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## THE WAY OF THE MANGER

*The Birth  
of Costly  
Discipleship  
in the Life of  
Dietrich  
Bonhoeffer*



BY TOM  
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# THE WAY OF THE MANGER

**D**ietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 - 1945) was one of the most beloved, well-known and respected theologians of the 20th century.

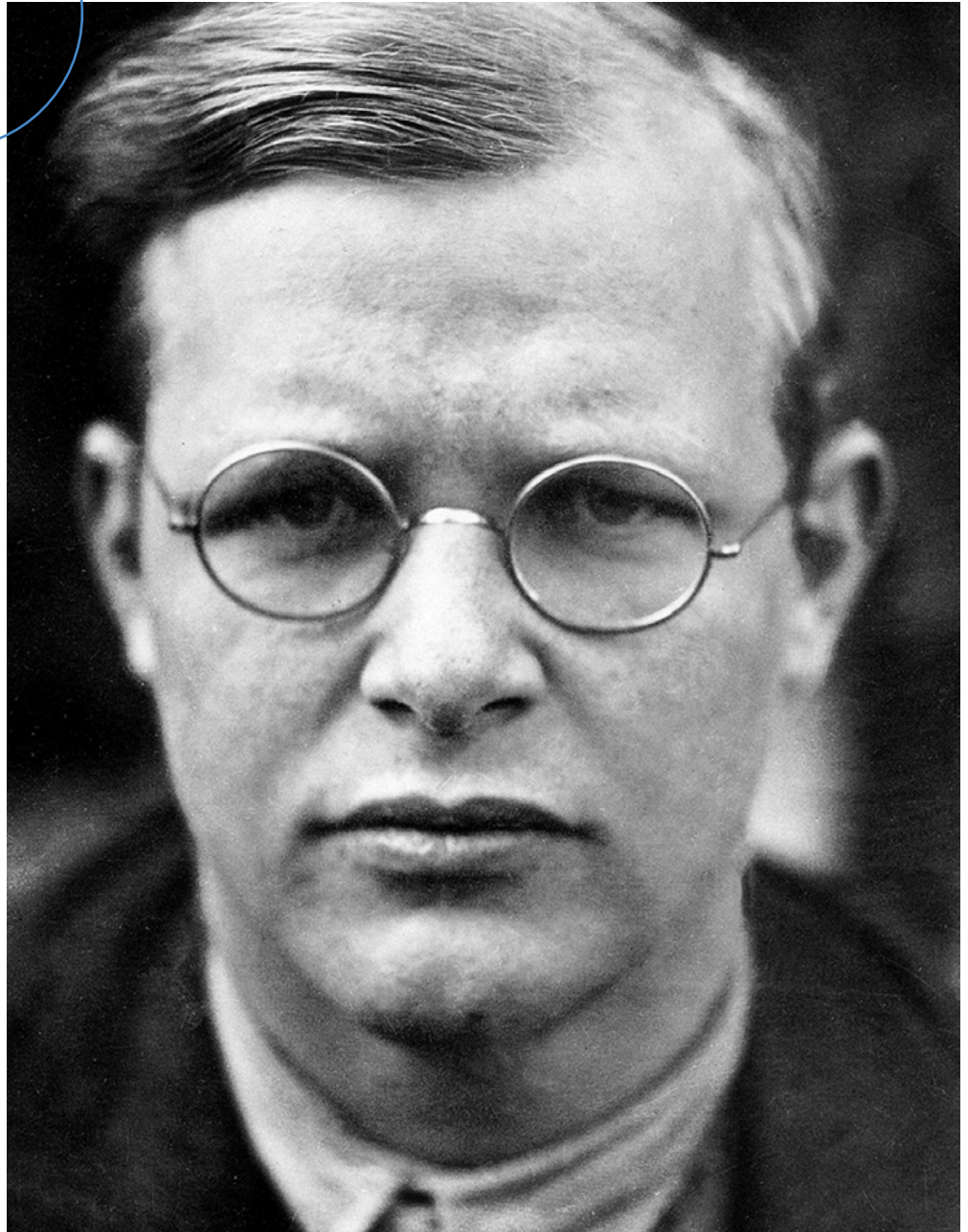
With the publication in 1937 of his masterwork *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer was forever linked to the most famous line from that book: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Eight years later, that command became prophetic. In April 1945, as Adolf Hitler's Third Reich crumbled beneath the ruin in Berlin, the theologian was executed on the direct orders of Hitler. Bonhoeffer then entered the pantheon of Christianity's most famous martyrs.

