All Saints Day: Dietrich Bonhoeffer

By
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“Precious in the sight of the LORD Is the death of His saints.”
-Psalm 116:15

It’s no secret that as a pastor one of my main passions are the holidays that bring us together as a community and help us to meditate on specific, vital truths of our Christian faith. When God established these days for His people in the Old Covenant He told them that this was an opportunity for children to participate in deeper truths that were beyond their understanding through rituals, and a time for parents to *explain* the rituals to their children over time so that they might build their faith and understanding in God.

The problem is, that when holidays are not properly explained, they become secular, and the more secular they become the less spiritual and the more debauched they become. I don’t think any holiday represents this phenomenon better than Halloween. To this day, many believe that Halloween was a purely pagan festival adopted by the church with no spiritual merit or importance. But this belief is the result of the church’s failure to *teach* the significance of this holiday. Originally “Halloween” was called “All Hallow’s Eve”, and was on the “eve” of a major Christian feast called “All Saints Day” on November 2nd.

On this day Christians would celebrate the saints of old and remember their testimony to strengthen them in their own faith. Unfortunately this day then morphed into another day that celebrated saints trapped in purgatory, (something that we won’t get into in this paper) and then eventually created a superstition that the day that preceded these two sacred days must be the day in which the boundaries between the earth and the grave began to blur and ghosts and ghouls could walk the earth. But at its core, this was an extremely important holiday with a lot of spiritual value, and partially explains why children dress up like superheroes and princesses on Halloween to this day.

But this plays into the definition of a “saint”. The word “saint” in the Bible is derivative of the word that means to “sanctify” or to make something holy, or set apart to God, thus making them godly. I believe that the apostle Paul describes this principle best when he said:

“And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.”

-Romans 6:13

A saint is someone who has offered up their bodies to God, to serve Him and not our sinful lusts, which means that all Christians are technically saints because we have all offered up our lives to God when we made Him our Lord and Savior. But when we refer to “saints” we are referring to someone who exemplifies this principle in an extreme way. And thus, by studying their lives and their examples, we can learn what it means to do this in our own lives. This is why the above Psalm declares that God finds the death of His saints “precious”. Not that He delights in their deaths, but because God rejoices in a life that ends in faithfulness. By doing this, we might learn the courage and wisdom necessary to live lives, and even die deaths, that glorify God. And for this All Saints Day I thought it would be good to meditate on the life of a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Biography

“Then He said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? “For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father’s, and of the holy angels.”

-Luke 9:23-26

If there was one section of Scripture that could be said to embody the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I would say the above verses qualify. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany during the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi movement. He opposed this movement from the beginning and eventually died as a martyr in his opposition. But throughout his pastorate, there was no more serious issue that he wrestled with than what it meant to truly be a disciple of Christ. To not merely believe in the gospel, but to really try to live it out, even in a world gone mad. Probably his most famous quote comes from his book “The Cost of Discipleship” in which he says this:

“The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy

life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Cost of Discipleship"

Even though Bonhoeffer lived during truly insane times, his significance is not merely from his historical context, but it comes instead from the universal way that he described the Christian life. But to understand the man who would make the radical statement that we read above, we first have to understand his life. Dietrich was born in 1906 in Germany to two incredible parents. His father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was a renowned psychologist in Germany, though in today's vernacular we would associate him more with "neurology" than modern psychology. On top of this, the "Bonhoeffers", German for "bean farmers", descended from a truly noble lineage that dated back hundreds of years in the German nobility. Among their ranks were statesmen, doctors, lawyers, pastors, teachers and powerful businessmen.

His mother, Paula Von Hase, was a teacher and descended from no less noble lineage. Her family however were not really renowned for their intellect or wealth, though they had both of these in spades, but instead for their artistry. From her family were numerous famous musicians, composers, painters, and even a couple theologians. It was from his mother that Bonhoeffer received his immense love of the arts, his compassion, his chivalry, and his love for God. It was from his father that he received his academic proclivities, his impressive intellect, and impeccable logic.

Though Dietrich was the youngest of the Bonhoeffer boys, he, more than his brothers, represented a perfect synthesis between the two parents. An extremely gifted musician in his own right, Dietrich contemplated becoming a pianist, but eventually sided with becoming a pastor and theologian. But we also must remember that Bonhoeffer's life was marked with tragedy. Being born in the early 1900's, and growing up in Berlin, Dietrich was able to witness Germany at her absolute peak. This was in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war where Germany went from a series of kingdoms, into one unified kingdom.

In this era, Germany had the most impressive universities, was the source of the most prolific philosophers, art, and theology (we mustn't forget that this is the land that Martin Luther descended from). But he also witnessed the fall. It was when he was a teenager that Germany fought in the disastrous World War 1. Though Dietrich was too young to fight himself, he did see his older brothers drafted into this war. After the defeat of

Germany, the nation was almost taken over by the atheistic communists who sought to take advantage of the turmoil and ride the red wave of the communist revolution in Russia.

