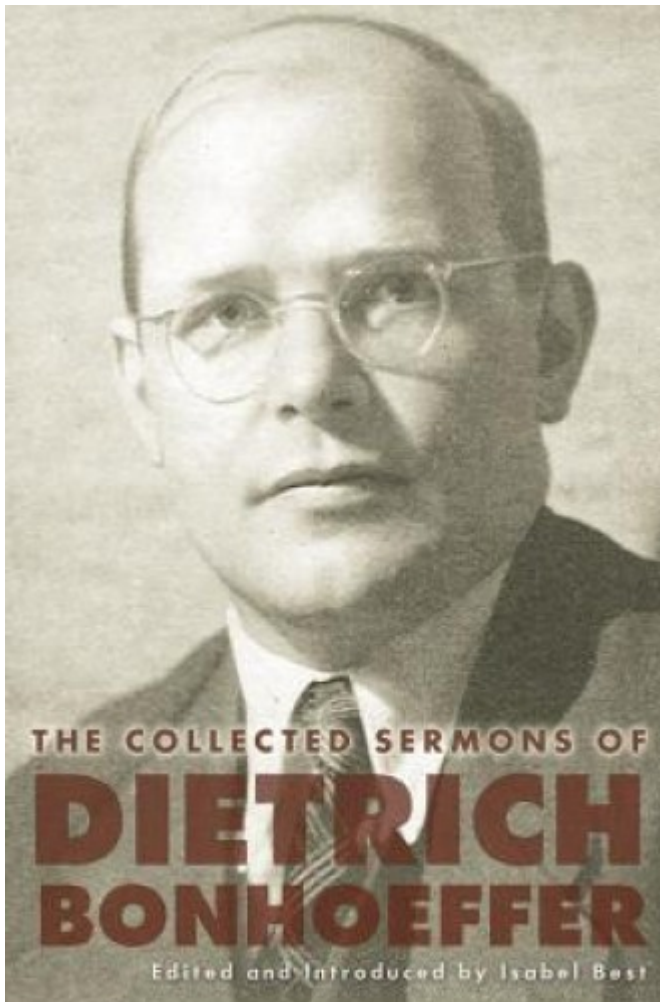


The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, edited by Isabel Best

reviewed by [Barry Harvey](#) in the [December 12, 2012](#) issue

In Review



The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Edited by Isabel Best

Fortress

Readers of Dietrich Bonhoeffer know him in many roles—theologian, pastor, ecumenist, university lecturer, seminary director, conspirator, prisoner, martyr—but they may not readily think of him as a preacher. Yet as his best friend and

biographer, Eberhard Bethge, observed, very little could compete with the significance Bonhoeffer attached to preaching, an emphasis that testifies to his critical love for the church. As he grew older and the times darker, his preaching acquired an urgency that makes these sermons a poignant witness not only to this amazing man's life and thought, but to the gospel itself.

Selected and introduced by Isabel Best, the sermons range in time from Bonhoeffer's tenure as a young pastoral assistant in a German-language church in Barcelona in 1928, to a few months after the start of World War II, in 1939, when he delivered a homily at a celebration of communion with his remaining seminarians. In 1940, the Gestapo banned him from speaking in public.

Some readers may be surprised to discover that Bonhoeffer seldom spoke directly on the events of the day. According to Bethge, he had observed that in New York, sermons had become little more than occasional remarks about current events, and he found the practice distasteful. That said, one can readily discern that he perceived a deep dissonance between Christianity and National Socialism. In the first sermon he preached after Hitler's ascension to power in 1933, for example, Bonhoeffer juxtaposed the Old Testament story of Gideon, who ultimately had to renounce power, honor and pride to save Israel, to the story of Siegfried, the hero of the Nibelung legend whom the Nazis idealized in their propaganda.

Bonhoeffer's critical eye was not reserved solely for those who had cast their lot with manifest evil. He once told participants at a youth conference that it was not enough for Christians to read the Bible for themselves. They must also learn to read it against themselves, to understand that together with all humanity they stand before a God who judges as well as redeems. This perspective permeates this collection.

One example is a sermon that I read for the first time, perhaps providentially, on 9/11. Bonhoeffer preached the message on National Memorial Day in 1932, when the German nation mourned the millions who died in World War I. He stated that people observe the day for various reasons—some highly personal, some patriotic. But the church cannot praise battles and heroic deeds; it must have something special to say. Like the seer of ancient times who perceives something others do not, the church desires to know "how we as Christians—and not only as Germans—should see all of this." As in all other settings, the church must proclaim the word of Christ and his cross. Whenever that word is truly spoken, "the world senses that it is either ruinous madness or ruinous truth, which endangers its very

life.”

A second example is another sermon from 1932, delivered shortly after Chancellor Franz von Papen issued a proclamation in which he reintroduced the custom of invoking the name of God at the opening of parliament. Bonhoeffer’s message, based on the passage from Colossians that proclaims that our lives have been raised and hidden in Christ, anticipated many of the provocative themes that he would later raise in his prison letters.

Bonhoeffer observed that the scriptural words seem incomprehensible; we have little sense of how they relate to our personal or public lives. He noted that it made little difference whether one was talking about Christianity in the United States, where churches were filled to overflowing, or in Germany, where they were nearly empty. In its feeble attempts to address the crisis, the church took refuge in religious busyness and talk, all the while refusing to be told that God is dangerous, that God will not be mocked, and that we must lose our life if we really want to have anything to do with the living God.

We see once again on these pages why so many have been attracted to Bonhoeffer. Evangelicals embrace him as someone who really believed in Christ’s death and resurrection. Progressives are drawn to his manifest concern for those who, as he would put it in an essay written a few months before his arrest, are compelled to view history from below. Academics appreciate the depth and soundness of the theology that informed his homiletical style. In short, we read on these pages the thoughts and passions of one who has always eluded the convenient labels of conservative and liberal, left and right, that dominate the ecclesial landscape of the English-speaking world.

Though we learn from these sermons little that is new about Bonhoeffer as a theologian and minister, they give us a fresh appreciation of a man whose life and work were inseparable from the calling of Christ and the mission of the church.