

## "SOME TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEN OF GOD"

I. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

### INTRODUCTION

Some of you know of my fondness for occasional biographical sermons. It has long seemed to me that one of God's favorite ways of communicating is through people. When a good friend of John Greenleaf Whittier died, he wrote these lines:

"The dear Lord's best interpreters  
Are humble, human souls -  
The Gospel of a life like hers  
Is more than books or scrolls."

In the highest sense, this is what the New Testament says about Jesus. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us". Never again - in just that way. But still, the word of God and the will of God seem often entrusted to human lips and lives, often emerging through human frailties and struggles, not always recognized at the moment, but later acknowledged as "the word becoming flesh and dwelling among us".

I have never attempted a series of sermons on "twentieth-century men of God". In a way, this is harardous and presumptuous. We are too close to the events and passions of our own time fully and finally to appreciate greatness. So let these sermons of the next three Sundays be introduced today with the acknowledgment that they represent one minister's present estimate of three men who seem to him to be among the "dear Lord's best interpreters" in our century.

### DEVELOPMENT

If we had been in the vicinity of Morningside Heights here in our own city in 1930 or again in the Summer of 1939, we might have encountered a tall, broad-shouldered young German by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who at those times was studying or lecturing at Union Theological Seminary. Those were his only two unheralded visits to this country, but forty years later, he is often hailed as one of the tallest Christians of this century.

Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 - one of eight children in a comfortable, middle-class family. Most of his childhood was spent in Berlin, where his father was a psychiatrist and university professor. By the time he was 11, the boy knew that he wanted to study theology, and by the time that he was 18, he was at the University of Tübingen pursuing his goal. He was soon recognized as a young man with a great mind and a strong faith, and the two developed together. He had by the time he was 21 the equivalent of his PhD. He spent a required year before his ordination as the pastor of a German congregation in Barcelona. Then came the year when he was in this land at Union Seminary studying under a special fellowship. He was dismayed by what seemed to him the lack of theology in American seminaries and churches, but he was impressed and influenced by what his biographer terms "one virtue which was not conspicuous among the learned members of the theological faculty at Berlin - a burning concern to bring what they (at Union) knew of Christianity into contact with daily life at every point".

So the promising young German Christian went back to begin his assignment as theological lecturer at the University of Berlin and Chaplain of a Technical High School. Yet it was no ivory tower academic existence that the young professor led. He was asked to take over a confirmation class of about fifty boys in one of Berlin's poorest, toughest districts. In time he gained the attention and respect and ultimately their Christian commitment. It is this combination of scholarship on the one hand and service on the other - devotion and deeds - that was so typical of this young man of God.

In 1933, Hitler came into power, an event of decisive importance for Bonhoeffer's life and influence. From the beginning, the young Christian was repulsed by Hitler's persecution of the Jews and his proclamation of Aryan superiority. Increasingly, he was dismayed by Hitler's unfolding arrogant plans for control of Germany, and then of Europe, and of the world. He was deeply appalled by the acquiescence or the silence of many of his fellow churchmen. He was one of the guiding spirits in the establishment of the Confessing Church of Germany, an independent fellowship of Christians, whose beginning was accompanied by this declaration:

"Jesus Christ, as He is testified to us in Holy Scripture, is the one word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and death...."

Bonhoeffer's particular position during this period was to serve as the director of the seminary for training young pastors of this Confessing Church. It was a highly orthodox seminary, centered in a rambling country house, and in time, forced to go underground and meet in secret sessions.

In the early summer of 1939, Bonhoeffer made his second visit to the United States. Friends here in the city secured for him an appointment as a summer lecturer at Union and what could have been a more permanent appointment as pastor to German Christian refugees in this country. His motives in coming to this country at this time are not entirely clear to us - perhaps they were not to him. He seemed to want a time and place for reflection upon his role in the imminent inferno that would soon break loose. But no sooner was he here, than he yearned to be back in his homeland. His American friends tried to persuade him to stay in America "for the duration" - but he made up his mind that he must return and he sailed on one of the last ships that could take him back to Germany before war broke out at summer's end in 1939.

He became active in the underground resistance movement in Germany. He became so convinced of the evil of Hitler's ways that he turned from the pacifism of his earlier years and became involved in plots to overthrow and destroy Hitler. An English friend recalls him saying:

"If we ~~claim~~ claim to be Christians there is no room for expediency. Hitler is Anti-Christ; therefore, we must go on with our work and eliminate him, whether he be successful or not".

His journey from pacifism to militancy is hard for some to understand; surely it was hard for him to make. But certain it is that he did within the framework of his faith and integrity.

Almost inevitably, he was arrested and imprisoned in April of 1943. For the first year or so, he was given certain freedom in prison. His correspondence with his friends and family, as well as some of his meditations during this period form the heart of the now-famous volume, "Letters and Papers From Prison". After the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life in July of 1944, new evidence was discovered incriminating Bonhoeffer, and thereafter, the shadows lengthened about him.