Luckily for them, this revolution was defeated, and instead the weak and ineffectual “Weimar Republic” was instituted. Germany was almost completely bankrupt from the cost of the war and the forced “reparations” imposed on them by the League of Nations, especially France. This was the Germany that Bonhoeffer began to preach within. Not the strong indomitable Germany of his childhood, but the cowed, debauched, frivolous, and ineffectual Germany of their defeat. It was in this environment that the Bonhoeffers witnessed the rise of Nazism in their youth, and the eventual election of Hitler to the position of Chancellor of Germany in 1933.

Dietrich more sensed than really understood what was happening in his once great nation. It was for this reason that he devoted himself to understanding a couple key Christian ideas, what is the church? What is the state? What is a Christian? And what is a disciple? These questions drove him in his academic life, and as the tides turned in Germany, these are the principles he clung to to maintain his integrity in a world gone mad. Dietrich, and his family, were some of the first to oppose the Nazi’s during their rise. Unfortunately too many in Germany saw the Nazi’s as a good opposition to the communists in their midst and fell for their rhetoric.

The Bonhoeffers were too wise to fall for the machinations of a man like Hitler. They immediately saw him for what he was and they feared and opposed the anti-semitic sentiments that followed in the wake of this movement. When Hitler ascended, one of the first institutions that he targeted for takeover was the church itself. Under the “German church” Hitler “Christianized” his more insane notions and tried to indoctrinate the nation into the cult of his personality. Dietrich immediately withstood this assault, sometimes almost alone. He called out the “German Church” as not a church at all, but a heretical entity that opposed the true gospel.

He encouraged his fellow Christians to oppose this false gospel and stand upon the confession of true faith in Christ, eventually forming what was called “The Confessing Church” in Germany. But it was due to his background and instinct that he knew that the church could never work with Germany. He was one of the first to see the incompatibility of Nazi doctrine and true Christian faith. Because it took the other pastors so long to see what he knew for so long, he eventually became a little frustrated with the naivete and soft speech of his own movement.

When his family became embroiled in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, Dietrich joined their ranks as a spy in German intelligence known as the “Abwehr”. The Abwehr preceded Hitler’s "Gestapo" and in many ways functioned as a rival to this organization. It was also run by a man named Wilhelm Canaris who was working with the allies and wanted to oust the Nazis and install a new government that would surrender to the allies. Bonhoeffer joined the religious wing of this organization and turned from pastor to spy during the last days of the war. About a year before the major assasination attempt known as “The July Plot” or “Operation Valkyrie”, Bonhoeffer and several other members of the Abwehr were captured and imprisoned by the Gestapo.

When he was first imprisoned, he was treated rather well because of his family connections, and because the Gestapo really didn’t have any firm evidence against him, but when the assasination plot eventually failed, the remaining members of the conspiracy were arrested and eventually executed in spring of 1945.

Now that we have an idea of who Dietrich Bonhoeffer was and what he stood for, we can look at some of his key ideas that can be an encouragement and a light in the dark times that we currently live in. One thing I want to say at the outset, I do believe it is a mistake to draw too many parallels with the German revolution or the Russian revolution to what we are seeing in our own nation. We live in our own unique time and in our own unique circumstances. So while we can draw general patterns from how societies fall, our issues will be distinct from what happened to Germany. As Mark Twain once said, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes”. Because of this rhyming pattern to nature, we should listen to the lessons that Dietrich can teach us, but if we try to relate too closely to his life we might miss the bigger lessons that he has for us.

What is the Church? “The Community of the Saints”

“...and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

-Matthew 16:18

After Dietrich finished seminary, he went on a trip to Rome. It was in this place, seeing Roman Catholicism in all its glory, that he was gripped with his first great question, what is the church? Growing up in Germany, it was a given that if you were a German, you were a Christian, and if you were a Christian, you were a Lutheran. But going to Rome and seeing, not only the fullness of Roman Catholicism, but also this great place of pilgrimage for western Christians, Bonhoeffer witnessed expressions of worship and fidelity to God that were distinct from his own, but something that he saw as being equally honoring to God.

It was here that he started to see the church in the same terms that the reformers did all those centuries ago. Not as a building, or a singular institution, but as a gathering of God's people from every corner of the earth. Who have been called out of the false religions of our past and into true worship and devotion to the one true God. It was this spirit that made Bonhoeffer want to visit America, teach in London, and participate in the "ecumenical movement" occurring around his time.

Perhaps it was his background as a musician that caused him to value harmony so much or to reject cacophony when he could, but Dietrich was moved in his spirit to promote unity within the church as often as he could. This led him to write his very first major work, "The Community of the Saints" in which he tried to answer this question, what is the church? Since this is one of his earliest works, his brilliance is on full display, but this genius had not been tempered enough by experience and wisdom to come across as clearly or as simply as he probably wanted.

Even so, the insights from this work are undeniable. With the eventual takeover of the German church by the Nazis on the horizon, Bonhoeffer had to figure out what constituted a true church versus a false one. And beyond that, he had to figure out a way for the Church of Christ to stand strong against the unbelievable darkness that was about to sweep the entire world. This required participation between different denominations of Christianity as much as it meant firm borders around the true faith to be able to properly warn about false doctrines and pernicious teachings.

