

# **Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy Study Guide**

**Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy by Eric  
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# Plot Summary

This biography of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred by Adolf Hitler at the end of World War II, draws substantially on Bonhoeffer's own writings as it chronicles the development of his Christian faith and how a determination to live according to that faith led him into a conspiracy to kill Hitler. At the same time as it focuses on Bonhoeffer's determination to understand and live God's will, the narrative also explores themes related to the nature and value of loyalty, and the value of both friendship and family.

In a prologue, the author describes a church service in London, held just as World War II was ending, that memorialized Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed for what was called treason but what his family, friends and allies came to believe an act of faith. The prologue concludes with a brief description of how Bonhoeffer's parents, Karl (an eminent psychologist) and Paula (a well-born mother of eight) learned of their youngest son's death for the first time while listening to that broadcast.

The narrative then shifts to the past and the author's detailed examination of the emotionally reserved, intellectually challenging, theologically sparse childhood that was the foundation for the adult Bonhoeffer's quest for full, lived understanding of God's will, and for the courage and grace to put that will into action. After completing his elementary and senior education in Berlin, and after completing a theological degree in university, Bonhoeffer traveled to Spain, to Italy, to England and to America. In each of these countries, he deepened his perspective on, and insight into, what was becoming a very conservative, traditional, Bible-based theology. Meanwhile, the author is also outlining the causes, circumstances and manifestations of the rise to power of German Chancellor (then President, then Fuhrer) Adolf Hitler, and the associated rise of anti-Jewish, anti-minority sentiment and activity in 1930's Germany.

When Bonhoeffer finally settled in Berlin in the mid-to-late 1930's, Hitler's rise to power was almost complete, and almost entirely unopposed by the majority of the German population. Bonhoeffer's family, friends and colleagues, however, many of whom were highly placed within the ranks of Hitler's Third Reich, kept each other informed of the increasingly frequent, and increasingly inhumane, crimes against humanity being perpetrated by Hitler and his minions, all in the name of re-establishing German pride of place in Europe. Bonhoeffer's efforts focused on strengthening the so-called Confessing Church, a determinedly pro-Christian community of believers established in opposition to the Reich Church, which was only nominally Christian in its unwavering, propagandistic devotion to the word and ways of Hitler.

Eventually, as Hitler's greed for power led him and Germany into invasions of Czechoslovakia, Poland, France and what was then Russia, Bonhoeffer, like-minded members of his family, and allies in the cause of the Confessing Church joined into a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer, the author reveals, believed that in taking action to rid the world of a being (Hitler) and a government (the Third Reich) that was so anti-Christian, he was in fact acting on God's will for him. Several attempts to kill Hitler

fell short of their ultimate goal, with one of them (the Valkyrie Plot) coming closest but ultimately failing. As the result of Valkyrie's failure, Bonhoeffer and many of his fellow conspirators were arrested, imprisoned, and ultimately executed.

The narrative draws to a close with the author's return to the scene he described in the Prologue - the British memorial service. He incorporates several texts from the service, including the sermon given by one of Bonhoeffer's closest friends and colleagues. The book concludes with one final reference to Bonhoeffer's parents, whose lives had inspired and encouraged their son in so many ways and who, at the end of the service, simply turned off the radio.



# Part 1, Prologue and Chapter 1

## Part 1, Prologue and Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

This biography of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred by Adolf Hitler at the end of World War II, draws substantially on Bonhoeffer's own writings as it chronicles the development of his conservative Christian faith and how a determination to live according to that faith led him into a conspiracy to kill Hitler. At the same time as it focuses on Bonhoeffer's determination to understand and live God's will, the narrative also explores themes related to the nature and value of loyalty, and the value of friendship.

### "Prologue"

The author describes how, in July of 1945, shortly after the official end to World War II, a memorial service was conducted at a church in London, England (see "Objects/Places - Holy Trinity Church") for a German citizen, executed in the last days of the war. The author comments on how strange it seemed to many Britons, still suffering as the result of Germany's attacks, that their country and their church were honoring a German citizen in this way. He also describes how the man's parents received confirmation of their son's death by listening to the service on their radio (see "Quotes," p. 5). Finally, he comments that "the man who died was engaged to be married. He was a pastor and a theologian. And he was executed for his role in the plot to assassinate Hitler." That man is the subject of this biography, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

### "Family and Childhood"

Bonhoeffer and his twin sister Sabine were the sixth and seventh children born to Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer. The author describes the impressive family lines from which Karl and Paula both came (see "Quotes," p. 8), and the expansive but not insurmountable differences between the two parents; Karl was an intellectual and essentially an agnostic, while Paula had a profound, conservative, traditional Christian faith. He adds, however, that the two respected and supported each other completely, focused on raising intelligent, articulate, moral, responsible children, all of whom, along with their entire extended family, ultimately rejected Nazism. The author then provides background for the rise of Nazism, discussing how centuries of German imperialism culminated in the country's militaristic aggression in World War I, actions that resulted in what was perceived as a profoundly humiliating defeat. That defeat, summed up in the debilitating restrictions imposed upon Germany by the Treaty of Versailles (see "Objects/Places") was, according to both the author and to history, a key factor in the rise of the Nazi party. The author also reveals how the war took a personal toll on the Bonhoeffer family when second eldest brother Walter died, two weeks after joining up.

Other descriptions of Bonhoeffer's childhood include references to his family's high social and secure economic status, and also to his intelligence, his playfulness, his



emotional intensity, and his sense of compassion for those younger and more vulnerable than him. The author also includes descriptions of how, at the age of thirteen, Bonhoeffer decided he was going to devote his life to the study and practice of theology, much to the well mannered surprise of his parents and the more outspoken, more teasing surprise of his older siblings, many of whom were already making their way in substantial, non-theological careers.

Bonhoeffer was only one of thousands of German and European citizens slaughtered by Hitler in revenge for their determined efforts at limiting, and ultimately ending, his reign of terror. What makes Bonhoeffer so unique are the personality traits, values, and beliefs that so profoundly defined him as everything Hitler was not - what might be described today as a Christian humanist. The author's point, reiterated throughout the narrative and reinforced by the frequently excerpted contents of Bonhoeffer's own writings, is that Bonhoeffer believed in the ultimate worth of all humanity. That belief, the author further contends, was defined and motivated by absolute faith in God and His will, as manifest in both the Bible and in the actions of those who listened to not just its words, but its true meaning. In Chapter 1, then, the author defines how Bonhoeffer's early and precocious study of the Bible blended with the atmosphere of rigorous but compassionate humanism preached and practiced by his parents became the foundations for the beliefs that defined him and his actions in later life. Those beliefs, as the author makes clear, eventually led him to becoming involved in plots to assassinate one of the most anti-humanist agencies (the Nazis), led by one of the most monstrous human beings (Hitler) who ever lived.



## Part 2, Chapters 2, 3 and 4

### Part 2, Chapters 2, 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

"Tubingen, 1923"

The year 1923 saw several changes in the over-achieving Bonhoeffer family; the eldest daughter got married, the eldest son obtained a significant position in a scientific institute, and Bonhoeffer himself left for college. At around the same time, the author points out, Hitler made his first attempt at gaining control of the German government, was imprisoned for treason, and spent his time in jail writing the infamous manifesto of his beliefs, "Mein Kampf." At the conclusion of this chapter, the author reveals how a minor head injury was the catalyst for Bonhoeffer to plan for the next phase of his academic journey, which took him to Rome.

"Roman Holiday, 1924"

Accompanied by his brother Klaus, Bonhoeffer traveled to Rome where for the first time he was exposed to, among other things, the Roman Catholic Church. This, the author comments, led Bonhoeffer to realize that there was more to religion, a more fundamental truth and purpose, than he had come to believe in Germany (see "Quotes," p. 53). This sense of a universality of purpose and meaning to church worship and function regardless of denomination led him to some eventually unpopular positions, including the belief that the Catholic and Protestant churches should one day be united. At the end of his time in Rome, Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin. The chapter concludes with an extensive quote from one of Bonhoeffer's later academic papers, its content, the author says, profoundly influenced by Bonhoeffer's time in Rome.

"Student in Berlin, 1924-27"

The author notes Bonhoeffer's completion of his doctoral studies by the time he was twenty-one, and the engagement of Bonhoeffer's sister Sabine to a Jewish man which, the author further comments, enabled the Bonhoeffers to "experience the difficulties of the years ahead in an especially personal way." The author then describes the process of Bonhoeffer's theological studies, how he found the teachings of Karl Barth (see "Important People") fit thoroughly with his own (see "Quotes," p. 60), and how he found himself so intensely committed to his work that he was able to complete his doctoral dissertation in only eighteen months. The author also discusses an element of Bonhoeffer's life which, he says, has been rarely discussed in previous biographies - his relationship with Elizabeth Zinn (see "Important People"), another theologian with whom Bonhoeffer, as he later admitted in correspondence with his fiancé, was in love. The author concludes this chapter with commentary on how, at the end of his years as a student, Bonhoeffer was invited to become the assistant pastor of a German congregation in Spain.



In this section, it begins to become clear that one of the things that seems to have made Bonhoeffer unique among Christians with similar conservative theologies (i.e. those based almost entirely upon study of the Bible) is his open-mindedness, or what might otherwise be described as intellectual or spiritual curiosity. His contemplation of the nature and purpose of the church, for example, can be seen as originating in a curiosity about what lay beneath the rituals and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, from which the Lutheran Church (of which he was a part) broke with such apparently irreconcilable force during the Reformation. His open-mindedness towards the Catholics, not to mention his curiosity about what motivated and defined their religion, can be seen as presaging (in terms of his life and work) and foreshadowing (in terms of this narrative) his definition of the Jews not only as human beings, but as fellow searchers for the meaning and the will of God.

Meanwhile, a very intriguing element of the book's narrative is introduced here - the way the author interweaves his narrative of Bonhoeffer's life with that of Hitler's rise to power. Documentation of the latter is, to some degree, necessary if Bonhoeffer's eventual attitudes and actions towards the Nazis are to be understood. On a literary level, however, the point to note here is how the lives of two "characters," essentially a protagonist and antagonist, are portrayed as intertwining practically from the beginning of their lives. In other words, they are set, by the narrative, on the road to inevitable confrontation almost from its very first page.