How many of us think that Jesus is bidding us to come and die at the nativity? We are more comfortable thinking of Jesus as the child "Away in a Manger," the gentle and lowly Christ who demands little of us.

But Bonhoeffer's perspective points to the "Way of the Manger." He believed Christ demands much of us in our walk with Him. In his book, Bonhoeffer disdained "cheap grace." There could be no forgiveness without repentance, no communion without confession, no grace without sacrifice.

Bonhoeffer believed that Christ expresses strength best through weakness, and that God is often heard most clearly by those in poverty and distress.

From a Nazi prison cell on December 1, 1943, in the midst of his own penultimate Advent, Bonhoeffer wrote the following to his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer:



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"I used to be very fond of thinking up and buying presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious; the emptier our hands, the better we understand what Luther meant by his dying words: 'We're beggars; it's true.' The poorer our quarters, the more clearly we perceive that our hearts should be Christ's home on earth."

In Christ's case, and in our own lives, we tend to romanticize the reality of babies. But with the recent birth of identical twin boys in the Westgate household, I've been gently reminded of the sacrifice that babies (plural) demand not just of the parents but

extended families.

Jesus' birth also demands much of us. Mary and Joseph came to that realization immediately, and believers do too in the course of their spiritual formation.

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

The life and martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that the cost of discipleship is very great indeed. What follows is his story. It may not be the Christmas story we are accustomed to reading, but as followers of Jesus, it is one well worth considering.

# A DEVASTATING DEATH

**B**orn on February 4, 1906, into what can only be described as a most extraordinary family, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ancestors included statesmen, lawyers, painters and theologians, on both his maternal and paternal sides.

His father Karl was a renown German psychiatrist, one of the most famous of the 20th century. His mother was also brilliant, a teacher who homeschooled all eight of her children. Dietrich was the youngest of the four boys. His twin sister Sabine was born 10 minutes after he was, something he teased her about his whole life.

The children were also remarkable. Dietrich's eldest brother, Karl Friedrich, was a physicist who at the age of 23 was involved in splitting the atom with German scientists Max Planck and Albert Einstein. Another brother, a lawyer, was a top executive at Lufthansa, the German airline.

Like many Germans of that era, Dietrich was raised in the Lutheran Church.

His mother Paula was a huge spiritual influence over Dietrich. She read the children Bible stories and the governesses she hired were devout Christians. While father Karl was most likely agnostic, he deeply respected his wife's faith, author Eric Metaxas writes in his two biographies of Bonhoeffer. Karl supported Paula's efforts to raise the children as Christians and always participated in family gatherings where Scriptures were read and hymns were sung.



*Karl-Friedrich, Walter (who perished in World War I), Klaus, and Dietrich on top (with the mop of hair).*

**IN 1917, WALTER, THE YOUNGEST OF DIETRICH'S THREE BROTHERS, WAS CALLED TO THE MURDEROUS WESTERN FRONT.**

When Dietrich was 8 years old, World War I arrived. Although the Bonhoeffers were not gung-ho German nationalists, all three of Dietrich's older brothers enlisted in the German army to defend the Fatherland.

In 1917, Walter, the youngest of Dietrich's three brothers, was called to the murderous Western front. Metaxas recounts that the whole family saw Walter off at the station. Mother Paula ran alongside the train carriage as her beloved Walter departed, calling out, "It is only space that separates us."

Then tragedy struck. Walter's death two weeks later utterly devastated the family. For an entire year afterward, the mother was unable to function. Dietrich, too, was deeply affected by Walter's death.



