

Bonhoeffer for us: Asking the key questions

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 7, 2006](#) issue

For the first time in the United States,” said the book blurb, “a number of Christian thinkers gathered to analyze Bonhoeffer’s theological achievement for publication.” So eight of us claimed—I was editor—in *The Place of Bonhoeffer*, which in 1962 sold for \$4.50 (\$2.25 paperback), and now, Google will tell you, can be found for \$55.00. I dug it out of its virtual time-capsule to prepare for a panel responding to Martin Doblmeier’s impressive film *Bonhoeffer*, which can be seen on PBS on February 6, two days after the late German theologian’s 100th birthday.

All but one of the seven then-young contributors to *Place*—Peter L. Berger, George W. Forell, Reginald W. Fuller, Walter Harrelson, Franklin Littell, Jaroslav Pelikan and Franklin Sherman—are still with us and are influenced by Bonhoeffer in various ways.

Bonhoeffer spoke to his time and could not anticipate ours. No one did, or could. *The Place of Bonhoeffer* appeared 17 years after the Nazis hanged him. The civil rights movement was in its prime. As the Doblmeier film shows, Bonhoeffer was way ahead of almost all European and most American theologians on the interracial front. He had been accepted in and had learned from Harlem churches during his year in New York in 1931. The Vatican Council was just beginning in 1962, so the ecumenical front, on which he was a pioneer, did not yet include Catholics. And the film *Bonhoeffer* demonstrates that however patriarchal he and his contemporaries now appear, he was theologically and personally close to powerful women. Most of the vigorous church women’s movements took off just after our attempt to “place” Bonhoeffer.

The film takes seriously the fact that while Bonhoeffer sought the liberation of Jews, his theological thinking was still “1930ish,” since he often spoke of Jews’ value as potential converts to Christianity. Yet he died in the cause that included the future of Jews, and I’ve always thought he deserves recognition as a “Righteous Gentile” in Israel.

The question we asked in 1962 Bonhoeffer had asked in 1944: “*The thing that keeps coming back to me is, ‘what is Christianity, and indeed what is Christ, for us today?’*” Momentarily he departed from his high Christology to envision an almost humanistic Jesus. It was at the time when he was chronicling the “world come of age,” obvious in Europe. With the recovery of high Christologies and a Christian boom in the poor and southern worlds he found a new place. John deGruchy, who figures large in *Bonhoeffer*, has shown at book length the part that Bonhoeffer’s thought played in ending apartheid in South Africa.

It’s always a bit foolish to ask how someone in the past would respond to trends today. WWBD: what would Bonhoeffer do—and think? He foresaw how complacencies in mainstream Protestantism forebode decline, and he offered clues for addressing the situation that are still worth picking up on. He praised then and would praise now the vitality of African-American inner-city churches. While his writings appear in anthologies of spirituality, it’s hard to conceive of him making sense of the Jesus-spirituality that so appeals to individualist seekers today. In one famous essay he wrote that “Christ exists as community.” Many things in the newer evangelical expression he might admire, but not its slavish nationalism or its market orientation.

Watching *Bonhoeffer* in the light of what we might think of him almost a half century ago leads me to say that for Christians his urgent question remains, to be answered in multiple ways, but still to be answered: “What is Christ for us today?”