

Bonhoeffer's Life Together WAF Series

Session 1: Bonhoeffer's Life

September 2, 2015

I. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (February 4, 1906 – April 9, 1945)

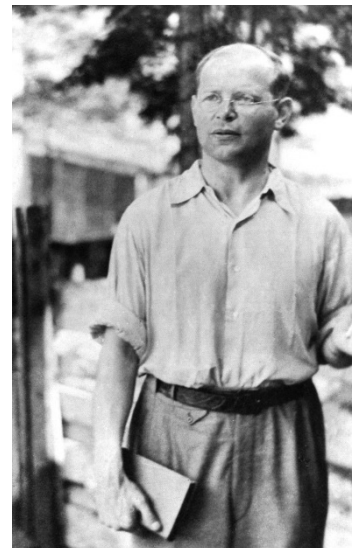
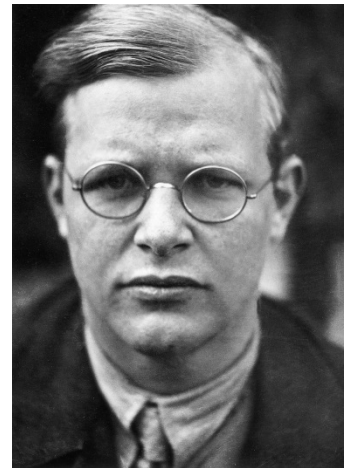


A. Family

1. Father – Karl (1868-1948) – prominent psychiatrist and neurologist (pictured right)
2. Mother – Paula (1874-1951) – granddaughter of theologian Karl von Hase
3. The Bonhoeffer children (all eight educated at home)
 - a. Karl Friedrich (1899-1957) – chemist, professor, director of Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physical and Electrochemistry, helped discover spin isomers of hydrogen
 - b. Walter (1899–1918) – killed in action in WWI
 - c. Klaus (1901-1945) – lawyer, executed by Nazis for his involvement in resistance (particularly the July 20, 1944 attempt to assassinate Hitler, in which Dietrich may or may not have been involved)
 - d. Ursula (1902-1983) – married a lawyer who was executed by Nazis
 - e. Christel (1903-1965) – married a lawyer who was executed by Nazis, herself imprisoned
 - f. Dietrich (1906-1945)
 - g. Sabine (1906-1999)– Dietrich's twin sister, married a legal scholar
 - h. Susanne (1909-1991) – married a theologian

B. Academic and Professional Work

1. 1923 – began undergraduate studies at the University of Tübingen
2. 1927 – Doctor of Theology (doctoral thesis “Communion of Saints”) and then an additional terminal degree at University of Berlin in 1929 (thesis “Act and Being” on the centrality of Christ in Christian ethics)
3. 1930 – Postgraduate study at Union Theological Seminary in New York
 - a. Studied under Reinhold Niebuhr
 - b. Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem
 - i. Influenced by preaching of Adam Clayton Powell
 - ii. Harlem Renaissance
 - iii. Developed a love for African-American spirituals
4. 1931 – Lecturer in systematic theology at University of Berlin
5. 1933 – Radio address criticizing Hitler two days after his installation as Chancellor was cut off the air; ordained at St. Matthias Church in Berlin; Bonhoeffer with Martin Niemöller and others form *Pfarrernotbund* (“Emergency Covenant of Pastors”) – a precursor to Confessing Church
6. 1934 – Went to pastor a German church in England; Confessing Church founded in Germany; Barmen Declaration written by Karl Barth
7. 1935 – Returned to Germany to direct the Confessing Church's illegal underground seminary in Finkenwalde.
8. 1936 – Authorization to teach at University of Berlin withdrawn
9. 1937 – Finkenwalde seminary closed by Gestapo, pastors and students arrested; Bonhoeffer published *The Cost of Discipleship*
10. 1938 – Wrote *Life Together*; began work with German Resistance
11. 1940 – Forbidden to speak publicly and must check in with police regularly; began work on *Ethics* (reconstructed and published posthumously)
12. 1941 – Forbidden to publish; Joined the *Abwehr*
13. 1943 – Engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer; Arrested three months later
14. 1945, April 9 – Executed at Flossenbürg (May 7, Germany surrendered)



C. A few interesting facts about Dietrich Bonhoeffer

(from "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Did you Know?" by Mark and Barbara Galli, published in *Christian History Institute*, issue 32, 1991)

<https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/dietrich-bonhoeffer-did-you-know/>

1. Dietrich was so skilled at playing the piano that for a time he and his parents thought he might become a professional musician.
2. At 14, Bonhoeffer announced matter-of-factly that he was going to become a theologian.
3. Bonhoeffer earned his doctorate in theology when he was only 21.
4. Though later he was an outspoken advocate of pacifism, Bonhoeffer was an enthusiastic fan of bullfighting. He developed the passion while serving as assistant pastor of a German-speaking congregation in Barcelona, Spain.
5. By the end of 1930, the year before Bonhoeffer was ordained, church seminaries were complaining that over half the candidates for ordination were followers of Hitler.
6. In 1933, when the government instigated a one-day boycott of Jewish-owned businesses, Bonhoeffer's grandmother broke through a cordon of SS officers to buy strawberries from a Jewish store.
7. In his short lifetime, Bonhoeffer traveled widely. He visited Cuba, Mexico, Italy, Libya, Denmark, and Sweden, among other countries, and he lived for a time in Spain, in England, and in the United States.
8. Bonhoeffer taught a confirmation class in what he described as "about the worst area of Berlin," yet he moved into that neighborhood so he could spend more time with the boys.
9. Bonhoeffer was fascinated by Gandhi's methods of nonviolent resistance. He asked for—and received—permission to visit Gandhi and live at his ashram. The two never met, however, because the crisis in Germany demanded Bonhoeffer's attention.
10. Bonhoeffer served as a member of the *Abwehr*, the military-intelligence organization under Hitler. (He was actually a double agent. While ostensibly working for the *Abwehr*, Bonhoeffer helped to smuggle Jews into Switzerland—and do other underground tasks.)
11. While a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Bonhoeffer regularly attended the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. He taught one youth Sunday school class and one women's Bible study; he also helped weekly in Sunday school.
12. Bonhoeffer learned to drive a car while in the United States—yet he failed his American driver's-license examination three times.
13. Just before World War II, Bonhoeffer was invited to lecture in the United States. This allowed him to escape increasing persecution and the impending draft. But Bonhoeffer decided he must share the fate of those suffering in Germany. In less than a month, he returned home.
14. During Allied bombing raids over Berlin, Bonhoeffer's calm deeply impressed his fellow prisoners at Tegel Prison. Prisoners and even guards used all kinds of tricks to get near him and find the comfort of exchanging a few words with him.
15. The majority of Bonhoeffer's classic *Letters and Papers from Prison* was smuggled out by guards who chose to assist Bonhoeffer.
16. Bonhoeffer could have escaped from prison but chose not to for the sake of others. He had prepared to escape with one of the guards when he learned that his brother Klaus had been arrested. Fearing reprisals against his brother and his family if he escaped, Bonhoeffer stayed in prison.
17. The German underground failed on numerous occasions to assassinate Hitler. Had they succeeded, Bonhoeffer probably would not have been executed.
18. Adolf Hitler was directly involved in the decision to execute Bonhoeffer and his co-conspirators.
19. Some of Bonhoeffer's best-known works, such as *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison* were not published until after his death.
20. Bonhoeffer's parents did not learn of his death until three and a half months afterward, when they tuned into a radio broadcast of a London memorial service for their son.