# THE BIRTH OF COSTLY DISCIPLESHIP

**W**hen Dietrich was 13 years old, once the war had ended, he revealed a fateful decision to his family: he'd decided to pursue a career in theology.

That same year, Dietrich was a confirmand at the local Lutheran church. His Scripture verse he was asked to memorize was from James: "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."

Although father Karl and many of his siblings were dumbfounded by Dietrich's decision to become a theologian, the young man would not be dissuaded. He was following in the footsteps of his mother's side. His maternal grandfather and great-grandfather were both theologians. Bonhoeffer excelled in his theology studies, earning his PhD in religion from the prestigious Berlin University when he was only 21 years old.

Another significant milestone in Bonhoeffer's spiritual formation came at the age of 24, in the early 1930s, while doing post-doctoral studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Biographer Metaxas identifies this moment as when Bonhoeffer committed himself to a life not just of academic study but of action.

During the nine months that studied at the seminary, he attended Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, which at that time was the largest church in the United States.

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Bonhoeffer's worship at Abyssinian turned out to be a pivotal moment in his spiritual formation.

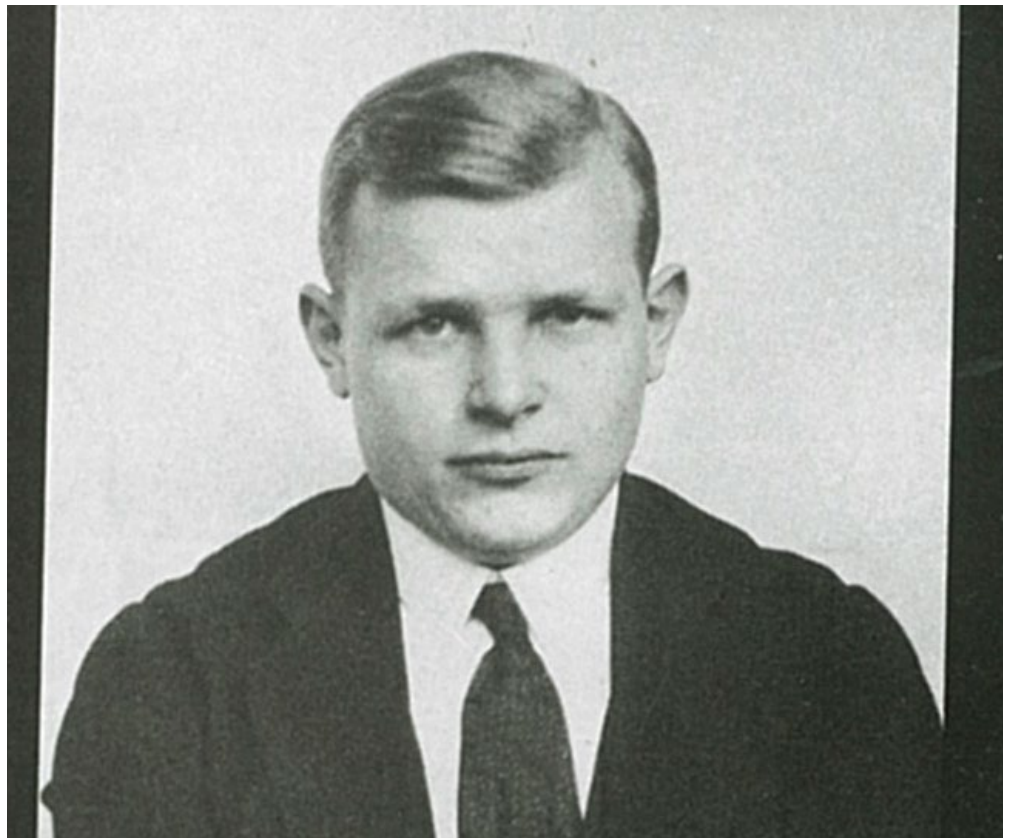
The senior pastor of Abyssinian Church was the Rev. Dr. Adam Clayton Powell Sr. The son of slaves, Powell's mother was a full-blooded Cherokee and his father was African-American.