# Chapters 5 and 6

## Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

"Barcelona, 1928"

After a brief stop in Paris (where he saw, among other things, prostitutes at prayer, an incident which affected his beliefs about humanity's experience with God), Bonhoeffer arrived in Barcelona. There he found himself faced with a supervisor less intellectual, less eager, and less determined than Bonhoeffer to reach as many people as possible in as stimulating a way as possible. Also, the community of German expatriates to whom Bonhoeffer was ministering were "staid and conservative" and, for the most part, out of touch with what was going on politically and spiritually back in Germany. The author describes how despite those obstacles, Bonhoeffer proceeded with his goal of communicating with as many people as he could what he believed to be important truths about God and religion. These truths, the author further comments, were built upon the conservative theology he studied with Barth - essentially the idea that there is a difference between Christianity and following Christ (see "Quotes," p. 84). Bonhoeffer was ultimately invited to remain in Barcelona for another year, but chose to return home to Berlin.

"Berlin, 1929"

Upon his return to Berlin, the author writes, Bonhoeffer was, at twenty-three years old, too young to be formally ordained a minister, and so decided to return to his studies and get a post-doctorate degree that would enable him to become a university lecturer. Meanwhile, events in his personal life brought him into contact with two people who played profoundly influential roles throughout the remainder of his life. The first was his new brother-in-law, Hans von Donanyi (who eventually drew the increasingly willing Bonhoeffer into the conspiracy to kill Hitler). The second was Franz Hildebrandt, a fellow theologian who was, because of his mother's Jewish heritage, himself viewed by the government as Jewish (for further commentary on both, see "Important People"). The author's consideration of Hildebrandt's Jewishness leads him to commentary on the historical relationship between Germany and the Jews, a generally tense relationship which emerged, the author contends, from the teachings of the German religious leader Martin Luther who, at the end of his life, indulged in a series of very public anti-Semitic rants. These rants, the author adds, were the source of much of the Nazis' justification for their anti-Semitic policies and practices. For his part, Bonhoeffer, following completion of his post doctoral thesis, was qualified as a university lecturer, but instead of getting a job right away, decided to visit America. It was, the author comments, a decision that changed his life.

Bonhoeffer's open-mindedness is again on display in the author's passing comment on Bonhoeffer's passing experience with the Paris prostitutes. His determination to evangelize, to bring God's word to the world, is evident in the narrative of his time in



Barcelona, his efforts manifesting (according to the author) in sermons, meetings with young people, and public lectures. His belief that Christianity was a faith not only of contemplation but of action is also evident here, a belief that not only deepened as he got older but also defined his motivation for joining the conspiracy to kill Hitler (see "Topics for Discussion - One of the most defining characteristics..."). Commentary here, particularly as quoted on p. 84, serves as foreshadowing of Bonhoeffer's eventual martyrdom. Meanwhile, with the arrival of Donanyi and Hildebrandt in both his life and the narrative, the author begins development of one of the biography's significant secondary themes - its exploration of, and commentary on, the nature and value of family and friendship, both in general and in the specific circumstances of Bonhoeffer's life and work (see "Themes").



# Chapters 7 and 8

## Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

"Bonhoeffer in America, 1930-31"

Bonhoeffer's initial impression of both America and the school he was to attend (Union Theological Seminary - see "Objects/Places") was not initially favorable; he found, it seems the teachings at the school and of the American churches in general too liberal. It was only when, in the company of a black theological student named Albert Fisher (see "Important People") that Bonhoeffer realized there was a traditional, conservative side to American Christianity that he felt comfortable exploring. It also seemed to him, as a result of his experiences in black churches, that that the greatest faith in God, the most trusting, came from those who maintained that faith in the face of great suffering, as black Americans did in an environment still tainted by the residue of slavery. Meanwhile, back in Germany, Hitler's Nazi party was making political inroads, to the point that, when he returned home in the early summer of 1931, Bonhoeffer found a changing Berlin (see "Quotes," p. 120).

"Berlin, 1931-32"

Shortly after returning from America, Bonhoeffer actually met Karl Barth, and the two of them became good and lasting friends. As their friendship developed (and as Hitler and the Nazis were steadily accumulating more power), friends and family began to notice changes in Bonhoeffer (see "Quotes," p. 121). His sermons became more severe and insistent, he started to go to church more regularly (which he hadn't done when he was growing up), and he developed intense, more social relationships with the students he was teaching. He was also teaching them to have greater focus on the Bible, and to look at its words and revelations in deeper ways. Both these aspects of his teaching, the author comments, found their way into the illegal seminaries he eventually founded at Zingst and Finkenwalde (see Chapter 18).

It could be argued that while blacks in America never experienced the physical genocide experienced by Jews in Germany, they experienced a spiritual, social, political and economic genocide of relatively similar proportions. It's almost un-arguable, however, that there are clear parallels between the experiences of the two ethnic communities (see "Topics for Discussion - Research and discuss the experiences..."). Bonhoeffer's apparent discovery of these parallels can be seen as informing and/or influencing his eventual empathy for the Jews, an aspect of his humanism that, as the author points out, distinguished him from his fellow German Christians, sometimes to the point of confrontation. His contention, for example, that the truest Christian faith could be found in those who experienced the deepest suffering, was particularly controversial. Meanwhile, Bonhoeffer's actions and activities as described in Chapter 8 can be seen as the first steps in his active resistance to the attitudes and practices of Hitler and the

Reich, steps taking him further down the road towards conspiracy and eventual martyrdom.



# Chapters 9 through 13

## Chapters 9 through 13 Summary and Analysis

### "The Fuhrer Principle, 1933"

The election of Adolf Hitler as chancellor of Germany at the beginning of 1933 marked the official beginning of the Third Reich (see "Objects/Places"). The author describes how, by sheer coincidence, Bonhoeffer preached a sermon against one of the founding tenets of the Reich, the Fuhrer Principle (see "Objects/Places") just days later, without having known of the Reich's plans while preparing it. A further step to consolidate Nazi power was taken with the burning of the Reichstag, the seat of German government which the Nazis, according to many historical researchers, deliberately burned so they could accuse German Communists of the crime and gather the outraged support of the German people to the Nazi cause.

### "The Church and the Jewish Question"

The author describes how Nazi authority continued to gain strength with the implementation of The Aryan Paragraph (see "Objects/Places"). In response, knowing how Christianity was being co-opted and re-shaped by Hitler and the Nazis and influenced by his awareness of how racial minorities were treated in America, Bonhoeffer spoke out in a document called "The Church and the Jewish Question," which drew the fire of both the church establishment and the Nazis (see "Quotes," p. 155). The troubles facing the Jews were observed by a visiting British bishop, George Bell, who would become a close ally of Bonhoeffer's (see Chapter 14), and were brought very close to the entire Bonhoeffer family when Sabine's Jewish-born husband began to face persecution.

### "Nazi Theology"

This chapter goes into considerable detail about Hitler's attitudes towards Christianity (see "Quotes," p. 165), contrasting them with those of many of his senior advisors who hated both the thought and the practice of Christianity and wanted to eliminate it from the emerging Nazi Germany. All these beliefs triggered the foundation of Hitler's Reich Church, a nominally Christian organization that supported both Nazism's nationalistic philosophies and the Fuhrer Principle. The Reich Church quickly became the primary target of Bonhoeffer's pro-Jewish, Christianity-motivated activism.

### "The Church Struggle Begins"

That activism, the author reports, took the form of leadership in a group called The Young Reformation, a name with deliberate echoes of the great reformation led by the founder of the German church, Martin Luther. The first elected leader of The Reich Church proved to be too conciliatory and compassionate for both the Nazis who, in spite of aggressive campaigning by Bonhoeffer and the Young Reformation, which continued

in spite of determined efforts at suppression by Hitler's secret police, elected a replacement. This was Ludwig Muller (see "Important People"), uncouth and portrayed by the author as being free of true Christian conscience. In response, Bonhoeffer and his allies prepared a written confession of Christian faith to be presented at a national church conference held in a community of disabled persons called Bethel, a community which Bonhoeffer saw as embodying truly Christian ideals.

#### "The Bethel Confession"

The author describes how Bonhoeffer, while considering an offer to become the pastor of a pair of German churches in London, worked intensely with other leaders of the Young Reformation on the confession of faith. The first draft, however, was so watered down and altered by pastors who wanted to appease the Nazis that it became, to Bonhoeffer, entirely useless. He published his own statement of faith, but in the wake of building enthusiasm for the Nazis and in spite of support from ecumenical movements outside of Germany, he was ignored. The Nazi authorities, in an attempt to get him to back down, threatened to prohibit him from traveling to London. But when Bonhoeffer remained resistant, the Nazis realized he might be more dangerous if forced to stay, and allowed him to leave.

The most noteworthy point about this section is its portrayal of how Bonhoeffer was beginning to put his beliefs into practice - specifically, his firmly held belief in Christianity being a faith of action. The contrast between his choices and those of, for example, the German pastors determined to appease Hitler is quite noteworthy, particularly when viewed with hindsight which suggests, perhaps idealistically, that if more people had had Bonhoeffer's courage and followed his lead, Hitler might have been stopped, the war might have been pre-empted, and millions of lives might have been saved. Other important points in this section include the reference to the burning of the Reichstag, which is the first of a string of increasingly horrifying, increasingly self-serving actions taken by Hitler and the Nazis over the next several years, and the entrance of Bishop Bell, who became one of Bonhoeffer's most influential allies and supporters, into the latter's life. In story-telling terms, both incidents can be seen as foreshadowing later narrative developments. Meanwhile, for further consideration of the Fuhrer Principle, its theory and its practice, see "Topics for Discussion - Consider the intent and manifestations of ..."