Within this book, this is the most succinct definition of the church that Bonhoeffer offers:

"*He is only present in the church, that is, where the Christian community is united by preaching and the Lord's Supper for brotherly love. The real presence of Christ is also decisive. The relation of this presence to the problem of the Word and of preaching is only indicated by Paul. The sole content of the church is in any case the revelation of God in Christ. He is present to the church in his Word, by which the community is const-ituted ever anew. The church is the presence of Christ, as Christ is the presence of God."*

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Community of the Saints"

For Bonhoeffer, the church was not merely a gathering of like minded individuals, or a list of rituals of commandments. He took seriously the statements of Scripture, that the church was the "body of Christ". That as God the Father revealed Himself to the world through the Son, so the Son manifests Himself upon the earth through the church. The

church is where the Spirit of God is truly present, nowhere else. So what constitutes the Church? Three things: preaching, the Lord's supper, and brotherly love.

Preaching of the Word

"...that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD."
-Deuteronomy 8:3

Church is the place where the word of God, the true word of God contained in Holy Scripture was proclaimed without fear or compromise. This is the community of people who have hallowed the word of God above all else and desire to be governed and shepherded by this word. It is the people who know the voice of their Savior and long to hear it proclaimed among the people that they might live in obedience to it. They don't just want to hear it, they want to live on it like their necessary food.

The Lord's Supper

It is the place of the Lord's supper. For Bonhoeffer this phrase contained two meanings. The Lord's supper, especially for a Lutheran, was the presence of God within the service. So we can think of it that way, the church is the place where Christ is present among His people. For Bonhoeffer this would include the sacraments of the church, namely the Lord's supper and baptism, but it meant more than this, which we will discuss in a second.

This point will become more relevant when we discuss his views on discipleship, but for now it is important to understand. The church for Bonhoeffer was not a place to meet an individual's likes or tastes, it was the place where the people of God could practice their worship of God. When we come to church, if we are merely looking for teachings that tickle our fancies, worship that tickles our ears, or programs that meet our needs, we have missed the point of church. The purpose of the church is to witness the presence of God. The person who comes to the church with that expectation, and that anticipation will not leave disappointed, but one who seeks something less will always be disappointed.

But more than this, the church is the place where the presence of God is manifested, because the presence of God is within the believer:

"Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?"
-1 Corinthians 6:19

Brotherly Love

This truth leads to Bonhoeffer's final point, the church is the place where brotherly love is practiced.

"No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit."

-1 John 4:12-13

Once again, for Bonhoeffer, the idea that the church is merely a place where we *hear* the word of God would have been a grave disappointment to him. For him, the church was the place where the word of God was put into practice. The place where the people of God could learn what it meant to love one another with God's love. To build a community that reflected God's ideal community, harmonized and perfected in the love of God. This is why Bonhoeffer wrote:

"*The movement upwards cannot be separated from the movement towards our neighbor."*

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Community of the Saints"

We can not move upwards (towards God) if we aren't also moving in love towards our neighbor. Church was not a spectator sport for Dietrich, it was a place of active participation. A place to be challenged and grow in our ability to love. This means that the church was a place to manifest our own service towards God and our neighbor *more* than it was a place to be served. This truth does not negate the previous two points that he made. Bonhoeffer took worship, preaching, and the sacraments with a level of severity that would make most modern people blush. And he did have some harsh words for many of the churches that he attended in America especially for their watered down preaching and their flimsy worship. But still, his love for the church and desire to see brotherly love flourish and grow should also be taken with equivalent severity.

When to Divide

"What is at stake is by no means 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."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

It is only in this context that we can understand Bonhoeffer's decision to "break away" from the German church. If Bonhoeffer had been a discontented young man, constantly critical of the church, we can take his impassioned statements with a grain of salt, attributing much of what he said as the misplaced passions of youth. This is by the way how the majority of contemporary pastors took young Dietrich's words, especially when the movements of the Nazi's were relatively tame.

But Dietrich understood that if the church of God was to be the Church, it had to act like the church. We could not compromise our responsibility without abdicating our role and twisting our responsibility. When German pastors were willing to segregate their congregations and even to deny Jewish Christians the ability to be pastors, Bonhoeffer didn't take this as a simple division among brothers, he saw this as a full compromise of the gospel itself. So while his heart yearned for unity within the church, he was also willing to see when the divisions among believers actually broke the church in two.

