There’s no such thing as a Bonhoeffer moment

Dietrich Bonhoeffer didn’t choose to be a martyr. He simply tried, as many others did, to be decent in the face of evil.

by Victoria Barnett in the January 2025 issue
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Century illustration (Source image: bpk / Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin)

In almost every lecture I have ever given on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, someone has asked this question: Are we in a Bonhoeffer moment?

It is usually a question about some current issue of moral urgency, a “here I stand” moment that demands that we speak out as Christians: an election. Racial justice.

Israel/Palestine. Abortion. The future of Christian faith. The challenges of American culture. LGBTQ issues. Denominational tensions. Over the years the question has been posed by progressive Christians, evangelicals, “nones,” and everyone in between.

I have my own strong views about all these things, but there’s a bigger problem here. The very notion of a “Bonhoeffer moment” is based upon the widespread, overly simplistic image of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Christian activist and hero, moved by conscience and faithfulness to his Lord, who singlehandedly led his church in its fight against Hitler and was ultimately executed for rescuing Jews and trying to overthrow the Nazi regime. Most American versions of Bonhoeffer (particularly in popular books and films) draw on that heroic image, tweaked over the years to conform to certain sensibilities: Bonhoeffer as feminist, as countercultural evangelical, as progressive Christian, as Christian nationalist.

The attempt to conform the Bonhoeffer story to our preconceptions is especially problematic in light of the Holocaust and the role of Christian theologians and churches during that era. The history of Nazism, Christianity, and the Holocaust is a complex story in which there were few heroes. Ignoring that difficult truth obscures who Bonhoeffer really was and what he might have to tell us today.

The heroic narrative about Dietrich Bonhoeffer emerged soon after the Allied defeat of Nazi Germany. It was tied to the early hagiography about the German Protestant and Catholic churches, which were the only major German institutions to retain some independence under National Socialism. They managed this, however, by making numerous compromises with the regime and avoiding direct confrontations with the Nazi state, especially when it came to the persecution of the Jews.

In contrast, Bonhoeffer’s story seemed to offer even the churches’ critics a clear heroic narrative, one in which the threads of his background, his theological writings, his actions, and his execution by the Nazis were woven neatly together into a seamless garment. His early writings were read through the lens of his later resistance. He was given a leading role in events in which he was in fact a minor figure, a decisive and activist role at moments in which his actual behavior was ambivalent and complex. After 1945, Christians wanted a martyr and hero, and Bonhoeffer fit the bill.

In the decades since, books and films on Bonhoeffer have made him the central figure on the historical stage, larger than life and certainly playing a larger role than he did in history. More problematically, this version of Bonhoeffer ignores the extensive new scholarship that offers a more critical and complex understanding of Nazi Germany and the complicity of ordinary Germans, elites, and the church and resistance circles in which Bonhoeffer moved.

The Bonhoeffer story remains oddly untouched by this newer historiography, raising questions about the historical reliability of our portrait of Bonhoeffer—and perhaps even our interpretations of his theology. To what extent can a historical figure, even a theologian, be understood through interpretation? Can we really understand what Bonhoeffer was all about if we don't get the history right? The question was raised provocatively by British historian Andrew Chandler in his 2003 *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* essay "The Quest for the Historical Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in which he argued that most theological interpreters of Bonhoeffer had become "stuck in [the] historiographical grooves" of the Eberhard Bethge biography, which was published in the 1960s—the era when the hagiography about what's referred to as the German church struggle still prevailed.

Holocaust scholars in particular have always viewed Bonhoeffer more critically. Observing that popular portrayals of Bonhoeffer as a rescuer of Jews rely more upon assumption than evidence, historian Kenneth Barnes wrote this in 1999: "In the shadow of the Holocaust, Bonhoeffer's words and actions appear small, tentative, restrained, and ambivalent. . . . The Bonhoeffer phenomenon . . . illustrates that people would rather huddle around one point of light, no matter how feeble and flickering the flame, than sit alone in darkness."

So, who was he? My own career began with a study of the German Confessing Church (published in 1992 as *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest under Hitler*), based on more than 60 oral history interviews I conducted with Germans who had been part of that movement. Although I interviewed Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer Bethge, as well as his brother's widow Emmi Bonhoeffer, I had no plans to write about Bonhoeffer in particular. Rather, I wanted to understand the broader Confessing movement and the challenges it confronted between 1933 and 1945. Twenty-five of my interviews were with women who had been active in the Confessing Church; their battle for ordination coincided with the church struggle.

It was a way of encountering Bonhoeffer not as the central protagonist on the stage but as one intriguing and complex figure among many. Several people I interviewed had never heard of him until after 1945. Others, especially the women, were quite critical of him. He was by upbringing a very conservative and traditional Prussian man, and he did not support the Confessing Church women in their struggle for ordination (even though the woman with whom he was involved at the time, Elisabeth Zinn, was among them).

