

# Fearless leader

by [Robin Lovin](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

*The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.*

By Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson. Eerdmans, 300 pp., \$25.00.

In good times religious leaders think that they have reinvented the church. In bad times they seek wisdom from those who have gone before them. No wonder, then, that many now ask what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would have made of our world. When the path to peace seems so uncertain and the relationship between Christian faith and America's role in the world has become so complicated, we might learn something from this German pastor and theologian who led the church's resistance to his country's imperialism and militarism.

American readers tend to overlook the fact that Bonhoeffer was a patriot who cared deeply about the future of the German people. That was why he gave up the safety of New York to return to Germany in 1939. But Bonhoeffer was also a Christian who accepted God's judgment on his nation.

Geoffrey Kelly and Burton Nelson are well qualified to relate Bonhoeffer's spirituality to our time. Both have devoted their careers to Bonhoeffer scholarship, and they have maintained an ecumenical dialogue in which Kelly's Roman Catholicism and Nelson's Evangelical Covenant Protestantism subtly enrich their interpretations of Bonhoeffer's German Lutheran ecclesiology. They present a systematic treatment of Bonhoeffer's theology and ethics, with an emphasis on the spirituality he developed during Germany's church struggle and taught to his seminarians in the Confessing Church. The extensive notes and index signal that this is a work of serious scholarship. Thirteen pages of useful discussion questions also remind us that Kelly and Nelson are superb teachers. Theirs is a book for the college and seminary classroom, the clergy study group and the Sunday morning discussion class, as well as the theologian's library.

Above all, this is a book for those prepared to think about moral leadership at a time when the future is unclear and when self-righteous certainty dominates public discourse. How do we provide courage and hope without self-righteousness? How

can we listen to the concerns and fears of those around us without falling victim to their illusions? *The Cost of Moral Leadership* is about theological convictions that provide a wider perspective on world events, but it is especially concerned with the spiritual disciplines that sustain our faith when success and power seem to have deserted us.

Kelly and Nelson richly detail Bonhoeffer's own spiritual practices, especially the community of prayer and work to which many readers were introduced in Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*. Kelly and Nelson make clear why Bonhoeffer tried to keep his seminary community from becoming too much like its monastic forebears: Spirituality is not about imitating some other way of life. It is about preparation for the tasks of our life.

*The Cost of Moral Leadership* relates Bonhoeffer's spirituality to liberation theology's struggle against oppression and to a theology of compassion that takes on the vulnerability of the weak. The book's central chapter, "The Spirituality That Dares Peace," is a reminder that Bonhoeffer's resistance to Hitler grew from his opposition to war. Even his eventual acceptance of conspiracy and assassination reflected his commitment to peace and his willingness to accept guilt on behalf of others so that peace might be restored.

Kelly and Nelson do not hesitate to relate this spirituality of peace to what they see as the growing militarism in U.S. foreign policy after 9/11. They see parallels between our time and the German churches' silence and complicity when political leadership moved to claim a kind of religious authority for itself.

Among those who oppose the war in Iraq and our growing reliance on military power, the question often seems to be one of discernment. Given the uncertainty of events and the limits of what we know, when does resistance appropriately begin? One pastor put the question to me in these terms: "Would Bonhoeffer be calling for a Confessing Church in the U.S. today?" My quick answer was that I'm not sure Bonhoeffer thought that American Christianity had the resources to create a Confessing Church.

Those who read Kelly and Nelson's book will learn how Bonhoeffer arrived at his convictions. They will also learn a better answer to my pastor friend's question. Bonhoeffer did not first conclude that the situation in Germany required resistance and then start living his faith in a different way. His aim from the beginning was to live his faith so consistently that it would give him a steady standard of judgment

amidst the changing events and shifting opinions around him.