When Dietrich made the decision to help found the "Confessing Church" in opposition to the German Church, he didn't see this as a schism between believers, he didn't see his movement as another denomination within Germany, he saw the Confessing Church as the true church of God and the so-called German Church as a heretical sect of people who had abandoned their faith. But this was because Dietrich had such a love for *true* church unity. He wouldn't settle for false unity based on well meaning platitudes and slogans. He was firm in his convictions and would fight for the church with his life. That is why, even before the Nazi aggression against the church, he wrote this:

"Nowadays there is much talk of unification of the churches. But we must not forget that unification from below is not the same as unity from above, and that the wish for unification should be realized, first of all, in the smaller and even the smallest congregation. The way to unification, however, follows a course fraught with the most difficult obstacles; for the stronger the wish the more pronounced will be the individual opposition. There will indeed be a basic aim to serve as a relative unity upon which we shall be able to build. And this may also be assumed of a church in which it cannot be formulated, but where the will is at work to give it conceptual expression. In spite of the recognition that we shall never be able to attain an absolute oneness corresponding to the unity of the Spirit, the will for the greatest possible realization of this oneness will be alive in the church, and will take comfort from Jesus' s prayer: 'that they may all be one, even as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee' (John 17.21)."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Community of the Saints"

Here he was warning against false unity. He was cautioning his own ecumenical movement from moving the borders of Christianity beyond the gospel. And he was also

warning against global movements of unity. He wanted church unity to begin at the smallest possible level and move out to the larger community. Without this framework, he believed the church would be too weak to stand up to the coming onslaught, and like most of his other predictions, history vindicated him.

What is a Christian? “The Cost of Discipleship”

“Then He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” They immediately left their nets and followed Him.”

-Matthew 4:19-20

As Dietrich was studying what the church was, it made him ask a more fundamental question, what is a Christian? This is where Dietrich’s concerns should hit home at a higher level for us today. As stated before, the famous reformer, Martin Luther, came from Germany, as such the Lutheran church was basically the only church in Germany. One of Luther’s most famous proclamations was that the man was saved by “sola fide”, or by “faith alone”. This was said in contradiction to what Luther saw was the excesses of the Catholic church, which required numerous works to “participate” with the grace of God in order to achieve salvation.

Much debate has been held over the centuries over what Catholic teaching on this subject really is and the true nature of the Protestant/Catholic controversy and I won’t really get into that today. For our purposes, what Bonhoeffer witnessed during his own time was a dangerous, reductionistic gospel that had filled Germany. For most Germans, to be saved by “faith alone” meant that we could be saved by merely having the right beliefs about God. This meant that if you had the right theological knowledge, you were a Lutheran and therefore a Christian regardless of what you actually believed or practiced.

For Bonhoeffer this was a completely false gospel that not only threatened western Christianity, but it literally put in jeopardy the peace of the entire world. Let’s start with the first point. For Dietrich, a Christian was synonymous with a “disciple” of Christ. This is someone, like the apostles, who had been called by Christ to follow Him, and had taken up that call with the severity that it deserved. The enemy that he saw to that truth was a “cheapening” of God’s grace and the terrible price that He paid that we might be allowed to follow Him:

“*Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace…Cheap grace means grace as doctrine, as principle, as system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God’s love as merely a Christian idea of*

God. Those who affirm it have already had their sins forgiven. The church that teaches this doctrine of grace thereby confers such grace upon itself. The world finds in this church a cheap cover-up for its sins, for which it shows no remorse and from which it has even less desire to be set free. Cheap grace is, thus, denial of God's living word, denial of the incarnation of the word of God. Cheap grace means justification of sin but not of the sinner. Because grace alone does everything, everything can stay in its old ways. "Our action is in vain." The world remains world and we remain sinners "even in the best of lives." Thus, the Christian should live the same way the world does."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Cost of Discipleship"

In America, many theologians have noticed the same phenomenon in our churches today. They have dubbed this "hyper grace" but the point is the same. It is a cheapening of God's grace to be without personal cost to Him, thus making the call of discipleship a friendly suggestion as opposed to a binding commandment. The fear of "legalism" had so polluted the German church that license had run amok and the true gospel was hardly ever taught.

"For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."

-1 Corinthians 6:20

As a result, the church was not filled with disciples of Christ, but Germans who attended church out of social obligation. This preaching didn't draw people near to Christ, but it drove them away from Him:

"Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ… Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Cost of Discipleship"

People were being deprived a true and active relationship with Christ, which for Dietrich, was the source of his deepest joy and satisfaction:

"Those who follow Jesus' commandment entirely, who let Jesus' yoke rest on them without resistance, will find the burdens they must bear to be light. In the gentle

pressure of this yoke they will receive the strength to walk the right path without becoming weary. 6 Jesus' commandment is harsh, inhumanly harsh for someone who resists it. Jesus' commandment is gentle and not difficult for someone who willingly accepts it. "His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3)...Where will the call to discipleship lead those who follow it? What decisions and painful separations will it entail? We must take this question to him who alone knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows where the path will lead. But we know that it will be a path full of mercy beyond measure. Discipleship is joy."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Cost of Discipleship"

It is important to remember that Dietrich was not some cranky old legalist who was at odds with pleasure or happiness. Dietrich was a talented musician, a lover of the arts, an athletic young man who really could be every bit as carefree and joyous as he was when the occasion called for it. His heart broke, not as a pharisee witnessing the joy of his companions, but as a man who had found his true joy and pleasure in the arms of God, and he was indignant that this same pleasure was being denied to his fellow Christians due to the utter weakness of the doctrine of "cheap grace". This is why he exhorted and admonished the church:

"*All of these questions refuse to take seriously that Jesus Christ is not dead but alive and still speaking to us today through the testimony of scripture. He is present with us today, in bodily form and with his word. If we want to hear his call to discipleship, we need to hear it where Christ himself is present. It is within the church that Jesus Christ calls through his word and sacrament."*

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Cost of Discipleship"

Once again, he didn't hate the church for its failure, he loved the church with all his heart. He therefore lovingly rebuked the church to fulfill its calling, so that those who wanted to be disciples of Christ were given the knowledge and resources to do that well. But this doctrine that he called "costly grace" also confounded the legalists. If we take seriously the unbelievable cost that God paid so that we might have grace, it should shame those who treated that grace as license, but it also should shame the legalist who denied its great value. In his view, the legalist was no less a disciple of Christ than the "Christian" who lived in license. In his later work "Ethics" Bonhoeffer put it this way:

"The Pharisee who rendered thanks to God for his own good deed (Luke 18) was still the man who lived in the knowledge of good and evil, who passed judgement upon himself and then indeed thanked God that he was able to do so. The Pharisee knows the good that he has done. Jesus's saying is not directed against the boastfulness or

the self-satisfaction of the man who has done good; but once again He is striking at the heart of the man who lives in disunion."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "Ethics"

The fact that the Pharisee was so judgemental was evidence that he had not tasted God's costly grace. He was not certain in his own identity before God, and so he lashed out at his fellow men in judgement. It is only by receiving this costly grace that someone could actually answer the call to follow Christ correctly. Freed from our own shame and desire to justify ourselves, but equivalently reverent to the love and sacrifice that allowed for our discipleship, we can follow Christ without fear, ego, or presumption. We can be properly reverent in our pursuit while maintaining our immense joy in the pursuit.

But what does this have to do with the fate of the German nation? I think that the late pastor Timothy Keller put this point best in his forward to Bonhoeffer's biography. Quick note, when he speaks of the "formalists" he is talking about the Germans who saw grace as a means of licence, and the "legalists" as those who were trying to work for their salvation:

"Both of these impulses made it possible for Hitler to come to power. The formalists in Germany may have seen things that bothered them, but saw no need to sacrifice their safety to stand up to them. Legalists responded by having pharisaical attitudes toward other nations and races that approved of Hitler's policies. But as one, Germany lost hold of the brilliant balance of the gospel that Luther so persistently expounded—"We are saved by faith alone, but not by faith which is alone." That is, we are saved, not by anything we do, but by grace. Yet if we have truly understood and believed the gospel, it will change what we do and how we live."

-Timothy Keller - Forward to "Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy"

The radical rhetoric of the Nazis fed the egos of the pharisaical Christians, just as it succeeded in silencing the "formalist" Lutherans. It was for this reason why Dietrich had such a bleak outlook when the Nazis rose to power. He knew that the legalists would be seduced by the speech and power of the Nazis and the formalists would tolerate their abuses because they were unwilling to suffer for the call of God. This is one of the major reasons why Bonhoeffer wrote this book. A church that can stand up to the predations of a wicked and mad tyrant is a church made of disciples, nothing less.

"And I believe that the whole of Christendom should pray with us that it will be a "resistance unto death," and that the people will be found to suffer it."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.”

-2 Timothy 2:3-4

How Should We Live? “Ethics”

“But He said to them, “I have food to eat of which you do not know.” Therefore the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought Him anything to eat?” Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.”

-John 4:32-34

“The origin and the goal of my conscience is not a law but it is the living God and the living man as he confronts me in Jesus Christ. For the sake of God and of men Jesus became a breaker of the law. He broke the law of the Sabbath in order to keep it holy in love for God and for men. He forsook His parents in order to dwell in the house of His Father and thereby to purify His obedience towards His parents. He sat at table with sinners and outcasts; and for the love of men He came to be forsaken by God in His last hour. As the one who loved without sin, He became guilty; He wished to share in the fellowship of human guilt; He rejected the devil’s accusation which was intended to divert Him from this course. Thus it is Jesus Christ who sets conscience free for the service of God and of our neighbour; He sets conscience free even and especially when man enters into the fellowship of human guilt. The conscience which has been set free from the law will not be afraid to enter into the guilt of another man for the other man’s sake, and indeed precisely in doing this it will show itself in its purity. The conscience which has been set free is not timid like the conscience which is bound by the law, but it stands wide open for our neighbour and for his concrete distress.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “Ethics”

Now we skip ahead to Dietrich’s final book, his magnum opus that he never got to fully finish, “Ethics”. The reason why we are skipping to this one is because the point is rather simple and he did work on it throughout his life. Since Bonhoeffer was not a dogmatist or a legalist, he truly struggled with ethical problems, especially in a world turned upside down. When the Nazis took power, there was much debate among Christians about what they should do. Should they appease him so they could continue to preach the gospel? Should they oppose him and suffer as martyrs? Should young men in the military rebel openly, or should they follow orders? And eventually, should we conspire to kill the democratically elected leader of Germany?