# Chapters 14, 15 and 16

## Chapters 14, 15 and 16 Summary and Analysis

### "Bonhoeffer in London"

While deciding whether to go to London, Bonhoeffer considered the possibility of the trip to be a trigger for contemplation about his relationship with God, and about humanity's relationship with God in general (see "Quotes," p. 196 and 210). Eventually he did go, forging a close personal and professional relationship with Bishop George Bell (see "Important People," and also Chapter 9) while there. As the result of Bonhoeffer's extensive communications, via letter and telephone, with family and friends in Germany, he passed on information about the Nazis and their activities to Bell and to other pastors in the expatriate German community, who in turn passed it on to the public.

### "The Church Battle Heats Up"

Bonhoeffer, Bell, and the other German clergy in London were visited by Bishop Theodore Heckel (see "Important People"), the head of the German church outside of Germany. His Nazi-friendly efforts to persuade Bonhoeffer and his allies to stay quiet met with complete refusal at every turn. As the result of Heckel's visit, Bonhoeffer and his allies realized that their determination to preserve a true German Church was at a turning point and together, with the help of Karl Barth, created the Barmen Declaration (see "Objects/Places"), an important step towards the eventual creation of the Confessing Church (see "Objects/Places"). The book quotes the Declaration at considerable length. Shortly after the release of the Declaration to the public, Bonhoeffer prepared to attend an international conference at Fano in Denmark. Meanwhile, Germany was rocked by Hitler's newest atrocity - the Night of the Long Knives, in which any and every member of Hitler's army and secret service who was suspected of undermining his power was summarily killed.

### "The Conference at Fano"

Throughout the Fano conference, Bonhoeffer proclaimed repeatedly that delegates were there to listen for and determine God's will (see "Quotes," p. 237), and that resistance to the Nazis must take the form of decisive action. The conference, in spite of interference by Heckel and other delegates, passed a motion expressing grave concern about what was going on in Germany. Heckel got his revenge, however, inserting a clause into an important motion that essentially gave the Confessing Church and the Reich Church equal status.

The author's commentary on Bonhoeffer's contemplations about the trip to London can be seen as further explorations of a fundamental aspect of Bonhoeffer's character and faith. This is the idea that every opportunity, every choice, every experience must be examined for evidence of God's will which is, of course, a manifestation of the even



deeper belief that everything about existence is a manifestation of God's will. In other words, what the narrative begins to explore at this point is what Bonhoeffer's life, to a considerable degree, was about exploring - the layers of faith, purpose and action that defined a Godly, truly Christian life. Other important elements in this section include the commentary on Bonhoeffer's role in spreading the word to the world about the Nazis (the importance of which, in spite of his being repeatedly ignored by the British cannot be overstated), and the narrative of the creation of the Confessing Church. Here Bonhoeffer can be seen as continuing down the road towards his eventual martyrdom, each action increasing Nazi suspicion, and eventually Nazi condemnation, towards him. Finally, there is the reference to the Night of the Long Knives, only the latest example of Hitler's increasingly brutal attempts at consolidating, and securing power.





# Chapters 17, 18 and 19

## Chapters 17, 18 and 19 Summary and Analysis

### "The Road to Zingst and Finkenwalde"

After Fano, and while continuing his work in London, Bonhoeffer began formulating plans to establish and lead a seminary to train young pastors in the ways of the new Confessing Church. In an effort to stall the Church's momentum, Heckel asked one of Bonhoeffer's fellow students in Berlin to distribute a letter advising against support of the Confessing Church. When Bonhoeffer got hold of the letter, he and his former friend engaged in an intense, very frank correspondence, which resulted in neither of them changing their minds. It did, the author contends, increase Bonhoeffer's resolve to establish his seminary.

### "Zingst and Finkenwalde"

Shortly after leaving London, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, where he established his seminary first in Zingst, a location by the sea. There they were joined by twenty-three ordinands, one of whom was Eberhart Bethge, who became Bonhoeffer's closest confidant (see "Important People"). The small community lived and worked as a kind of spiritual collective, their practices including long periods of contemplation of Bible verses. A few months later, the community moved to a more permanent location, an abandoned estate at Finkenwalde. The author describes how during this time, Bonhoeffer and Bethge got closer and closer, how Bonhoeffer insisted that he be treated as a "servant leader, as opposed to the authoritarian" of the Fuhrer Principle, and how he found great joy and fulfillment in preaching, in discussion, in contemplation, and in prayer. Also at Finkenwalde, the author says, Bonhoeffer came in contact with a wealthy and admiring churchgoer who became a friend, ally, and benefactor - Ruth von Kleist-Retzow, who was also the grandmother of the young woman who eventually became Bonhoeffer's fiancé, Maria von Wedemeyer (for further information on both see "Important People").

### "Scylla and Charybdis, 1935-36"

As the leadership of the Confessing Church became increasingly concerned with Bonhoeffer's philosophy and methods, Bonhoeffer in turn became increasingly concerned with the leadership's apparent acceptance of what the Nazis were doing to German Jews. Meanwhile, a well-publicized trip to Sweden taken with several of the Finkenwalde students was the last straw for Heckel and the Third Reich, who revoked Bonhoeffer's license to teach, effectively forbidding the seminaries. Shortly afterwards, Bonhoeffer published a lecture which referred to the Confessing Church taking "its confident way between the Scylla of orthodoxy and the Charybdis of confessionlessness," and commented that "whoever knowingly separates himself from the Confessing Church in Germany separates himself from salvation." Even while the



leaders of the Confessing Church and the Third Reich were, alike, protesting that claim, Hitler ignored it, being more concerned with creating a favorable international impression at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Ultimately, Bonhoeffer remained optimistic that God's truth would prevail (see "Quotes," p. 299).

There is a noteworthy irony in this section, the sense that even while denying the Fuhrer Principle in both word and action, Bonhoeffer was to some degree embodying it. Just because one doesn't believe one is behaving in a messianic way (i.e. as a savior, one of the manifestations of the Fuhrer Principle) , it doesn't mean one isn't, and this point could be made of Bonhoeffer - that he was acting as some kind of savior of the Christian church in Germany. This irony seems to escape the author who, it must be noted, is writing from a clearly conservative Christian point of view (see "Style - Perspective").

Meanwhile, the references to "Scylla and Charybdis" are references to Greek myth. In The Odyssey, one of the most famous of the surviving Classical Greek narratives, the traveler Odysseus is forced to pass between two sea monsters, Scylla and Charybdis, each of which represents a different horrible death. Bonhoeffer's choice of Scylla and Charybdis as a metaphor in his lecture on the nature and value of the Confessing Church suggests that he is comparing the theological choices facing the church (i.e. the Scylla of mindless adherence to tradition, the Charybdis of passive faith) to the horrible destruction meted out by the two sea monsters of myth. There is the sense here that in Bonhoeffer's argument, both this Scylla and this Charybdis are enablers of Nazism.



# Chapters 20, 21 and 22

## Chapters 20, 21 and 22 Summary and Analysis

"Mars Ascending, 1938"

In this chapter, the author focuses on Hitler's 1938 drive to power - the forced resignation of one highly placed general, the removal of another on trumped-up charges of moral corruption, the annexation of Austria, and Hitler's plans to overrun Czechoslovakia. Perhaps the most infamous of all these events is Kristallnacht, a raid on Jewish communities in Germany in which "homes and businesses were destroyed, synagogues were set aflame, and Jews were beaten and killed." In the middle of all this, Bonhoeffer's sister Sabine, her Jewish husband and their children escaped into Switzerland, while Bonhoeffer himself lectured what remained of his Finkenwalde students on how Christ's love extended to all his people, even Jews. Also at this time, the author contends, Bonhoeffer became more significantly involved in the ongoing conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. One of the conspiracy's leaders was Hans von Dohnanyi (see "Important People"), Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law and a highly placed government official who kept the family informed of all the Reich's atrocities. A detailed, concealed record of those atrocities led, when eventually discovered, to the arrest and execution of Bonhoeffer and several others.

"The Great Decision, 1939"

When his mother informed him that he, among thousands of other Germans born in certain years, had been ordered to register with the military, and as Hitler's forces consumed more of Czechoslovakia, Bonhoeffer made a temporary escape first to England. There he was reunited with both Bell and the now exiled Hildebrandt, who both counseled him to accept an offer to go and work in America. For a while, he remained torn between doing so and returning to Germany to continue the work of the Confessing Church, but notification that he had been drafted made the decision for him, and he sailed for America. The country was very different from the country he left several years earlier, and he felt almost immediately that he had made a mistake, restlessly searching the Bible for insight into what he should do next and finding comfort in visits to fundamentalist churches. A letter from his parents, the contents of which are unknown, convinced him to return almost immediately to Germany, which he did, twenty-six days after arriving.

"The End of Germany"

The author describes how widespread atrocities perpetrated by Hitler following his invasion of Poland (anti-Jewish, anti-intellectual, anti-clergy, anti-nobility) and at home (such as the enforced euthanasia of "defective" children and adults) were referred to by one general as being "the end of Germany." They also contributed to increasing determination among generals in Hitler's army that he must be stopped (see "Quotes,"



p. 349), and their increasing receptivity to the idea, proposed by Donanyi and his fellow conspirators, that Hitler must die. Bonhoeffer, the author adds, became more involved in the plot because its leaders needed his aid in securing the support of Britain, France and other European countries in which he had connections.

The title of Chapter 20 is, like the earlier reference to Scylla and Charybdis, a reference to classical myth. In this case, the myth referred to is Roman - "Mars" was the Roman god of war. In that context, the title can be seen as a reference to, or evocation of, how momentum towards war was building in Germany in the late 1930's. Also in Chapter 20, one of the narrative's key secondary themes re-emerges, and is paid increasingly greater attention throughout the remainder of the narrative. This is the exploration of, and/or commentary on, the nature of the ties between friends and family. It must be noted that this particular theme is never explored in abstract terms, but always in terms of how Bonhoeffer's life was, in so many ways, defined by relationships with family and friends. His relationships with his sister and her Jewish husband, for example, are portrayed as contributing fundamentally, along with his breadth of compassion in general, to his increasing outrage at the violent injustices perpetrated against the Jews by Hitler. His relationship with Donanyi, both a friend and member of the extended family, was a key factor in Bonhoeffer's becoming involved with the conspiracy; he is not only helping out a fellow member of the resistance movement, he is helping a friend and brother-in-law. In short, personal ties, political motivation, and spiritual truth were, for Bonhoeffer, completely intertwined and entirely inseparable.