Nor did he seem to be a political activist—or at least that was my impression while I was working on the book. His spring 1933 essay “The Church and the Jewish Question” was written in response to the internal church pressures from the German Christians to adopt a church “Aryan paragraph” in conformity with new state laws. (The Aryan paragraph is often characterized as having been imposed by the Nazi state on the churches, but that’s inaccurate.) While Bonhoeffer certainly played a prominent role in those debates, he left Germany in frustration that September, returning in the spring of 1935 to oversee Finkenwalde, a Confessing Church seminary in a remote region of Pomerania. There, his focus was on creating a space for the kind of Christian ministry that could withstand the pressures of National Socialism—an alternative within a church that had largely conformed to the regime.

The significance of Bonhoeffer’s role in resistance circles is equally complex. He desperately did not want to serve in Hitler’s army. Through his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, he got a desk job in military counterintelligence (along with seven other Confessing pastors also evading military service). He became involved with the conspiracy to overthrow the Nazi regime only because of his family connections. The portrayals that give him a leading role in the resistance—plotting with the other conspirators, planning to assassinate Hitler himself—are dramatic exaggerations.

More problematically, the resistance group in which he was involved consisted of an inner circle of conspirators that had access to Hitler precisely because of their high-ranking positions in the Nazi system. Most had served as loyal civil servants and career military officers who gradually despaired of the evil surrounding them and turned against the regime. Reflecting on the inevitable compromises and complicity that had marked their lives during that first decade of Nazism, Bonhoeffer wrote in his Christmas 1942 letter, “After Ten Years”: “Have there ever been people in history who in their time, like us, had so little ground under their feet, people to whom every possible alternative open to them at the time appeared equally unbearable, senseless, and contrary to life?”

This letter is a stunning indictment of what Germany had become under Nazi rule. But it also illustrates Bonhoeffer's profound sense of his obligations to a broader humanity—and to history itself. That, I believe, is his real significance for us today: here was a man who over a period of 12 terrible years reflected with remarkable honesty and poignancy on the nature of the Christian faith and witness in evil times. Although he could not have known the impact his writings and his life would have on future generations, he already had an intuitive sense of what he owed them. "The ultimately responsible question," he wrote in that 1942 letter, " is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but [how] a coming generation is to go on living."

When I was writing my book on the Confessing Church, I asked Germans who had known Bonhoeffer what he was like. They all gave me some variation of the same answer: he was a decent man, a good person, a kind person. He was one of many (though not enough) German men and women who valiantly tried to be decent people during a 12-year period of incredible evil and brutality that pitted them against their compatriots, their church, and their country.

And as one of the general editors of the 17-volume Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works series, that's the person I encountered at the most basic level: day by day, year by year. Reading him, we know where this is heading and what terrors lie ahead. But this young man—he turned 27 shortly after Hitler came to power—didn't know these things. He was sometimes ashamed of his failures and at other times desperate to retreat from the grim realities of life in Nazi Germany. He vacillated and often described his own life as "fragmentary." Yet his writing also includes moments of joy, of love and friendship, of hope, of his embrace of the everyday wonders of human life, of his constant struggle with what it means to have faith when we don't understand where God is taking us.

What does it mean to be a good person in such a time as this? "The Christian writer does not decide what would be good for the world and proceed to deliver it," wrote Flannery O'Connor. "Like a very doubtful Jacob, he confronts what stands in the path and wonders if he will come out of the struggle at all."

That description fits many passages throughout Bonhoeffer's writings, from 1933 until our final glimpses of him in 1945. He confronted the realities of the evil around him and the failures of so many Germans (and their church) to withstand this evil. In his 1942 letter he asked poignantly, "Are we still of any use?" And yet he continued: "we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from

the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short, from the perspective of the suffering.” It was a view that he embraced as “more useful . . . more fruitful” for understanding the Christian’s place in this world.

That’s the kind of writing Bonhoeffer leaves us with. And we need it, whatever is to come. The century stretching before us will be one of tremendous turmoil, driven by intensifying climate change, battles over resources, economic disparity, and the refugees fleeing these things. In the US we still struggle with our nation’s own original sins: the deeply intertwined history of racism and violence. The sheer ugliness of our times has permeated not just our social fabric but our individual relationships, and it is increasingly difficult to trust what we are told.

In such moments we shouldn’t read Bonhoeffer for superficial sound bites or empty reassurances of larger-than-life heroism. We should read him because his is the story of one decent human being who understood better than any of us that in evil times, we must remain faithful—if only for the sake of future generations, because we are creating for them the foundation from which they can do good in this fallen world.