

What Bonhoeffer knew

When the church stops talking about Jesus, it has nothing to say.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [July 22, 2015](#) issue



Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1939. Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1987-074-16, [some rights reserved](#).

After I'd given a talk to mark the 70th anniversary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's execution, I got a letter complaining that Bonhoeffer had been drained dry of meaning and was of no more use to the church. Here's what I replied.

Bonhoeffer was theological. We don't all have to write two doctoral theses by the age of 24. But we do have to approach every challenge as fundamentally a question about God. The German Christians were seduced into treating the führer as God. Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church saw that the problem with the Nazis was first a theological problem.

Bonhoeffer was about Jesus. The Bonhoeffer of popular theology is the one who talks from prison about the "world come of age" and "religionless Christianity." But what put him in prison was Jesus. The church fears that when it says the word *Jesus* it's assuming an imperialistic oppressive voice that dominates, excludes, or devalues other voices. The church has too often assumed such a voice. But Jesus doesn't assume such a voice. Bonhoeffer knew that when the church stops talking about Jesus, it has nothing to say. And when it assumes dominance, it's not talking about Jesus.

Bonhoeffer was ecumenical. The vital conversation that convinced Bonhoeffer to return to Germany in 1939 was with George Bell, Anglican bishop of Chichester. They became friends in the 1920s ecumenical movement, when denominations really mattered. They matter less now. The days when we could forget about the world and concentrate on our arguments with other Christians are passing. Ecumenical discord is a luxury of the complacent church. We need each other. If we feel the church is weak, it's because we've limited what we're looking at when we use the word *church*.

Bonhoeffer was international. He understood that Germany and the church weren't the same thing. Western Christians are slowly realizing that they aren't the majority of the church or the part that matters most. Christianity doesn't fundamentally belong to them. Bonhoeffer may be a dead white Western male, but his legacy points us in global directions. When people say Christianity is in decline, you have to ask which map they're looking at.

Bonhoeffer was politically engaged. There were Christians in 1930s Germany who thought salvation was about saving souls and it wasn't their business to get involved in politics. That reasoning left 6 million Jews dead and ten times that number dead globally. Politics is the name we give to resolving differences short of violence. If you don't do politics, you end up doing violence.

Bonhoeffer was rooted in an accountable community. He saw that for his Confessing Church to have any backbone, it needed to be led by pastors who took for granted the simple, straightforward practices of daily prayer, the confession of sin, the studying of scripture, and the sharing of communion. His book *Life Together* describes that uncompromising, uncluttered set of priorities. Community is easier to theorize about than to practice, but it's still the center of the church's renewal.

Bonhoeffer was prepared to face danger. One of the assumptions I find bewildering yet widespread in the church is that if one is a good Christian, one's days will be long and one shall multiply and one's valleys will grow rich with corn. Most of the people in the Bible face danger, hardship, crisis, tragedy, and fear. Those are the places God most often shows up. God is close to the poor, not because there's anything holy about poverty, but because those in poverty face such things all the time, and that's what brings them face to face with God. Bonhoeffer wrestled with this in 1939. He could do so much good from the safe distance of America, but he was called to be in the place of danger. We face the same choices.

Bonhoeffer did not expect his life to be a tidy edifice of perfection. The great quandary of his life was whether he was right to join the plot to kill Hitler. It's a mistake, I believe, to assume that faithful Christians always make the right decisions, or that a person venerated after his death must have made only good decisions. Returning to Germany put Bonhoeffer in a position few of us could imagine or emulate, and none of us have the right to judge. He was both in an impossible situation and exactly where God wanted him to be. I once faced an impossible choice and shared my quandary with a friend. He said, "The point isn't the conclusion you come to: the point is, you're *in there*." Bonhoeffer was *in there*, in that sense. Are we?

Bonhoeffer did not expect immediate results. He died probably assuming his life had been a failure. We don't see it like that. The distinction between being faithful and being effective isn't an absolute one; they're actually the same thing in different time scales.

He assumed that the shape of renewal is death and resurrection. The future of the church is not simply a matter of using social media or singing attractive music or getting our message right. Bonhoeffer knew the way that Christ renewed Israel: through incarnation, sharing joys and sorrows, facing the passion, being crucified, and being raised. He allowed his life to follow the same trajectory. That's the way God renewed creation 2,000 years ago. That's the way God renews the church

today.