# Chapters 23, 24 and 25

## Chapters 23, 24 and 25 Summary and Analysis

### "From Confession to Conspiracy"

The author describes the moment when Bonhoeffer's closest friend, Eberhard Bethge, knew when Bonhoeffer had become a member of the conspiracy. The two were at a café when news of Hitler's overrunning of Paris became known. As the Germans around them celebrated, Bethge was surprised to see Bonhoeffer doing the same and hearing him whisper that they shouldn't attract attention. This, the author says, was clearly a turning point (see "Quotes," p. 362), one which was soon followed by Bonhoeffer, with the help of Donanyi, becoming a member of the Abwehr (see "Objects/Places"), an important rival to the SS (German Secret Service - see "Quotes," p. 370 - 1). In doing so, he was viewed by many on the resistance side, the author comments, as a traitor to his own values and those of the Confessing Church, but he persisted, secure in his belief that he was doing God's will (see "Quotes," p. 377).

### "Plotting Against Hitler"

The author describes how the biggest difficulty faced by the conspirators was getting generals in Hitler's army to support them, because many were grateful that he had brought the country above the humiliations imposed upon them at the end of World War I (see "Objects/Places - The Treaty of Versailles"). Meanwhile, Bonhoeffer continued to minister to the increasingly underground Confessing Church and, with the help of Bishop Bell, to gain support from the British for the conspiracy against Hitler. The failure of Hitler's assault on Russia was a serious blow to the conspiracy, since many generals who had begun to be supportive of the conspiracy were removed from power by Hitler following their failure to win him the land he sought. Eventually, Bonhoeffer and the other conspirators were brought together with another group of anti-Hitler military officers.

### "Bonhoeffer Scores a Victory"

After a meeting in Norway with a member of this second group of anti-Hitler officers, Bonhoeffer became aware that its aims (to ensure that Germany was not treated as badly as it had been at the end of World War I) were not those of his fellow conspirators (to kill Hitler). Meanwhile, Bonhoeffer was sent by the Abwehr to Geneva, but was secretly carrying a letter intended to make its way to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. His mission was canceled when he learned that Bishop Bell was visiting Sweden. Since Bell, as Bonhoeffer and the conspirators knew, had good connections with the British government, it was vital that he and Bonhoeffer meet. Diplomatic maneuvering by Donanyi made this possible, and soon Bell and Bonhoeffer were happily, and for the former surprisingly, reunited. Bell returned to England having written letters to Britain's foreign secretary urging the government to not think of all Germans as



Nazis (the prevailing sentiment of the day) and to support the movement to assassinate Hitler. The British government refused to pay Bell and his information any real attention, and forward movement of the conspiracy was further stalled.

The biographical and narrative fact communicated by this section can be summed up this way: Bonhoeffer became a double agent playing, as the quotes on pages 370 and 371 reveal, a complicated, multi-level game of deception. He was, however, and as the quote on 377 reveals, convinced that even while operating on all these different levels, he was enacting a simple truth ... that he was doing God's will. An important question when considering actions like Bonhoeffer's is this: Was such a belief rationalization, or was it a manifestation of fundamental truth? After all, Hitler himself believed he was enacting, if not the will of God per se, the will of providence. Good and bad alike have, throughout history, justified their actions by saying they were doing the will of God. Is plotting to kill another human being ever, under any circumstances, the will of God? See "Topics for Discussion - Debate the question..."



# Chapters 26 and 27

## Chapters 26 and 27 Summary and Analysis

### "Bonhoeffer in Love"

On a visit to Ruth von Kleist-Retzow, Bonhoeffer encountered her granddaughter, Maria von Wedemeyer, for the first time since she was twelve (see Part 7, Chapter 18). On this occasion, he was struck by her maturity, her intelligence, and her passion, but made little attempt to pursue the relationship further, searching instead for the message God was sending him by placing him in the position of falling in love with a woman half his age. Over the next few months, Maria's family was traumatized by the deaths of Maria's father and brother, and Bonhoeffer kept a respectful, but compassionate, distance. Meanwhile, Ruth went into hospital for treatment of an ailment unrelated to the war. The visits of Bonhoeffer and Maria frequently coincided, and Ruth, according to the author, noticed the chemistry between them, leading her to nudge them in each other's direction. Getting wind of this, Maria's mother, Ruth's daughter, felt things were moving too quickly, and took steps to stop the relationship from developing. The idea that there was a relationship at all came as a surprise to Maria, but once she accepted the situation, she opened herself to feelings for Bonhoeffer and he to his for her. Eventually, via a series of letters which the book quotes extensively, the two became engaged, in spite of further efforts by Maria's mother to keep them apart (see "Quotes," p. 421).

### "Killing Adolf Hitler"

The author describes, in considerable detail, a pair of plots to kill Adolf Hitler, both of which involved members of Bonhoeffer's extended family, both of which also involved unhappy members of Hitler's military staff, and both of which failed, for a variety of reasons. The author also describes how, while the second attempt was supposed to be taking place, the extended Bonhoeffer clan had gathered for a family celebration, interrupted by the arrival of a representative of the Reich with a service medal for Karl Bonhoeffer, the citation signed by Hitler himself. Meanwhile, the author comments, the Gestapo were getting closer and closer to arresting Bonhoeffer and the other conspirators.

What's particularly interesting about this section is its portrayal of Bonhoeffer's consistency - specifically, how he questioned his attraction to / love for Maria in exactly the same way as he questioned his intention to see Hitler dead. Here his faith can be seen as, for lack of a better phrase, pure and unconditional, unaffected by desire or, for that matter, any sort of emotion. The narrative makes it clear that this approach to all the circumstances of his life was, to a significant degree, the result of the family he grew up in, in which intellect and rationality were highly valued, almost to the exclusion of anything else. It's also very clear, however, that his approach was also the result of a hunger, a need, to be close to God. One wonders, in fact, whether Bonhoeffer ever questioned the intensity of that need, whether that was an expression of God's will or

whether it was in fact a manifestation of some other sort of inner drive or need. On another, more narratively oriented level, it's hard to escape the profound irony in the juxtaposition between Bonhoeffer's transformative experience of falling in love and the net of terror that was closing around him, his family, his allies, and his country.





# Chapter 28

## Chapter 28 Summary and Analysis

### "Cell 92 at Tegel Prison"

This lengthy chapter documents Bonhoeffer's eighteen month imprisonment. His first few months were particularly hard, in that he was treated as a typical criminal. As time passed, however, as his interrogators became more convinced he knew less than they thought, and as the influence of his uncle, the commandant of the prison, came to bear, Bonhoeffer's living conditions improved. During that time he wrote a large number of letters (coded ones to his parents and Bethge, romantic ones to Maria), all of which were written with the eyes of the censor also in his mind (see "Quotes," p. 441). For their part, the letters of his correspondents varied in their content. His parents sent coded information about the outside world, Maria discussed plans for their wedding, and Bethge sent analysis of Bonhoeffer's religious writings. There was also correspondence between Bonhoeffer and other members of the conspiracy, encoded in the pages of books sent via Bonhoeffer's parents. That correspondence enabled all the imprisoned conspirators to keep their respective stories straight, and in particular for Bonhoeffer to maintain his pose as a simple pastor.

Also during this time, Bonhoeffer deepened his contemplations and understandings of God's will in relationship to his own life (see "Quotes," p. 445 and 446), as well as on the relationship between Christianity and religion. From these contemplations emerged one of the most controversial theories with which Bonhoeffer has, over the years, been credited. This is the idea of "religionless Christianity," a proposition based on the idea, developed in letters to Bethge, that religion was in many ways a departure, perhaps even a corruption, of Christianity, and that the only true Christianity involved the believer devoting himself and his life entirely to determining and acting upon the will of God. Practicing such Christianity, Bonhoeffer ultimately suggests, could conceivably take place outside the realm of religion.

What had become, strangely enough, a secure period of contemplation and retreat, albeit enforced, eventually ended with some bad news. The Nazis succeeded in getting rid of the leader of the Abwehr, under whose auspices the conspirators had been, to some degree, protected. This meant not only that Bonhoeffer and his fellow conspirators were in danger. It also cleared the way for a new assassination conspiracy, this one led by Claus von Stauffenberg (see "Important People").

Again, there is a significant irony in this section, although one not unique to Bonhoeffer or his circumstances. This is the fact that even while his body was imprisoned, Bonhoeffer's mind and creative spirit was free, exploring ideas and feelings and faith in a way that, had he been out in the distracting world, he likely would never have done. Given that literary history is littered with instances of creative souls whose work took on new spiritual and emotional depths during periods of imprisonment (from Socrates to

the Marquis de Sade to Nelson Mandela), it's not that surprising that while in prison, Bonhoeffer completed a book hailed as his most significant piece of writing. This was *Ethics*, an unfinished book on Christian ethics written mostly during this period, its content smuggled into the protective care of Bethge and Bonhoeffer's family. All that said, the idea of "religionless Christianity" would certainly have been a controversial one in theological circles of the time, and would probably be considered so today. For further consideration of this idea, see "Topics for Discussion - Consider and discuss the concept of ..."



# Chapters 29, 30 and 31

## Chapters 29, 30 and 31 Summary and Analysis

### "Valkyrie and the Stauffenberg Plot"

Claus von Stauffenberg was a member of Hitler's staff who, ever since the invasion of Poland, had been repelled by the ways of the Reich and who, as the unsuccessful end of Germany's war was beginning to appear inevitable, made one last attempt to blow up Adolph Hitler. After surviving the attack with little more than mussed hair, Hitler proclaimed he had been saved by providence, and ordered the arrest and trial of all the conspirators. During this process, Donanyi's concealed records of Nazi atrocities (see Chapter 20) were found, their contents clearly implicating both Donanyi and Bonhoeffer. As Germany was repeatedly bombed into submission, and as Maria (according to her surviving letters) was losing hope, Bonhoeffer and the conspirators who weren't immediately tried and executed were transferred to less comfortable prisons. In Bonhoeffer's case, he was taken first to a dark and crowded Gestapo prison, and a short time later, to one of the Nazi's most infamous concentration camps at Buchenwald. In one of his surviving letters to Bethge, Bonhoeffer comments that, "Death is the supreme festival on the road to freedom." The narrative suggests that, at this point in his life, he felt as though he was on that road himself.