For Dietrich, these questions had to be wrestled with in the context of Scripture, but he believed that a definitive answer could not be found within Scripture. He believed that ethical considerations were for those who found their "source" of morality in God alone. And therefore, their decisions had to be grounded in the call of God. But, Bonhoeffer recognized that the world's judgement was askew due to our sin and attempt to justify ourselves:

"*Conscience itself reverses this relation. It derives the relation to God and to men from the relation of man to himself. Conscience pretends to be the voice of God and the standard for the relation to other men. It is therefore from his right relation to himself that man is to recover the right relation to God and to other men."*

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "Ethics"

Since even our own conscience can be set aflame by our pride and desire to judge ourselves and our fellow man without allowing God to be the judge was for him the great difficulty of ethical situations. This insight takes on a new level of gravity when the world itself is flipped on its head. At least in a relatively just society, one can lean on the social conscience and be directed in a form of morality and godliness. But in an unjust society, when every foundational sense of morality and decency are being threatened, living unto God becomes almost impossible. As an example Bonhoeffer gives the following account:

"When the various orders of life no longer respect one another, words become untrue. For example, a teacher asks a child in front of the class whether it is true that his father often comes home drunk. It is true, but the child denies it. The teacher's question has placed him in a situation for which he is not yet prepared. He feels only that what is taking place is an unjustified interference in the order of the family and that he must oppose it. What goes on in the family is not for the ears of the class in school. The family has its own secret and must preserve it. The teacher has failed to respect the reality of this institution. The child ought now to find a way of answering which would comply with both the rule of the family and the rule of the school. But he is not yet able to do this. He lacks experience, knowledge, and the ability to express himself in the right way… The child's answer can indeed be called a lie; yet this lie contains more truth, that is to say, it is more in accordance with reality than would have been the case if the child had betrayed his father's weakness in front of the class. According to the measure of his knowledge, the child acted correctly."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "Ethics"

Because the moral order was upset by a teacher, having one form of moral authority, setting the child against their parent, having a different form of moral authority, the

“correct” decision for the child was muddled. This confusing circumstance is a fairly good representation of how Dietrich viewed the Christian's conscience in Nazi Germany. It was the duly elected authority of the state calling on the Germans to betray their families, various other institutions, and their fellow human beings. In times of moral trial like these, one had to be dependent on the word of God and prayer.

Without God's guidance and the wisdom He provides, no one would be able to correctly navigate the kinds of moral dilemmas that they would face in the world that was turned upside down. We can see similar instances in the Bible like David feigning madness to avoid capture in 1 Samuel 21, or Rahab the prostitute betraying her own people and hiding the Jewish spies in Joshua 2. These represent instances in which the normal moral order has been turned on its head and the old rules don't apply the way they normally do.

This is the world that Bonhoeffer found himself in. And as a pastor he had to find out how to act in this world, and how to lead others. Because even in these circumstances there remains a moral order and a right way of living. In order to do this, Bonhoeffer believed that one had to live like Christ and seek above all else the will of God:

“This one thing Jesus calls the will of God. He says that to do this will is His meat. This will of God is His life. He lives and acts not by the knowledge of good and evil but by the will of God. There is only one will of God. In it the origin is recovered; in it there is established the freedom and the simplicity of all action.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “Ethics”

It was because of this that Dietrich was hesitant to condemn actions taken by his students or fellow pastors. When many of his students were drafted, he didn’t tell them they had to resist, and when one of his students did resist and was executed, he didn’t affirm his decision or shame the ones who became soldiers. While he would have condemned those who were soldiers from participating in evil actions, or from pastors refusing to stand up for the Jews, his views were more nuanced than we might think. It was from this complex perspective that when he truly believed he was being called by God to participate in the conspiracy to kill Hitler, he went willingly, but alone.

He didn’t even talk to his closest friends about this decision, because he didn’t want to sway them into his way of thinking. He felt called to this course, but he didn’t believe that it was the necessary course for everyone else. It was for this reason that many in his own movement felt betrayed by Dietrich. Those who were wanting to continue in the Confessing Church felt that either he had betrayed his morals to work with the Nazi’s, or they knew he was working as a spy and felt that he had left them to work in the

confessing church while he worked as a manipulator and a traitor. Outside of his family, who were heavily involved in the conspiracy, Dietrich found himself to be very alone, but convinced that this was the right course of action for himself.

The Church in Revolt “Life Together”

“How sweet are Your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way.
NUN
Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path. I have sworn and confirmed That I will keep Your righteous judgments.”
-Psalm 119:103-106

It was because of this conviction that Bonhoeffer’s first true act of rebellion against the Nazis was not to join the conspiracy, but to form an illegal seminary. It was in this seminary that he developed his theory of discipleship and wrote his amazing book “Life Together”. He believed that to be a disciple of Christ meant more than giving theological lectures, it meant literally living together and practicing the Christian life in concert with other believers. He believed that the church alone could bring us the community we needed to weather the severe storms of life, but he also acknowledged that this incredible gift is widely ignored by those who have the easiest access to this:

“*It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.”*
-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “Life Together”

This insight was more or less given to him when he visited America. In New York he attended a liberal seminary and saw the lukewarm, compromised Christianity of the late twenties. The only place where he saw powerful Christianity demonstrated was in the persecuted black churches. It was here that he understood something, when fellowship is difficult, it is treasured, when it is easy, it is trampled underfoot and disregarded. But in the difficulties of life, especially life under the tyranny of the Nazis, fellowship was the only benefit that could get him through this dark time.