For the first time in his church life, Bonhoeffer witnessed the gospel preached and lived out in obedience to God's commands. Rev. Powell also introduced him to the phrase, "cheap grace."

Years later, in 1937, with the publication of *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer's theology of "costly discipleship" was fleshed out. As Bonhoeffer defined "cheap grace," it is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.

It's communion without confession. It's grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without sacrifice, grace without Jesus Christ. Cheap grace is a divine get-out-of-jail-free card. True discipleship, on the other hand, is costly, as Bonhoeffer himself would soon discover.

*Bonhoeffer in 1928.*



# OPPOSING THOSE WHO MOCK GOD

**B**onhoeffer's time at Abyssinian Baptist Church was also significant in another way.

From the very first time he worshipped there, author Metaxas recounts, he was staggered by what he saw. Worship was real and personal. These were mostly Black people who had difficult lives, yet they were joyful. There was a community which embraced each other and carried each other's burdens. It was a covenant community.

Worship was also celebratory. Belief in Jesus was not merely a philosophical or theological construct. Worship at Abyssinian also exposed the patrician 24-year-old to the budding issue of civil rights.

"For perhaps the first time in his life," Metaxas writes, "Bonhoeffer linked the idea of having deep faith in Jesus with taking political and social action." Faith, in other words, had to manifest itself in one's life.

Two years later, when Bonhoeffer had returned to Germany, this newfound manifestation of his Christian formation would put him on a path in opposition to the new chancellor of Germany, Adolf Hitler.

In January 1933, just two days after Hitler had become chancellor, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio sermon in which he publicly criticized the new regime. He warned Germans that "the Führer concept" was dangerous and wrong.

Bonhoeffer prophetically signaled the



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dangers of slipping into an idolatrous cult, that the *Führer* could turn out to be a *Verführer* – a misleader or seducer – if Hitler were idolized and elevated to too high of a status.

"Leaders of offices which set themselves up as gods mock God," his address concluded. But Germany never got to hear those final statements; the microphone had been switched off in mid-transmission.

Not to be defeated, in April 1933, Bonhoeffer again condemned Hitler's persecution of the Jews. He declared that the church must not simply "bandage Jewish victims under the wheel, but jam a spoke in the wheel itself."

This was a dozen years before he would be hanged, as a subversive enemy of the state.

# "I MADE A MISTAKE IN COMING TO AMERICA"

**A**s the 1930s unfolded, while the Nazis consolidated their power and the German people fell further under Hitler's spell, a pivotal turning point emerged in 1939. By that time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a well-known theologian. *The Cost of Discipleship* had been published two years before, to great acclaim. At that same time, war clouds were on the horizon.

Bonhoeffer knew that when hostilities were declared, his conscience wouldn't permit him to take up arms and fight for Hitler. Bonhoeffer prayed earnestly, author Metaxas recounts, asking God to show him what to do.

It was not possible to declare oneself a conscientious objector in the Third Reich. "How could he avoid having to fight while not endangering his brethren in the Confessing Church?" Metaxas writes.

**BUT WHEN HE ARRIVED IN NEW YORK, HIS UNEASINESS DID NOT LIFT.**

An answer to his dilemma came when his friend, the famous American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, got involved. Niebuhr managed to wrangle an invitation for Bonhoeffer to return to Union Theological Seminary, where Niebuhr taught. Everything was arranged and in early June 1939, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once more sailed for America.

But when he arrived in New York, his uneasiness did not lift. In fact, it intensified.

"What was he doing in America," Metaxas writes, "when his people were about to undergo such a terrible ordeal? In the end he really believed that God wanted him to go back, to stand with his people, come what may. He knew that danger and possibly death lay ahead, but he went [back to Germany] nonetheless."

Bonhoeffer left New York in early July, only 26 days after his arrival in

the United States. His German friends were shocked to see him.

In a letter to Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer explained his rationale for returning to Germany:

*I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America at this time. I must live through this difficult period in our national history along with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials at this time with my people. ...*

*Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that a future Christian civilization may survive, or else willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization and any true Christianity. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from a place of security.*





# IMPRISONMENT

**I**n weighing whether to stay in the United States or return to Germany, Bonhoeffer's situation was complicated. Both of his parents had opposed Hitler from the beginning. Members of his family were in jeopardy, as they had been engaged in years of conversations in which they voiced their opposition to Hitler.