### "Buchenwald"

Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in the cellar of what was once a residence for Buchenwald staff. Among the sixteen other prisoners was S. Payne Best (see "Important People") who, in his post war memoir which the author quotes extensively, described in considerable detail the other prisoners which included a former Nazi death scientist and their relationships. He describes Bonhoeffer as being consistently in a good humor and very close to God. After seven weeks, Best writes, the prisoners and their luggage were loaded into a van for transport.

### "On the Road to Freedom"

Over the next few days Bonhoeffer, Best and their fellow prisoners endured cold, starvation, being lost, and suffocating smoke in the back of the wood-heated van as their drivers attempted to obey first one set of conflicting orders and then another. They were first driven to Flossenburg, another prison camp, but were turned away because it was too full. They were then sent to first one, then another prison. At the second one, many were reunited with old friends, since it was there that the wives and children of other conspirators, as well as a few conspirators themselves, were being held. The morning after their arrival at the second prison, Bonhoeffer led a brief prayer service. Almost immediately following its conclusion, military officers arrived and took him back to Flossenburg, where he was to have been left in the first place. There, he and several other conspirators were tried by German authorities, found guilty, and sentenced to



death. As the author comments on Bonhoeffer's beliefs about death (see "Quotes," p. 531), he describes how Bonhoeffer was executed less than twelve hours after his arrival, accepting his fate in a way that witnesses described as "entirely submissive to the will of God." The author then describes the shock and grief with which the surviving members of Bonhoeffer's family learned of his death, and how Bishop Bell, Sabine and her husband in exile in London as well as Hildebrandt also in exile organized the memorial service described in the Prologue. The Bible lesson, Sabine's recollections, and Hildebrandt's sermon are all quoted at length. The narrative concludes with the comment that, "When the service ended, Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer turned off the radio."

As the narrative of Bonhoeffer's life draws to its inevitable conclusion, the reader can note several points. Among the most important - how Bonhoeffer's faith apparently sustained him to the very end of his life, and how that faith continued to be defined by both belief in the intrinsic value of other human beings and the acting on that belief. There are also clear examples of how relationships with family and friends, even those made in the direst of circumstances, like those portrayed in these final chapters, were also a fundamental part of what sustained and nourished that faith.

That said, there is considerable irony in the fact that, a mere two weeks after Bonhoeffer's execution, Hitler himself died and the war came to an end. There is the clear sense that the author is, to some degree, asking the reader to contemplate what Bonhoeffer's life might have been like if he had been able to live just that much longer. Possibilities include a life with Maria and probable children, continued closeness with his multi-generational extended family, continued theological contemplation, and further action on what had been discovered through that contemplation. Ultimately, though, there is a much greater sense pervading not only these final chapters but the book as a whole. This is the feeling that Bonhoeffer, according to the will of God he so faithfully and completely accepted, lived the life he was meant to live and died the death he was meant to die. Granted, this sense may be the result of the book being a biography, a form of writing which has, as a fundamental purpose, the aim of giving order, sense and explanation to a life that while being lived, seems to be more of a series of random events (see "Topics for Discussion - One of the purposes of biographies..."). But in the excerpts of Bonhoeffer's own writings, many of which are either quoted or referred to in quotes from others (i.e. Maria, Bethge), it seems as though he already had a firm, clear order and purpose, a sense defined by faith and determination to both know and understand God's will. He trusted completely in that will, in what God was telling him to do, even if he had no idea of the outcome. This, then, can be seen as the book's ultimate thematic and narrative contention, its reason for being: trust the way of God completely, and both life and death will hold no fear. All is as God wills. The most profound irony of all, of course, is that Hitler said much the same thing.



# Characters

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is the book's central figure, a well educated, passionately thoughtful German intellectual and theologian born in the latter days of the 19th Century and executed at the conclusion of one of the most world shattering events of the 20th - World War II. He was raised in a well-to-do family at a time and place in his country's history in which anything approaching liberalism, intellectualism and / or religion (all important components of Bonhoeffer's family life) was increasingly frowned upon. While completing an extensive and quickly completed education in theology, Bonhoeffer developed a deep and abiding faith in God - in God's word, as manifest in the Bible, and God's will, as manifest in faith but, more importantly for him, in action. This belief, that faith was truest only when acted upon, led him to active participation in the resistance movement against Hitler and Nazism, said participation leading him in turn to involvement in several conspiracies to see Hitler assassinated. All these plots met with failure, and as the eventual result of his involvement being discovered, Bonhoeffer was arrested, tried, convicted, and executed. The story of Bonhoeffer's evolution from precocious child theologian to spiritual counter revolutionary to martyr is one of a life strictly, humbly and gratefully lived according to the tenets of traditional, Bible-based, Christian faith. As such, it can be seen as a text book example for contemporary Christians of how a life in God is most fulfillingly lived ... or, at the very least, it seems to be intended to be seen as such (see "Style - Perspective").

## Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer's parents were two very different people. His father Karl was a non-religious academic who became one of Germany's most prominent psychoanalysts, while his aristocratic mother Paula was very religious and very family-oriented. They were, from all accounts, a good and happy match for each other, raising a large, affectionate, intelligent, liberal-leaning family of which Dietrich was proud to be a part. The elderly Karl and Paula are portrayed, in the book's introduction and its final chapter, as listening to the radio broadcast of Bonhoeffer's memorial service, broadcast from London only the day after they first heard of their son's execution.

## Bonhoeffer's Siblings

Bonhoeffer had seven siblings, including a twin sister (Sabine) who, along with her Jewish husband Gerhardt, became among the first refugees to leave Germany following the Nazi rise to power. His eldest brother Karl-Friedrich became a prominent scientist, and another brother (Klaus) a prominent lawyer, but his second oldest brother Walter was killed in World War I, traumatizing Paula. Daughter Ursula married another lawyer, Rudigard Schleischer (who became involved in the conspiracy to kill assassinate Hitler),



while another daughter, Christine (also known as Christel) married a civil servant who became yet another conspirator (see "Hans von Dohnanyi" below). The youngest Bonhoeffer, Susanne, married one of Bonhoeffer's school friends and led a relatively uneventful life. In short, the connections of the Bonhoeffer siblings were far reaching, enabling Dietrich a wide ranging, sympathetic support system within which to practice his spiritual and political activism.

## **Karl Barth**

Barth was a conservative, traditional theologian and scholar whose work and theories (see "Quotes," p. 60) were viewed with respect, and adopted, by Bonhoeffer, for whom Barth was something of an idol. Barth, partly through his involvement in establishing the Confessing Church (see "Objects/Places") but also through other activities, supported Bonhoeffer and other members of the German resistance movement throughout the war.

## **Hans von Dohnanyi**

Dohnanyi, as he is referred to throughout the biography, was married to Bonhoeffer's sister Christine. Dohnanyi, in spite of his more liberal political leanings, worked in a government office of the Third Reich, and so was well placed to receive first-hand knowledge of what the Nazis were doing and how they did it, knowledge he passed on to his family. Dohnanyi was one of the leaders of the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, and kept extensive records of Nazi atrocities which, when eventually found, contributed to the body of evidence that led to his own execution as well as that of Bonhoeffer and several other conspirators.

## **Albert Fisher**

The son of slaves, black theological student Albert Fisher played an important role in Bonhoeffer's evolving theology and practice when he took the German to an evangelical black church during the latter's visit to America in the early 1930's. His experiences there confirmed, in Bonhoeffer, the belief that direct revelation from God was possible outside an experience of the Bible.

## **Eberhard Bethge**

Bonhoeffer met the man who was to become his closest friend and confidante in 1935, when he was in the process of establishing the theological study center of Zingst, which eventually moved to Finkenwalde (see "Objects/Places"). The two men were very different, Bonhoeffer coming from an aristocratic urban family and Bethge from a relatively uneducated rural family. Both men had powerful intellects, strong artistic sensibilities, and similar theological perspectives. Over the course of their intense friendship, Bethge was entrusted with many of Bonhoeffer's writings, and at one time



they were one another's confessors. Bethge survived the war, and died in the 1990's, having become essentially the guardian of Bonhoeffer's theological legacy.

## **Franz Hildebrandt**

The witty, wisecracking Hildebrandt was another of Bonhoeffer's close friends, the two having met in Barcelona during Bonhoeffer's stay there in the late 1920's. The basis of their friendship was intellectual argument, both men describing their time together as filled with intense, but good-natured, debate. Hildebrandt was viewed by the German government as being Jewish, on account of his being born to a Jewish mother. He, like Bethge, survived the war, and was one of the organizers of the memorial service held in Bonhoeffer's honor in London in 1945.

## **George Bell**

Bonhoeffer met British bishop George Bell in 1934 while Bonhoeffer was on a visit to England. Bell was one of the leaders of the anti-Nazi movement in England and the European community outside of Germany's borders. Over the next several years, until Bonhoeffer's execution at the end of the war, Bell remained one of Bonhoeffer's most respected advisors and closest friends. His last words were directed at Bell, and Bell conducted Bonhoeffer's memorial service in London, in July of 1945.

## **Ruth von Kleist-Retzow**

This wealthy aristocratic widow, single mother of five children, came into Bonhoeffer's life as he was laying the foundations for Finkenwalde, helping him any way she could - with money, with moral support, and with political influence. One of the several grandchildren she was helping to raise, Maria, grew into the young woman who eventually became Bonhoeffer's fiancé (see below).

## **Maria von Wedemeyer**

Maria first came into Bonhoeffer's life as a twelve-year-old girl, one of the grandchildren of Ruth von Kleist-Retzow (see above) whom Bonhoeffer, during his time at Finkenwalde, helped prepare for confirmation. When he saw her again some years later, just after Maria had graduated from high school, the two young people (Bonhoeffer was only in his thirties) realized a strong attraction to each other. Over the next three years, they fell deeply in love and became engaged, with Maria's visits to Bonhoeffer in prison giving him the spiritual, personal and emotional support he needed to sustain him through his time there. In the last years of the war, at the time of Bonhoeffer's execution, Maria lived with his parents.