Joy in Troubles

This is another odd aspect of Dietrich's insight. In the midst of doom and gloom, he didn't mope about like some larger than life martyr, he continued to live his life and enjoy all that God had given to him. In this seminary time, he took his students to plays, musicals, orchestras, played games with them, and took long walks simply building friendships. He realized that in the face of despair, it isn't enough to survive, we had to learn what it meant to truly choose life and find joy no matter what. When the war ramped up and things looked more bleak than ever, he was invited to a wedding by one of his friends and he wrote the following:

"Over the years I have written many a letter for the wedding of one of the brothers and preached many a wedding sermon. The chief characteristic of such occasions essentially rested in the fact that, in the face of the "last" times (I do not mean this to sound quite so apocalyptic), someone dares to take a step of such affirmation of the earth and its future. It was then always very clear to me that a person could take this step as a Christian truly only from within a very strong faith and on the basis of grace. For here in the midst of the final destruction of all things, one desires to build; in the midst of a life lived from hour to hour and from day to day, one desires a future; in the midst of being driven out from the earth, one desires a bit of space; in the midst of widespread misery, one desires some happiness. And the overwhelming thing is that God says yes to this strange longing, that here God consents to our will, whereas it is usually meant to be just the opposite."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

He didn't discourage his friends because of the current troubles of the world, he joined in their joy. In this way he reflected the spirit of Christ, who, even though He faced widespread corruption throughout the Jewish elite and political unrest between the Jews and Romans, attended wedding feasts and ate and drank with His people. If we are to be people facing great tragedy, we must learn to celebrate the blessings of God when they come, to choose life whenever we can and thank God.

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; "that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

-Deuteronomy 30:19-20

“If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.”

-John 15:10-11

Spiritual Discipline

But his call towards practical discipleship was more than a bulwark against the darkness of this world, it was also the source of godly inspiration and conviction:

“As a whole the Scriptures are God’s revealing Word. Only in the infiniteness of its inner relationships, in the connection of Old and New Testaments, of promise and fulfilment, sacrifice and law, law and gospel, cross and resurrection, faith and obedience, having and hoping, will the full witness to Jesus Christ the Lord be perceived. This is why common devotions will include, besides the prayer of the psalms, a longer reading from the Old and the New Testament.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “Life Together”

In a world where lies propagated more quickly than the truth, in order to maintain sanity, the church had to be devoted to meditation on the Word of God. Dietrich didn’t read the Scriptures as some dead ancient wisdom, but as the living word of God, written for his edification and exhortation. In order to shape our conscience to reflect the will of God, we have to be grounded in God’s word, to know it better than we know our own thoughts.

“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”

-2 Timothy 4:2-5

The other major discipline that he taught was prayer. Bonhoeffer was captivated by the book of Psalms, in fact the last major work that he had published was a short book on the Psalms. This book got him banned from any future publishing, because he unabashedly praised the book of Psalms, which the Nazis considered Jewish trash, but he did this act of rebellion because he knew that the only way the church could hold together is if they learned to pray together:

“Third, the psalms teach us to pray as a fellowship. The Body of Christ is praying, and as an individual one acknowledges that his prayer is only a minute fragment of the whole prayer of the Church. He learns to pray the prayer of the Body of Christ. And that lifts him above his personal concerns and allows him to pray selflessly.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “Life Together”

Finally he taught that the church was a bulwark against our own sinful passions. If we are to be ready to resist the powers of darkness, even to the point of death, we need to start by learning to resist our own passions that war in our members. Dietrich believed one of the main weapons we had in this fight was the body of Christ itself that was only mobilized to aid us when we confessed our sins:

“‘CONFESS YOUR faults one to another’ (James 5.16). He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners!”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “Life Together”

This would build a community of disciples, men and women ready to actually live out the Christian faith no matter the cost. Again, what seems to be the strangest act of rebellion that Bonhoeffer could have done is actually the most profound. The media always wants us to focus on issues that are so far beyond our control that all we can do is vote away our power and authority to those who are positioning themselves to “save us”. But the word of God wants our primary act of rebellion to be internal and powerful in our convictions. To not merely rail against the injustices of the world, but to actively go to war with the injustices in ourselves. The church that is ready to become martyrs is the church that is ready to be discipled.

“Simply suffering—that is what will be needed then—not parries, blows or thrusts such as may still be possible or admissible in the preliminary fight; the real struggle that perhaps lies ahead must simply be to suffer faithfully. . . . [F]or sometime [the church struggle] hasn’t even been about what it appears to be about; the lines have been drawn somewhere else entirely.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The Call to Death “Stations on the Way to Freedom”

“Now it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. Then the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was torn in two. And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, “Father, ‘into Your hands I commit My spirit.’ ” Having said this, He breathed His last.