The Bonhoeffer clan was very well connected in elite Berlin circles, and they were close to a number of key players in what would emerge as a clandestine conspiracy to kill Hitler. Dietrich had provided moral support to the conspirators and given them solid theological grounds for their conspiracy against the German head of state.

Bonhoeffer also had solid theological grounds that favored returning to Germany. Failure to return and oppose Hitler would not only be a violation of his conscience. It wouldn't be obeying God's call to act upon one's beliefs. "To do anything less," biographer Metaxas writes, "would be to buy into the idea of cheap grace that he had so eloquently written about."

Through a connection with his brother-in-law, who was a top official in Germany's military intelligence agency called the Abwehr, Bonhoeffer began working as an Abwehr agent. He was able to travel to neutral countries such as Sweden and Switzerland, carrying messages to the Allies that there were Germans inside Germany who were working against Hitler.

During the more than three years Bonhoeffer worked for the Abwehr, he also helped German Jews escape to



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Switzerland. But on April 5, 1943, Bonhoeffer and his brother-in-law were arrested and imprisoned. kill Hitler escalated scrutiny and suspicion of everyone in the German underground.

For a year and a half, Bonhoeffer was held at Tegel military prison, just seven miles from his home, while he awaited trial. The military commandant over Berlin was Bonhoeffer's uncle, so he was treated reasonably well during his imprisonment in Berlin. During his time there, he wrote most of his now famous *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

But circumstances changed abruptly when the Valkyrie plot unfolded on July 20, 1944. The failed attempt to

In October 1944, Bonhoeffer was transferred to the Gestapo's high-security prison in Berlin. In February 1945, while the Allies unleashed intense bombing of the German capital, Bonhoeffer was transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp where he remained for two months. Then, as April dawned, he was taken on a week-long journey that eventually landed him in Flossenbürg concentration camp located in rural Bavaria.

# THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS

**A**s the Third Reich crumbled in April 1945, Hitler ordered the execution of many political prisoners who'd been suspected of conspiring to overthrow him. Since papers had recently been discovered that confirmed Bonhoeffer's involvement in anti-Nazi activities, the theologian was among those slated for execution.

Early on the morning of April 9, 1945, he was hanged while naked. He had been condemned to death the day before by an SS judge in a show trial. Bonhoeffer was among more than 5,000 Germans who were executed in the aftermath of the Valkyrie plot and discovery of the Abwehr's involvement in it.

From the standpoint of secular thinking, the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer might be viewed as a tragedy.

He'd been killed at age 39, just ten days before German forces began to surrender and only three weeks to the day before Hitler shot himself in a gray bunker beneath his shattered capital. The war in Europe was over on May 8, 1945, only a month after Bonhoeffer's execution.

In death, Bonhoeffer's body was tossed on a pile and burned, sharing the same fate as Jews who'd been recently killed at Flossenbürg. "But it seems clear that, for Bonhoeffer, giving his life for the Jews was an honor," biographer Metaxas writes. "The God of the Jews had called him to give his life for the Jews."



**FROM THE STANDPOINT OF SECULAR THINKING, THE DEATH OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER MIGHT BE VIEWED AS A TRAGEDY.**

That was the obedient death Christ had called him to, which was celebrated at his memorial service on July 27 in London. Anglican Bishop George Bell, Bonhoeffer's longtime friend, ended his sermon that day with the words: "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church."

That service began with a reading from the fourth chapter of Second Corinthians, verses 8 through 12:

*<sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup> So*

*death is at work in us, but life in you.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that obeying God – even onto death – was the only way to live. The words he penned in *The Cost of Discipleship* were, in the end, the creed under which he lived and died: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

This is the life of faith revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. This is the life of faith for all believers. It may not be a literal death for most of us, but we are all called to come and die, to take up our cross and follow Him.