was only twenty-four years old. He received his training in the school of liberal theology, but he was profoundly influenced by the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth. Many were attracted to this unselfish and self-sacrificing man.

The work of this influential theologian is difficult to assess as his tragic death came at the age of 39. Bonhoeffer didn't live to explain his cryptic and fragmentary letters written in Tegel in a situation of inhumane and excruciating pressure. He was a paradoxical thinker who exerted an ambivalent influence. His works have been hailed by modern theologians. Many radical interpreters of Bonhoeffer have abused his ideas but many evangelicals have found that the piety in his writings have deepened their own spirituality.

Bonhoeffer resisted the superficiality of 20th Century Christianity. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, written in 1937, he opposed what he called cheap grace. For him, it was "the deadly enemy of our church." "Cheap grace," wrote Bonhoeffer, "is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." And again, "Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life."

Bonhoeffer didn't like religion. He wrote about "religionless Christianity." Much confusion has been caused by the uncertainty of Bonhoeffer's usage of the word "religion less." How can we formulate a non-religious interpretation of biblical terminology? Though he disliked religiosity he was a devout student of scripture. He loved the liturgy of the church, and particularly the psalms. He spent much time in prayer and had a sustaining sense of God's presence.

As a prisoner in war-torn Germany, Bonhoeffer often thought about the stark reality of death. But when he spoke of death, he did it from the perspective of Christ's

resurrection. Naturally a Christian must long for and rejoice in eternity, beyond all the struggle and suffering of this world.

Bonhoeffer was against an egocentric and selfish view of life after death. He believed that Christians should not be concerned just with their own individual immortality. He viewed death as an enemy, but he also wrote that death was the supreme festival on the road to freedom.

Paradoxical? Not when one thinks of Christ's victory over death. Christ has risen. His resurrection is our hope. The Lord even calls His own, the children of the resurrection. On Easter Sunday, April 25, 1943, Bonhoeffer wrote that, "One of the great advantages of Good Friday and Easter Day is that they take us out of ourselves, and make us think of other things, of life and its meaning, and of its suffering and events. It gives us such a lot to hope for."

Bonhoeffer wanted to live for Christ and know the power of the resurrection. One of his fellow prisoners was an English officer, Payne Best, who testified of Bonhoeffer's last sermon that on, "Sunday, April 8, 1945, Pastor Bonhoeffer held a little service and spoke. .. in a manner which reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of ... imprisonment and the thoughts and resolutions which it brought. He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil-looking men in civilian clothes came and said: 'Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us.' Those words 'come with us' - for all prisoners had come to mean one thing only - the scaffold. We bade him goodbye. He drew me aside. 'This is the end,' he said. 'For me the beginning of life.'"

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