-Luke 23:44-46

After the assasination attempt against Hitler failed, those in the conspiracy were rounded up and sent to prison. There they rotted in dark cells until they were unceremoniously executed. This was the fate that awaited this great man of faith. He didn’t go out in a blaze of glory, but as a nameless prisoner who met his end in obscurity. But it was in prison, like the apostle Paul before him, that he wrote many different papers and letters in his cell. From these letters we can see his mindset as he prepared to meet his end, and I believe in this we can hopefully resonate with the strength of Dietrich to meet our own ends with dignity and without compromise.

Before we read from one of these letters, let’s first look at, what he saw, as the great obstacle towards following Christ in this fallen world:

“What befell Christ befalls every man in Him. It is only as one who is sentenced by God that man can live before God. Only the crucified man is at peace with God. It is in the figure of the Crucified that man recognizes and discovers himself. To be taken up by God, to be executed on the cross and reconciled, that is the reality of manhood. In a world where success is the measure and justification of all things the figure of Him who was sentenced and crucified remains a stranger and is at best the object of pity. The world will allow itself to be subdued only by success. It is not ideas or opinions which decide, but deeds. Success alone justifies wrongs done. Success heals the wounds of guilt.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “Ethics”

Bonhoeffer noticed that men follow success more than we follow truth. Hitler’s popularity rose in Germany, not because he moderated his ideas or policies, but because he began to win in the wars across Europe. He became the vengeance of all those Germans who lost so much in a wasteful war a generation in the past. He showed his people German excellence and in the wake of his victories, they felt pride in their nation once again. Their misgivings about his immoral actions and speeches fell to the wayside and only his success was magnified.

What Bonhoeffer is showing here is that to be a Christian is to follow a man who, by all human metrics, was a failure. Executed by the government that had conquered His

people, betrayed by His own people to death, and even betrayed by one of His closest friends and abandoned to die alone by all others. He failed to start a political movement, write even a single book of renown, or change the heart of His nation. He died, naked, poor, and alone, shrouded in obscurity. By every human measurement, the life of Christ was a failure, a cautionary tale more than anything else.

It was for this reason that the Nazis rejected this image of Christ. They took down the image of the cross in the church and presented Christ as a powerful Aryan warrior, not as a weak and despised Jew. The Nazis worshipped power and success which is why they executed the poor and the disabled. And this spirit, to one level or another, resonates with us all. We don't want to be weak and poor, we want to be powerful and prosperous. The message of the cross is as much a stumbling block today as it has ever been.

"For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

-1 Corinthians 1:22-25

In the American church we focus so much on the immense love of God that put Him on the cross, that we sometimes fail to remind people that this same cross was the one that Christ encouraged us to take up and follow after Him. We have so much success and prosperity in our nation, that we fear suffering of any kind and death above all, we rarely even think about our own mortality or weakness. But it is this Christ, the One who was crucified alone that Dietrich Bonhoeffer served, and so when he was arrested and sentenced to death, he didn't beg for his life, he didn't try to bargain for his freedom, he accepted his fate and his calling from God, as he had learned to accept all callings from his God. And it was in prison awaiting his death that he wrote a poem entitled "Stations on the Way to Freedom." It is a short poem, so I will quote the later half in its entirety:

"Suffering
Wondrous transformation. Your hands, strong and active, are fettered. Powerless, alone, you see that an end is put to your action. Yet now you breathe a sigh of relief and lay what is righteous calmly and fearlessly into a mightier hand, contented. Just for one blissful moment you could feel the sweet touch of freedom, Then you gave it to God, that God might perfect it in glory."

"Death

Come now, highest of feasts on the way to freedom eternal, Death, lay down your ponderous chains and earthen enclosures walls that deceive our souls and fetter our mortal bodies, that we might at last behold what here we are hindered from seeing. Freedom, long have we sought you through discipline, action, and suffering. Dying, now we discern in the countenance of God your own face."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "Stations on the Way to Freedom"

Dietrich was able to say this, not because he was a masochist, or someone who disdained life. We have already seen that he cherished life more than most, (and he was engaged to be married when he was arrested). He wrote this because what seems to be foolishness to men is wisdom to God, what seems to be shame and defeat to man, is actually eternal victory and glory to God.

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

-Philippians 2:5-11

Bonhoeffer found his own peace and freedom in knowing that he had pleased God, even if it meant the scorn and wrath of man. He died content and even joyous, in spite of the great sorrow he felt for leaving his friends and family behind, because the approval of God had become enough for him. This is what it means to celebrate the saints of old. Not to celebrate the physically successful, though there is no innate harm in doing this, but in reminding ourselves of what it means to give ourselves fully to God. To love Him with all our hearts, souls, and strength and to find rest in His will, no matter what it might be.

"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing."

-2 Timothy 4:6-8