Still, there were delays in bringing him to trial, and he might have been liberated by the advancing American army had there not been a final burst of Nazi vengeance. On the Sunday after Easter in 1945, Bonhoeffer had been given permission to hold a small service with some of his fellow prisoners. As the ser-

vice ended, the door was flung open and two men stood in the doorway. "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, take your things and come with us". He knew what it meant, and as he went out to face the scaffold, he said to a friend: "For me this is the end, but also the beginning". Thus his life came to an end, but not his influence.

There are many different ways to suggest the heritage that Bonhoeffer has left us. Let me try to come at it by the way of three phrases from his writing which have gained wide usage in our time.

COSTLY GRACE      The first phrase is "costly grace". Listen to his words:

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance...grace without discipleship...grace without the cross...grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the Gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock".

There is no question that Dietrich Bonhoeffer revealed a magnificent grace at the center of his life. The word "radiance" is used repeatedly in the descriptions of friends who knew him well, friends of younger years, and even more by the wardens and fellow prisoners of his last few years. One of the simple, but splendid tributes came from an Englishman, a Captain Payne Best who was a fellow prisoner to the very end. He said,

"He always seemed to me to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event of life. His soul really shone in the dark desperation of our prison. He was one of the very few men that I have ever met to whom his God was real and close to him".

Yet, Bonhoeffer would be the first to acknowledge that such radiance was no cheap, casual gift. He was a man of intense spiritual discipline - devoted to the study of the Scriptures - faithful in prayer - harsh on himself and lenient on others. One time he wrote:

"The Christian disciple is as strict in condemning evil in himself as he was before with others, and as lenient with the evil in others as he was before to himself..."

Moreover, he knew his dark nights of the soul, his Gethsemane, especially when he first was imprisoned. There was nothing of pretense or dishonesty about him, and he wrote of his agonies:

"I often wonder who I really am....the man who goes on squirming under these ghastly experiences in wretchedness that cries to heaven, or the man who scourges himself and pretends to others (and even to himself) that he is placid, cheerful, composed and in control of himself, and allows people to admire him for it"

Yet the day came when radiance and confidence were the clear realities in his life. The same Captain Best wrote to Bonhoeffer's twin sister:

"At last he knew that there was nothing in life of which one need ever be afraid".

In a time when we are pretty much accustomed to looking for "cheap grace", this man of God speaks of "costly grace" and brings us back to the words of Jesus, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself...."

MAN FOR OTHERS

The second phrase is "the man for others". This was the way Bonhoeffer described Jesus - "one whose only concern is for others". He talked about "faith as this participation in this Being of Jesus" as a new "life for others" - "not in tasks beyond our scope and power, but in the nearest thing to hand". And in his devotion to Jesus "as the man for others", Bonhoeffer emerges with that same reputation.

Again, this idea of "the man for others" is not the most popular concept or concern in our day. We are generally much more interested in ourselves, our rights, our future, our security, than we are in others. "If I don't look out for myself" a man piously affirms, "nobody else is going to". And there is a certain truth to it - a certain justification for prudence, foresight, saving.

The only thing is that once there appeared upon this earth a life of such beauty, of such forgetfulness, such self-giving - that the people with big barns, big fortunes, the big plans for themselves all appeared rather foolish and spiritually bankrupt. And in every generation, at least a few of Christ's followers capture enough of His spirit to make the rest of us look a little foolish with our self-getting and self-centeredness. Bonhoeffer is one of those who by word and deed remind us that to be a Christian in the fullest sense, is to be "a man for others".

RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY

The final phrase "religionless Christianity" which seems like a strange wedding of words was coined by him and who can say dogmatically what was in his mind when he coined it. From his own life-style, it is pretty clear that he did not mean the divorce of Christianity from loyalty to the church or from personal devotional discipline.

Perhaps it would be accurate to say that Bonhoeffer was concerned with saving Christianity from a religious ghetto or isolation from the world around. He himself found and served God, not only in the quiet cloisters which were important to him, but also in the noise and action and sins and needs of the teeming world in which he lived. His closest friend put it this way:

"Secret discipline without worldiness become pure ghetto;  
worldiness without the secret discipline pure boulevard"

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Bonhoeffer's life was lived from the boulevard and progressively further from the ghetto. It was lived with God and for God, with people and for people.

A loyal German, Bonhoeffer did not hesitate to criticize his country and his leaders when he saw them unfaithful to the word of God. A privileged middle-class man, he did not hesitate to become involved in the plight of the poor and the rejected. A scholarly man, who could have spent his life in solitude, he gave himself in service. A talented man who could have done well for himself in the German religious establishment, he is remembered as "a man for others". All of which may help to shed light on his phrase "religionless Christianity".

In all of his life, he bears more than a faint resemblance to the Master whom he served - that original "man for others" - who also died the death of a criminal - because he exposed evil wherever he saw it - because he cared about people without regard to creed or country - because he was faithful to his God.

And while discipleship does not mean the same path or the same price for every person in every place and time, you can hardly spend much time with Bonhoeffer without some new appreciation of the meaning of discipleship - both its cost and its grandeur - even in the 20th century.

PRAYER      Thank you, our Father, for the best interpreters that we have known - some common people in common places - some great people in high places. Send us out from here with a concern and a deepened commitment for the Gospel that each of us daily records in the comings and goings of life. Amen