

In Bonhoeffer's company: Biographer Charles Marsh

by [David Heim](#) in the [May 27, 2015](#) issue



Photo by Gudrun Senger

*In his book Strange Glory, Charles Marsh offers a fresh account of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life based on previously unknown documents. Marsh is professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia and director of the school's Project on Lived Theology. Besides writing an earlier book on Bonhoeffer, Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1994), he is the author of God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights (1997); a memoir, The Last Days: A Son's Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of a New South (2001); and The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today (2005).*

**You were researching materials related to Bonhoeffer's experience in America in the 1930s when your project developed into a full-scale biography. What lured you into that larger work?**

Poring over Bonhoeffer's papers in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin brought surprises on a daily basis. It was like watching a fascinating slide show, with registration papers for a new Audi convertible, a bank slip from the joint account he shared with Eberhard Bethge, files on race relations in the United States, inventories of his wardrobe and library, photos of Bonhoeffer and Bethge goofing around and making

funny faces on the Baltic seaboard, postcards from Texas, a brief correspondence with Mahatma Gandhi.

All these illuminated an intriguingly different picture of Bonhoeffer than the one I had carried with me since writing a doctoral dissertation on him 25 years earlier. While for a few months I imagined writing a biography framed by his American experiences, I realized soon that this was a cheat and that I needed to tell a complete life.

**You suggest that Bonhoeffer derived more from his time in the United States than he let on or than previous accounts have indicated. He was famously appalled at the shallowness of American liberal theologians (“they preach everything but Jesus”), but it seems the example of social analysis and activism set by Reinhold Niebuhr and others at Union Theological Seminary was not lost on him. How would you summarize what he learned?**

Bonhoeffer was underwhelmed by the American Protestant establishment, but he returned to Germany with a transformed perspective on his vocation as theologian and pastor. “It is the problem of concreteness that at present so occupies me,” he wrote upon his return to Berlin.

By the end of April 1933, Bonhoeffer would make his first public defense of the Jews and condemnation of Hitler’s Aryan Clause when he told a group of ministers and theologians in Berlin that in response to the rising specter of German anti-Semitism the church was compelled not simply to bandage the victims under the wheel but to smash the wheel itself. Bethge commented, “Something had happened in America.”

What happened is a terrific story: he journeyed into the tenement buildings of the city, into Harlem during its artistic renaissance, into the Deep South weeks after the Scottsboro boys went to trial, and into an intense immersion in African-American religion and culture and the Abyssinian Baptist Church. He visited the National Women’s Trade Union League and the Workers Education Bureau of America and wrote notes on the labor movement, poverty, homelessness, crime, and the social mission of the churches. He met with officials from the American Civil Liberties Union, which after its founding in 1920 had focused heavily on the rights of conscientious objectors and on the protection of resident aliens from deportation. And in spring 1931, Bonhoeffer and a graduate student from Calais, France, took a

road trip together that concluded with a journey into the heart of the Jim Crow South.

He'd never in his life seen a theology professor take a group of students out of the classroom into some blighted neighborhood of the city, as he did at Union and elsewhere in America. That didn't happen in Germany.

**One of Bonhoeffer's most frequently quoted passages comes from *The Cost of Discipleship*: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." In your book, Bonhoeffer comes across as a man ferociously in love with the things of life—art, music, vermouth and soda, clothes, food. How would you describe this tension of dying for Christ and his zest for life?**

The passage troubled Bonhoeffer when he thought about it years later from Tegel prison. His intention was to correct the Lutheran tendency to portray faith as a refuge from obedience. Seeing the Nazified German Christian church as a veritable incubator of cheap grace, he sought to remind Jesus followers of the inescapable moment of personal decision: there is no grace without obedience; no remission of sin without the turning away from sin toward truth; no freedom without the burden of the cross.

Bonhoeffer would later acknowledge dangers here: a certain hint of spiritual heroism, which laid too much weight upon the individual, too little on Christians' shared life together. Still, Bonhoeffer stood by the book. These, he felt, were the right words spoken at the right time.

**Bonhoeffer in his final years made reference to a "religionless Christianity." What did he mean?**

Karl Barth, the theologian who most influenced Bonhoeffer, had claimed that "Jesus has nothing to do with religion." Bonhoeffer's late, fragmentary meditations on "religionless Christianity" trade on this conviction: religion is based on humanity's search for God, whereas Christianity begins with God's reaching out to humankind. So "religionless Christianity" means relationship with God without the entrapments of religion.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that aspects of Bonhoeffer's late meditations move in new and daring directions. "I am living, and can live, for days without the Bible," he said. When he opened his Bible again after an absence, he could hear and

experience the “new and delightful . . . as never before.” “Authenticity, life, freedom, and mercy” had acquired a new significance for him. A worldliness heretofore unknown was unexpectedly refreshing his spiritual being, and with it he felt a growing aversion to all things “religious.” He was experiencing new spiritual energies. It was an intimation of spirituality outside the church.