## Elizabeth Zinn

Early in his theological career, when he was studying in Berlin, Bonhoeffer met a fellow theological student named Elizabeth Zinn. They spent a great deal of time together, time that, according to the author, included not only visits to museums and art galleries, but also intense theological debates. The relation continued throughout the years of Bonhoeffer's many travels, but came to an end in the mid-1930's, when Bonhoeffer's determination to focus on both his work with the church and his fight against the Nazis left, in his mind at the time, no room for a relationship. Zinn received copies of all the sermons Bonhoeffer preached while he was traveling, including those he preached in London. That, according to the author, is the reason they survived and can still be read today.

## Adolf Hitler

German chancellor and commandant of the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler is remembered by history as one of the most evilly insane, or insanely evil, military commanders ever. The scope and breadth of the crimes against humanity he and the Reich committed are beyond the scope of this analysis, but suffice it to say that he was an enemy of Jews, Christianity, liberalism, and any sort of free thought and/or opinion. His conquest-oriented leadership of Germany from the early 1930's to the mid-1940's was the primary trigger for World War II. He ended up committing suicide as the war was drawing to its close, unable to face the prospect of a German defeat.

## Ludwig Muller

Muller was the man chosen by Hitler to lead the Reich Church. A whole-hearted and unconditional supporter of Hitler and the Nazi Party, Muller was to become one of Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church's primary adversaries.

## Theodore Heckel

Heckel was the head of the German church outside of Germany in the years before and during the war. It was on his invitation that Bonhoeffer first traveled to England, where he met George Bell (see below) and solidified his conservative theological and liberal political beliefs. As Bonhoeffer became more and more involved in the anti-Nazi movement, Heckel became more and more resentful and rejecting of him. Heckel eventually became the bishop of the Reich Church (see "Objects/Places"), and a bitter opponent of Bonhoeffer personally, politically, and theologically.





## **Claus von Stauffenberg**

This German army officer was one of the planners of the failed Valkyrie plot to kill Adolf Hitler. In fact, he was the one who literally carried the bomb in a briefcase into the meeting with the Fuhrer at which it was supposed to be detonated. Stauffenberg left the meeting before the bomb exploded relatively harmlessly. He was later discovered to be the person who planted the bomb, tried and executed within days of the assassination attempt.

## **Captain S. Payne Best**

This British officer, watchful and sardonic, was imprisoned with Bonhoeffer during his final two months of life at Buchenwald. Best survived the war, and his memoir of his experiences during his imprisonment is the primary source of information about Bonhoeffer's life in those last days, since none of Bonhoeffer's writings themselves survived.



# Objects/Places

## Germany

For several hundred years until the beginning of the 20th Century, Germany was one of the strongest and most respected, if somewhat feared, countries in Europe.

Economically, militarily and politically, it was a center of power and influence that, with the advent of the two world wars initiated by the territorial ambitions of a few of its leaders, dissipated into the Cold War of the mid-20th Century and is only now, in the early years of the 21st, beginning to rebuild.

## Berlin

Berlin is the capital city of Germany, its center of political, economic and military power, as well as of its intellectual and cultural life. Bonhoeffer was born and raised in Berlin, a circumstance that enabled both his theological training and his political perspectives.

## The Bonhoeffer Home(s)

The Bonhoeffer family - Klaus, Paula, and their eight children - first made their home in Poland, where Klaus and Paula met and where all the children were born. Later, when Karl received a prestigious appointment at Berlin University, they moved to Berlin, first into a relatively well-to-do Berlin neighborhood close to the University, then to the Grunewald district, and eventually to the Charlottenburg district, where Bonhoeffer maintained a room, where he was arrested, and where his parents listened to the broadcast of the memorial service. The Bonhoeffers' German houses were large and near to various members of their extended family. They were, as the author comments, "a genuinely happy family."

## The Bible

The Bible upon which the Christian religion and philosophy is founded was, for Bonhoeffer, the ultimate authority on the nature of God, on how worship of God should be practiced, how the authority of God should be followed, and how the relationship between God and man was to be practiced.

## The Treaty of Versailles

Following the defeat of Germany in World War I, the victorious Allied powers including America and Britain imposed military, political, and financial sanctions that Germany viewed initially as troubling and later came to view as completely crippling. The poor social and economic conditions resulting from the imposition of the Treaty proved to be



fertile ground for the discontent and unhappiness that eventually itself became fuel for the rapid expansion of the Nazi movement.

## Nazism

Nazism, or National Socialism, was the political and moral philosophy that governed and defined the actions of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich, the government of the day in Germany during the 1930's (the buildup to World War II) and 40's (the years of the war itself). It was founded upon a belief in fundamental German (Aryan) superiority that, in turn, manifested in violently racist and imperialist policies, and gained strength in a climate of both resentment of Germany's perceived humiliation at the hands of the Allies at the end of World War I and frustration at the economic conditions of the Great Depression.

## The Third Reich

This was the name given to the government of Adolf Hitler (see "Important People"), "Reich" being a term used colloquially and without genuine historical precedent to describe what amounts to an empire.

## The Fuhrer Principle

The Fuhrer Principle, which emerged in Germany in the aftermath of World War I, was defined by unquestioning faith in the absolute authority of a great leader. Hitler utilized the Principle in motivating Germany to elect him chancellor, and eventually Fuhrer. It was a principle that Bonhoeffer abhorred, believing it to be essentially messianic in nature (i.e setting up the Fuhrer not just as a leader, but as a savior).

## The Aryan Paragraph

Early in the Nazi ascent to power, Hitler and his operatives created a declaration called The Aryan Paragraph which essentially institutionalized anti-Semitism as a fundamental element of the practices and operations of the Third Reich. It allowed, and in the eyes of many, including Bonhoeffer, virtually insisted upon, the removal of any and all Jews from positions of influence or any sort of political or legal status. The publication of the paragraph triggered the writing and publication of one of Bonhoeffer's earliest anti-Nazi writings.

## The Reich Church

In an effort to give his government and authority legitimacy, and with the support and assistance of willing, self-protecting bishops such as Theodore Heckel (see "Important People"), Hitler created an official church of the Reich, the Reich Church, which



ostensibly preached Christian principles but which was, in fact, a religion-oriented venue for Nazi propaganda.

## **Bonhoeffer's Writings and Sermons**

Throughout his life, Bonhoeffer wrote and preached extensively, exploring, expanding and explaining his conservative theological beliefs to academics, fellow theologians, and the public. Many were preserved over the years by those to whom he sent copies (i.e. Elizabeth Zinn), to whom he sent letters (i.e. Maria von Wedemeyer), and to whom he entrusted his deepest thoughts (i.e. Eberhard Bethge). The writings, according to the author, indicate that Bonhoeffer had a clear, powerful, intelligent mind, a profound faith, and a deep-seated determination to ensure the ultimate, transcendent victory of both moral and Christian justice which were, to him, the same thing.

## **The Bethel Confession**

The Bethel Confession was an attempt, initially led by Bonhoeffer and a few other German clerics, to declare a set of values for the German church in clear opposition to the will and ways of the Reich Church. The vast majority of senior German clerics, however, eager to appease Hitler, watered down much of the confession to the point that Bonhoeffer distanced himself from it completely, viewing it as toothless and impotent.

## **New York City, Union Theological Seminary**

In the early 1930's, just as the Nazis were beginning their rise to power, Bonhoeffer visited America, his visit centering on New York City, teetering on the brink of the Great Depression while still fizzing with leftover energy from the Jazz Age. His discovery of the spirit-moved American churches proved fundamental, according to the author, in the deepening of his revelation-based spirituality. Union Theological Seminary was the religious school Bonhoeffer attended, if only nominally. Not really interested in pursuing a degree, he spent more time exploring and delving into the religion of the people.

## **Zingst, Finkenwalde**

Bonhoeffer established these two theological institutions in an effort to expand and build upon traditional Christian teaching and, at the same time, actively oppose the expansion of both the Third Reich and the Reich Church.

## **The Confessing Church, The Barmen Declaration**

The Confessing Church was founded and promoted by Bonhoeffer and several other leaders of the original German church as a clear Christian alternative to the Reich



Church. In spite of Hitler's continuing efforts to shut the church down, Bonhoeffer and his allies continued to operate the church throughout the war, its practices continuing even after Bonhoeffer's execution. The Barmen Declaration, named for a German town where a conference was held laying the groundwork for the Confessing Church, was essentially a manifesto laying down the beliefs and practices of the Confessing Church.

## **The Abwehr**

The Abwehr was, for several years before and during World War II, a government secret service organization in Germany with a rivalry with the more violent, and the more friendly to Hitler, SS (short for "Schutzstaffel"). For several years, Bonhoeffer was a member of the Abwehr, essentially a double agent reporting the organization's activities back to his comrades in the conspiracy to kill Hitler and bring down the Nazi regime.

## **Tegel Prison, the Gestapo Prison, Buchenwald**

After his eventual arrest for participation in the conspiracy to kill Hitler, Bonhoeffer was taken to Tegel Prison and there interned for eighteen months. While there, he maintained a correspondence with his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, and was able to maintain communications with his allies in the ongoing effort to topple the Nazis. Bonhoeffer was also imprisoned, for a time, in a Gestapo prison in Berlin, and was eventually taken to Buchenwald, one of the largest Nazi concentration camps where he spent two months.

## **Flossenburg**

Eventually, following the discovery of a cache of records listing Nazi atrocities at the home of Bonhoeffer ally and family member Hans von Dohnanyi, Bonhoeffer was taken to Flossenburg concentration camp and there executed. A marker was set up in his memory, and that of other conspirators who were executed with him.

## **Holy Trinity Church, Brompton**

A few months after Bonhoeffer was executed, Bishop George Bell (see "Important People") and a few other of Bonhoeffer's friends, family and colleagues, including his sister Sabine, organized and presented a service of memorial at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, England, a country which, in many ways and for many good reasons, still feared and resented Germans. Descriptions of this service bracket the narrative of Bonhoeffer's life and death in the introduction and at the conclusion of the final chapter.



