

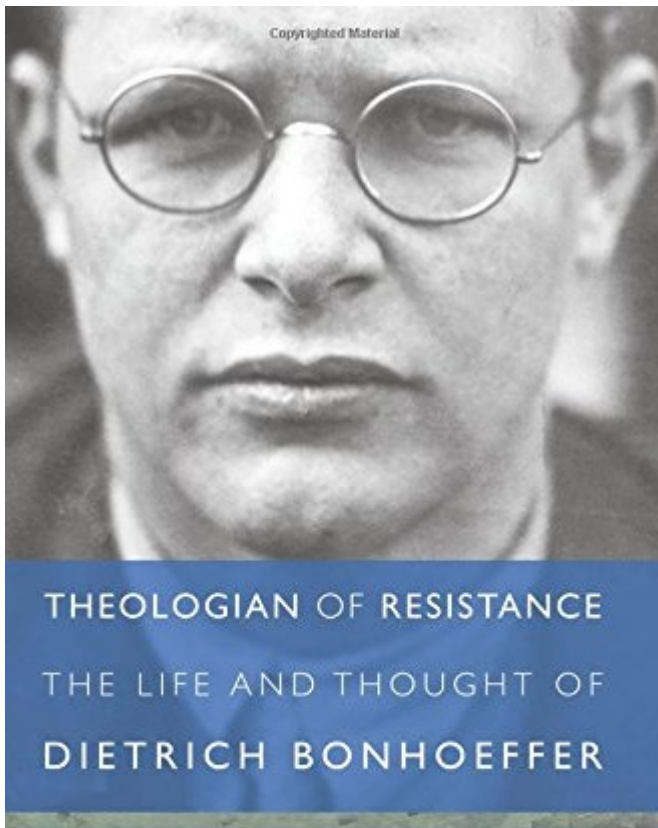
Bonhoeffer, briefly

Spoiler alert: He dies.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

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In Review



Theologian of Resistance

The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

by Christiane Tietz, translated by Victoria J. Barnett
Fortress Press

I read most of this book on an airplane full of religion scholars departing from a [conference](#). My seatmate and I discovered that we both lived in the same suburb of Chicago and hatched a tentative plan to share a cab home. She told me with excitement about her forthcoming [book](#). Then she closed her eyes, apologizing that she was exhausted after having given a talk earlier that day. The introvert in me rejoiced: a five-minute conversation with a friendly stranger followed by two hours of reading is my ideal airplane situation.

I pulled out the new biography of Bonhoeffer that had been thrust kindly into my hands by a publicist at the Fortress Press booth in the exhibit hall, and I began reading. I can't say that the book was immediately riveting. After all, I knew how it would end. I found myself frustrated by one of the early photos, with a caption that didn't make it easy to identify which person was the young Bonhoeffer. I noticed a few places where it was obvious that I was reading a translation from German. I found myself repeatedly re-reading the paragraph about Bonhoeffer's dissertation topic because it was hard to understand. (Then again, that guy in the seat in front of me was talking awfully loudly to his seatmate about his experiences as a seminary professor, so I suspect I was unduly distracted.)

But as the arc of Bonhoeffer's life and thought began to take over the narrative, I realized how important this book is. Compared to many Bonhoeffer biographies, this one is slim, unemotional, and concise. There are no surprises: the author tells readers in the preface's second paragraph about Bonhoeffer's death. There's sparse attention to Bonhoeffer's personal relationships and his sexuality (although the prison letters to and from Maria von Wedemeyer are quoted with tenderness). Nor is much detail given of the horrors of the Nazi regime or the plan to assassinate Hitler. But the book's significance is precisely in these qualities, which leave room for readers to strip away their own romanticized speculations about Bonhoeffer and view him simply as a Christian theologian and seminary professor—a man who wasn't perfect but strove to live ethically during a time of unprecedented political and social crisis.

This is where the book will intersect with the life of faith for many Christians today, even as its author warns convincingly against appropriating Bonhoeffer for our own political or social purposes. The book's strength—its explications of his theology and

ethics—allows Bonhoeffer to speak into our context in a fluid, nimble way. Summarizing the fragmentary text of *Ethics*, Tietz writes:

Bonhoeffer believed that the traditional ethical concepts of reason, conscience, duty, or virtue were no longer helpful. The person who is grounded in reason might not grasp the abyss of evil. The one for whom conscience is the decisive motive would be overwhelmed by the complexity of decisions he or she faced, none of which would give him or her a good conscience. To take duty as the primary motive is only dangerous. . . . And the person for whom personal virtue is the highest value will find that in a situation of widespread injustice, in which action on behalf of one virtue conflicts with another, she or he can only retreat into the private sphere.

What this means for our day is open to debate. That it should mean something to us is not.

As I approached the end of the book (which morphed from airplane reading to nightstand reading), I found myself hesitant to reach the inevitable conclusion of Bonhoeffer's life. The fact that I knew he was going to die in a rapidly decreasing number of pages weighed on me with unexpected gravity. I found myself riveted by each word. I deliberately read slowly so I could avoid turning the pages too quickly. Not because Bonhoeffer was a tragic hero who died too young—all the romance of that notion had been stripped away in the book's earliest chapters—but because I still had much to learn about how a smart person might think about Christian theology and ethics during times of political upheaval and blatant moral failings in the public realm.

The gift of this book is its unassuming nature, which prompts readers to strip away their own assumptions. It's not a dramatic page-turner, but it has ethical and theological *gravitas*. The fact that the end is revealed from the beginning diminishes any pretense of suspense enough to free readers from the fallacy of reading Bonhoeffer's life and thought only through his death. He's going to die. We all know that. Now let's get on with the real work of understanding how he lived and thought as a Christian in a very fallen world.