**Bonhoeffer’s theology was always evolving. He was responding to Barth’s theology, as you mention, as well as to the immediate crisis in the church and in Europe during the Nazi period. How would you locate a center to his thought?**

Bonhoeffer aspired for a purity of soul, and he achieved it. Another way of putting this would be to say he found originality in devotion to Christ; he sought to know the depths and heights of devotion to Christ, the extremities of redemption and the stillness of the center; to follow the arc of discipleship as far it goes in worldly life.

**You show that Bonhoeffer led a restless, peripatetic life. He never settled anywhere for long, and when he did settle, it seems he immediately began planning a vacation. It is ironic that community figured so large in his theology and that he is known for writing a great meditation on Christian community, *Life Together*. How would you put together these aspects of his life?**

In historical context, the five short chapters of *Life Together* represent a poignant meditation on all that was lost when the Confessing Church’s seminary in Finkenwalde was shut down by the Gestapo. Israel’s diaspora has become the condition of Christ’s disciples. To follow Jesus is to live in exile, for Christ’s body is broken and scattered. The world is the wilderness in which the Christian is ordained to wander. This is humanity’s curse and promise: God’s people are dispersed into the farthest corners, but in each person Jesus meets us as friend and fellow stranger.

**Scholars have long debated the morality and meaning of Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the plot to kill Hitler, especially in light of his earlier pacifist statements. Your book shows that his actual role among the plotters was quite tangential. How do you finally assess his role in the resistance?**

Bonhoeffer served the conspiracy with the full range of his pastoral and theological gifts, so I would not describe his role as tangential.

I don't see any evidence that Bonhoeffer regarded killing Hitler as an especially vexing matter. Close friends and fellow dissidents later recalled him speaking unequivocally of "killing the madman." He prayed for the defeat of his country and the assassination of the führer, and in praying with the conspirators he conferred God's blessings on tyrannicide.

His brother-in-law, the conspirator Hans von Dohnanyi, used his position at the Ministry of Justice to obtain the Nazi confidential records and compile a "chronicle of shame," a day-by-day listing of war crimes, military plans, and genocidal actions and policies, the full realization of which made clear to Bonhoeffer that his principled commitment to pacifism must yield under these extreme circumstances. For Dohnanyi, Hitler's assassination would rid the country of a moral "cancer," and Bonhoeffer agreed.

This is not to say he was not mindful of the gravity of taking a life, even that of a brutal tyrant. He saw himself in a *Grenzfall*—a borderline situation—pressed to discern moral exceptions to the commandment that no divine law had previously expounded and that only concrete reality could reveal. Arriving at no clear theological resolution, he abandoned any hope for innocence, incurring the guilt born of responsible action. Of the two evils, it was the one he could abide. Still, he worried less about the legitimacy of killing Hitler than the consequences of his decision on his Finkenwalde brethren and members of his family, who might be implicated in the conspiracy by association.

**The biography reveals a very worldly man—a man who loved the things of this world, including art, good food, nice clothes, and expensive cars. "Worldliness" was also a positive theological category for him—Christ lives at the center of this world. How do you interpret this aspect of his life?**

Bonhoeffer spoke of the humanism of the incarnation and how the fullness of the risen Christ enabled clarity of sight. Eberhard Bethge taught Bonhoeffer to love Heinrich Schütz, the German composer before the time of Bach who brought the sumptuous polychoral style of Venetian ceremonial song to 17th-century Lutheran church music. In prison, Bonhoeffer would transcribe the staves of Schütz's "O bone Jesu"—on the "restoration" of all earthy desire, tendered by the "kind Jesus, Word of the Father, Splendor of the Father's Glory, on whom the angels desire to gaze"—onto his final letters. "Nothing is lost," Bonhoeffer wrote alongside one of the notations: "In Christ all things are taken up, preserved, albeit in transfigured form,

transparent, clear, liberated from the torment of self-serving demands.”

Yet he could not be pried from his adherence to Christian orthodoxy: God holds the world mercifully in his hands. This was the strange and glorious gospel that Bonhoeffer had taken vows to proclaim, despite little evidence of what most of the world would recognize as “good news.”

The famous last words attributed to Bonhoeffer in the hour of his death—“This is not the end for me; it is the beginning of life”—are those of a British intelligence officer writing five years after the war. They are true to Bonhoeffer’s hopes. But the officer was not present when Bonhoeffer was summoned to the gallows. His last written words are more fitting for the pastor who had come to feel uneasy with pious language. “Please drop off some stationery with the commissar,” he said in a letter to his parents. That seems to me the perfect farewell.

### **What was it like to spend so much time in the company of Bonhoeffer?**

I’ve often heard biographers say that they became tired of their subject in the course of research and writing. My fascination with Bonhoeffer is greater than when I started the biography nearly a decade ago.

Proclaiming the truth of the gospel while pondering the end of Christianity, plotting the assassination of Hitler while affirming the ethics of pacifism; celebrating the sacrament of marriage while binding his affections joyfully to another man—Bonhoeffer came to embody some of the perplexing contradictions that modernity imposed upon the faith. I could happily spend the rest of my life sorting through these intricacies of character and belief.