# Themes

## Discerning and Living according to God's Will

This is the book's primary thematic consideration, embodied and dramatized through the story of its central figure, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The author places the circumstances and events of Bonhoeffer's life clearly within the context of the latter's belief, both heavily contemplated and decisively acted upon, that life was meant to be lived entirely in accordance to the will of God. The author and his work make it clear that for Bonhoeffer, that belief was unequivocal, and was to be rigorously applied in every conceivable circumstance - whether to travel, what feelings of attraction to a beautiful woman meant, whether to kill the man (Hitler) responsible for the deaths and ill treatment of millions. In narrated action, in excerpts from his subject's writings, in other excerpts from writings of those who knew and remembered him, the author presents evidence that for Bonhoeffer, it was each human being's responsibility or, at the very least, Bonhoeffer's own personal responsibility to discern, in every event and every circumstance, what God's will was. The key to that discernment was, for Bonhoeffer and, according to his preaching, for all humankind, study and contemplation of the Word of God as manifest in the Bible, for him the only true source of God's word. It might not be going too far to suggest that in writing about Bonhoeffer in this way, the author, himself a professed Christian, is evangelizing in a way similar to that of his subject - through the medium of a written contemplation of how God's will can, and perhaps should, manifest in an individual life (see "Style - Perspective").

## The Value of Friendship and Family

One of the work's secondary thematic considerations is the role friendship and family played in Bonhoeffer's life, work, and ever-evolving theological philosophy. The author makes this point very clear right from the beginning when, while setting the scene for Bonhoeffer's memorial service in London, he says those who prepared the service and who spoke at it were motivated as much by friendship and affection as they were by the desire to pay tribute to a Christian martyr. Then, from the first chapter on, the author repeatedly incorporates examples of how Bonhoeffer's family and friends influenced his life. These include the demanding intellectualism of his father and firm faith of his mother, the intellectual leadership and support of his teachers and mentors, the partnership in thought of his many friends and colleagues, and above all the transcendent, empowering humanism of almost everyone with whom he came in positive, affirming contact. All, in the author's portrait of his subject, contributed mightily to making him the complex, compassionate, spiritually transcendent man he became.

It's important to note, however, that relationships with family and friends played, according to the author, a profoundly important role in another significant way. Because several members of his extended family rose to positions either in the Third Reich or in organizations affiliated with the Reich, Bonhoeffer and his allies in the movement to



oppose and eventually assassinate Adolf Hitler had detailed, advance information about the atrocities perpetrated by him and the Nazi party he led. In short, for both Bonhoeffer and his work, family and friends provided an invaluable source of support and knowledge, of both the self and the world.

## Loyalty

A related thematic consideration is the book's contemplation of loyalty, in both its brighter and its darker manifestations, the one in fact counterpointing the other. In short, the loyalty displayed by Bonhoeffer, his family, his friends and his allies towards each other, towards God, towards their cause, and towards the oppressed (i.e. the Jewish people, others attacked by Hitler) is placed in powerfully contrasting juxtaposition to the loyalty that Hitler violently, intimidatingly demanded from his close allies and from the German people as a whole. The point here is that Bonhoeffer and those on the side of the resistance chose loyalty for reasons of faith and personal belief. Hitler, on the other hand, enforced loyalty, through both the threat and the enactment of violence and death.

The book also explores the theme of loyalty in terms of the idea of loyalty to God which seems, in the perspective of Bonhoeffer and therefore of the book, to lie somewhere between the two. There is the clear sense that for Bonhoeffer, God demands loyalty, in the way Hitler does, but unlike Hitler neither insists upon it nor inflicts suffering in order to ensure it. It could be argued that there was, for Bonhoeffer, a degree of relationship between suffering and belief in God - witness his contention, commented upon in Chapter 7 on the strength of faith in spite of the suffering of blacks in America. Nowhere does he contend, however, that the suffering in question was/is caused by God, in the way that Hitler caused suffering in the lives of those from whom he demanded loyalty.

In any case, loyalty, such as that practiced by Bonhoeffer and his circle of friends, family and contacts in ways outlined above, is clearly portrayed by the narrative as a positive value. In fact, the book makes the strong argument that for both Bonhoeffer and the author, such loyalty was in fact a manifestation of the all important will and ways of God.

# Style

## Perspective

The author, Eric Metaxas, is a professed Christian. Having received a revelation of the presence and power of the living Christ in a dream in his mid-twenties, he writes from a perspective that is, in many ways, similar to that of his subject. This perspective is based on certain fundamental principles - that following and accepting Jesus Christ is the only way to live a good and true earthly life, that Christ was God made manifest on earth, and that study and contemplation of the Bible is the only true, real means of discerning the will of God in everyday life. The faith of both author and his subject contends that that life can only be truly fulfilled through selfless, devoted, faithful seeking of that will and putting it into action, not just through going to church but in crisis, in tranquility, in love and relationship, in confrontation and suffering.

Because this sort of traditional, conservative Christianity also has, as one of its basic tenets, belief in both the necessity and value of evangelism (i.e. the spreading of the Word of God, the preaching of God's way), there is the sense that the author's intended audience has two aspects. The first - an audience of the already faithful, for whom Bonhoeffer's story is a profound reminder not only of the necessity for faith or of the necessity for acting on that faith, but of the potentially dangerous nature and extent of what living according to that faith can demand. The second is an audience of the as yet un-faithful, non-Christians who, in the minds of evangelical Christianity not only need to be saved, but are longing to be saved ... they just don't know it, or are unwilling to accept it. It's difficult to say what kind of effect the book, if such an evangelical purpose and perspective is part of its core identity, would have on this intended audience. Some might view it simply as a historical document, some as an example of how a fundamentally compassionate human being channeled and focused that compassion through a lens of Christianity, and some as yet another example of hammer-on-the-head Christian propaganda.

## Tone

The overall tonal quality of the book is, in some ways, difficult to pin down. On the one hand, because it is a biography and because it relies so heavily on reportage of historically documented events, there is definitely a sense of objectivity about much of it - or, at least, of a degree of objectivity. Beneath the surface, however, there is the lingering sense that ultimately, the book is significantly less objective about its subject and its themes than it initially appears. This sense becomes particularly strong when the author's perspective (see above) is taken into account. The more the reader looks past just the facts into both the commentary on those facts and the focus of both fact and commentary, the more the reader can perceive the author's likely agenda. This is the intention to use the life, theology, and faith of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as part teaching tool and part inspiration on the subject of how to live a true Christian life. In evangelizing





terms used by Bonhoeffer and arguably viewed by the author as gospel, this life, according to both the book's factual and tonal content, is the accepting of God as ruler, Jesus as savior, the Bible as revelation, and devotion as the way to salvation. This is, again in both narrative and tone, the only way to truth. For readers who share that faith perspective, this tonal quality can only be a positive, an affirmation of faith, although the challenge to live this kind of faith fully (explicit in Bonhoeffer's life, teachings and writings, implicit in his biography) might well be intimidating. For readers who don't share that faith perspective (i.e. non-traditional, non-conservative Christians, or indeed non-Christians), the compassionate humanism of Bonhoeffer and his allies might be seen as transcending what seems to come across as the narrowness of Bonhoeffer's views on "salvation." Also for those readers, the narrative content and tonal qualities of the book might also come across as simply another example of Christian dogma and close-mindedness - in other words, another example of how Christians think theirs is the only true spiritual way.

## Structure

The structural foundation of the book is essentially linear with the narrative documenting the events and examining the circumstances of Bonhoeffer's life in chronological order, from his birth to his death, with the exception of the Prologue, which starts with an event that took place after Bonhoeffer's death - his memorial service in London. That essential structure is broken down, chapter by chapter, in what amounts to units of experience such as childhood and youth, stays in this city or that, and phases of scholarship and/or introspection. This approach works as a strong narrative foundation, essentially serving as brick-by-brick groundlaying for the somewhat more complex intellectual and/or spiritual contemplations that make up the majority of the book's actual content.

Those contemplations are layered onto the work's essentially linear structure with the author's frequent insertions of commentary and/or information written after Bonhoeffer was executed, mostly taken from post-war letters, writings, and contemplations written by family, friends, colleagues and allies. These writings offer illumination, clarification and interpretation of the events in question and the life at the center of those events. In other words, the narrated events are the tip of the iceberg. The commentary reveals, at least to some degree, the masses of subtext (motivation, intention, history) beneath the surface. This technique serves primarily to fulfill the essential function of any biography - to make sense of a life, to determine what in "this" led to "that," and so on. In most cases, these integrations of future perspective into narrative of Bonhoeffer's in-the-moment / at-the-time experiences reinforce and/or illustrate the author's central thematic and narrative contentions about the nature, theory and practice of Bonhoeffer's faith.

## Quotes

"At the appointed hour, the old couple turned on their radio. Soon enough the service was announced for their son. That was how they came to know of his death. As the couple took in the hard news that the good man who was their son was now dead, so too, many English took in the hard news that the dead man who was a German was good. Thus did the world again begin to reconcile itself to itself." Prologue, p. 4

"The family trees of Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer are everywhere so laden with figures of accomplishment that one might expect future generations to be burdened by it all. But the welter of wonderfulness that was their heritage seems to have been a boon, one that buoyed them up so that each child seems not only to have stood on the shoulders of giants but also to have danced on them." Chapter 1, p. 8

"To think of the church as something universal would change everything and would set in motion the entire course of Bonhoeffer's remaining life, because if the church was something that actually existed, then it existed not just in Germany or Rome, but beyond both ... [this] was a revelation and an invitation to further thinking ..." Chapter 3, p. 53

"...Barth's approach to the bible ... asserted the idea ... that God actually exists, and that all theology and biblical scholarship must be undergirded by this basic assumption, and that's that ... Barth stressed the transcendence of God ... and therefore unknowable by man, except via revelation." Chapter 4, p. 60

"As the result of his intellectual openness, Bonhoeffer ... could appreciate the value in something, even if he ultimately rejected that something - and could see the errors and flaws in something, even if he ultimately accepted that something." Ibid, p, 61

"Bonhoeffer's sermons challenged the congregations both spiritually and intellectually. In his first sermon he leaped into his favorite subject, the difference between a faith based on our own moral efforts and one based on God's grace ... one can only imagine some of the Barcelona businessmen puzzling over this earnest twenty two year old, freshly descended from the ivory tower. And yet there was an undeniable vitality to what he was saying; he rarely lost their attention." Chapter 5, p. 77

"There was a foreshadowing of Bonhoeffer's ... attitude toward his fate under the Nazis. What did it mean to be 'grasped' by God? And why did Bonhoeffer already begin to have a deep sense that God had 'grasped him,' had chosen him for something?" Ibid, p. 81

"[Bonhoeffer] differentiated between Christianity as a religion like all the others - which attempt but fail to make an ethical way for man to climb to heaven of his own accord - and following Christ, who demands everything, including our very lives". Ibid, p. 84

"Bonhoeffer had been in New York a mere nine months, but in some ways it seemed a lifetime. When he left, the Nazis were a tiny gray cloud on the horizon of an otherwise



clear sky. Now, black and crackling with electricity, they loomed nearly overhead."  
Chapter 8, p. 120

"There were now an urgency and a seriousness to Bonhoeffer that had not been there before. Somehow he sensed he must warn people of what lay ahead. It was as if he could see that a mighty oak tree, in whose shade families were picnicking, and from whose branches children were swinging, was rotten inside, was about to fall down and kill them all." Ibid, p. 121

"Two days after Hitler's election, a young professor of theology delineated with incisiveness the most fundamental philosophical errors of a regime that hadn't existed when he wrote the speech, but that would from the week in which he was speaking and for the next twelve years lead a nation and half the world into a nightmare of violence and misery." Chapter 9, p. 140

"In the spring of 1933, Bonhoeffer was declaring it the duty of the church to stand up for the Jews. This would have seemed radical to even staunch allies, especially since the Jews had not begun to suffer the horrors they would suffer in a few years. Bonhoeffer's three conclusions - that the church must question the state, help the state's victims, and work against the state, if necessary - were too much for almost everyone. But for him they were inescapable. In time, he would do all three." Chapter 10, p. 155

"One sometimes hears that Hitler was a Christian. He was certainly not, but neither was he openly anti-Christian, as most of his top lieutenants were. What helped him aggrandize power, he approved of, and what prevented it, he did not. He was utterly pragmatic ... in private, he possessed an unblemished record of statements against Christianity and Christians." Chapter 11, p. 165

"As would happen so often in the future, he was deeply disappointed in the inability of his fellow Christians to take a definite stand. They always erred on the side of conceding too much, of trying too hard to ingratiate themselves with their opponents."  
Chapter 13, p. 185

"Bonhoeffer was thinking about God's highest call, about the call of discipleship and its cost ... God's call to partake in suffering, even unto death ... he was thinking about the deep call of Christ, which was not about winning, but about submission to God, wherever that might lead." Chapter 14, p. 196

"He was beginning to understand that he was God's prisoner, that like the prophets of old, he was called to suffer and to be oppressed - and in that defeat and the acceptance of that defeat, there was victory." Chapter 15, p. 210

"What made [Bonhoeffer] stand out, to some as an inspiration, to others as an oddity, and to others as an offense, was that he did not hope that God heard his prayers, but knew it. When he said they needed to humble themselves and listen to God's commands and obey them, he was not posturing. He wanted to impart this vision of God and was saying that one must utterly trust God now and must know that hearing him is indeed all that matters." Chapter 16, p. 237



"[Bonhoeffer] wanted to transmit the same culture of selflessness here that had been practiced in his home as a child. Selfishness, laziness, self-pity, poor sportsmanship, and the like were not tolerated. He made that legacy of his upbringing a part of these seminaries." Chapter 18, p. 269-70

"Bonhoeffer was an eternal optimist because he believed what God said through the Scriptures. He knew that whatever befell him or the faithful brethren would open new opportunities in which God would operate, in which his provision would become clear." Chapter 20, p. 299

"The war put Bonhoeffer in a strange position. He had always been a man of seeming contradictions, and the war would magnify them. He knew he could not fight for Hitler's Germany, but he was extraordinarily supportive when it came to the young men who did not see things his way. He also knew he had options they did not." Chapter 22, p. 349

"Future generations would be convinced that nothing good could ever have existed in a country that produced such evil. They would think only of these evils. It would be as if these unleashed dark forces had grotesquely marched like devils on dead horses, backward through the gash in the present, and had destroyed the German past too." Ibid, p. 351

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"On the one hand, Bonhoeffer would be actually performing pastoral work and continuing his theological writing, as he wished to do. Officially, this work was a front for his work as a Nazi agent in Military Intelligence. But unofficially, his work in Military Intelligence was a front for his real work as a conspirator against the Nazi regime." Ibid, p. 370 (1)

"Bonhoeffer was not telling little white lies. In Luther's famous phrase, he was 'sinning boldly'. He was involved in a high stakes game of deception upon deception, and yet Bonhoeffer himself knew that in all of it, he was being utterly obedient to God ... that made the dizzying complexities of it all perfectly coherent." Ibid, p. 370 (2)

"Bonhoeffer had come to a place where he was in many ways very much alone. God had driven him to this place, though, and he was not about to look for a way out ... it was the fate he had embraced, and it was obedience to God, and he could rejoice in it, and did." Ibid, p. 377

"It would be an engagement like few in the world. Of course, had either known what was ahead, they would have arranged things quite differently. But no one knew what was ahead, nor could know. But Bonhoeffer had cast his cares and expectations upon God.



He knew that he and his engagement to Maria were in God's hands ... though he wasn't quite sure of it yet, the Gestapo was on his tail, and the conspiracy was racing forward with yet another plan to kill Hitler." Chapter 26, p. 421

"Bonhoeffer was writing on two levels: on one level to his parents, but on another to the hostile set of eyes trolling [his writings] for incriminating evidence ... he was also using [his] letters to paint a particular picture ... a general framework in which to interpret things Bonhoeffer said during his interrogations. Even in an innocuous and truthful letter such as the first one, Bonhoeffer simultaneously engaged in a larger deception." Chapter 28, p. 441

"The essay ... confirms Bonhoeffer's crucial role in the conspiracy, that of its theologian and moral compass. He helped them see precisely why they had to do what they were doing; why it was not expedient, but right; why it was God's will." Ibid, p. 445

"He had theologically defined the Christian life as something active, not reactive ... living one's whole life in obedience to God's call through action ... it was God's call to be fully human, to live as human beings obedient to the one who made us, which was the fulfillment of our destiny. It was not a cramped, compromised, circumspect life, but a life lived in a kind of wild, joyful, full throated freedom ..." Ibid, p. 446

"When I consider the state of the world, the total obscurity enshrouding our personal destiny, and my present imprisonment, our union ... can only be a token of God's grace and goodness, which summon us to believe in him ... [it] requires faith, and may God grant it to us daily. I don't mean the faith that flees the world but the faith that endures IN the world and loves and remains true to that world in spite of the hardships it brings us. Our marriage must be a "yes" to God's earth." Ibid, p. 456 - Bonhoeffer to Maria.

"We know that Bonhoeffer thought of death as the last station on the road to freedom ... even if millions have seen Bonhoeffer's death as tragic and as a prematurely ended life, we can be certain that he did not see it that way at all ... 'How do we know that dying is so dreadful? Who knows whether, in our human fear and anguish we are only shivering and shuddering at the most glorious, heavenly, blessed event in the world?'" Chapter 31, p. 531 - the author, quoting Bonhoeffer.



## Topics for Discussion

One of the questions the book examines is the apparent contradiction between Bonhoeffer's profound experience of living as a Christian devoted to living according to God's will while, at the same time, engaging in a plot to kill Hitler - in other words, to break what is often viewed as one of God's greatest commandments (i.e. Thou shalt not kill). Discuss how and why it was possible for Bonhoeffer not only to hold such simultaneously opposing views, but to act on them.

Debate the question of whether murder is ever justified, even when it takes the form of execution.

One of the most defining characteristics of Bonhoeffer's Christian faith was the belief that the faith called not just for words and not just for contemplation, but also for action. From what you know and understand of the Christian faith, or indeed of any contemporary spiritual faith, do you agree or disagree with his contention? How can faith be put into action? And is every action justified if it is motivated by faith?

Discuss the parallels and differences between the experiences of Jews in Germany and the experiences of blacks in America (including pre-, during, and post-slavery). Debate this statement: while there are clear and inescapable differences between the two circumstances, the treatment of the latter can justifiably be viewed as similar in intent and manifestation to the former.

What other oppressed minorities around the world, in recent history, has and/or might the term "genocide", its attitudes and manifestations, be applied to?

Discuss the concept of martyrdom (i.e. of dying in the name of one's faith, or faith in a cause). Do you believe such a death has value? What causes are worthy of such a sacrifice? What, if anything, do you feel strongly enough about that you might be prepared to martyr yourself?

Consider the definition and intent of The Fuhrer Principle (see "Objects/Places"), and in particular its perspective on leadership. Do you agree or disagree with this perspective? Why or why not? In what ways is it valuable? In what ways is it destructive? In what ways does this perspective manifest, or has it manifested, in more contemporary political environments? What have been the repercussions of those contemporary manifestations?

One of the purposes of biographies such as this is to make sense of a life, to search out, discover, and comment on the various steps of an individual's journey ... how events, circumstances, actions and choices combined to create what the person became ... to explain, to organize, and to define. Write your biography to date, working out for yourself how events, circumstances and choices combined to shape who you are.



Research and write the biography of an important (older) person in your life - a parent, grandparent, or teacher. What questions do you need to ask in order to come to an understanding of the narrative of their life? How do you construct that narrative to fulfill the above described purposes of biography?

Consider and discuss the concept of "religionless Christianity," as defined in Chapter 28. Is such a thing, Christianity without religion, possible? Is faith still faith if it's not practiced within the parameters of ritual and rule as defined by religion?