



# Dietrich Bonhoffer

“Letters and Papers from Prison”

(1943-1945, first publication 1952)



# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

The Confessing Church has lapsed into conservative restoration. The important thing about it is that carries on the great concepts of Christian theology... It is true that there are in those concepts the elements of genuine prophesy (among them the claim to truth, and mercy) and of genuine worship... But both remain undeveloped and remote, because there is no interpretation of them [for the present]. (328)

# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

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The Confessing Church...sociologically has no effect on the masses – interest confined to the upper and lower middle classes. A heavy load of difficult traditional ideas. The decisive factor: the church on the defensive. No taking risks for others. (381)

# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

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Humanity has learned to deal with itself in all questions of importance without recourse to the “working hypothesis” called “God.” In questions of science, art and ethics this has become so well understood that one hardly dares to question it. For the last hundred years or so it has also become increasingly true of religious questions. It is becoming evident that everything gets along without “God”... “God” is being pushed more and more out of life... (325f)

# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. ... How do we speak of God without religion, i.e. without the time-conditioned presupposition of metaphysics, religious inwardness and so on? How do we speak in a “secular” way about God? In what way are we “religionless-secular” Christians...called forth as belonging wholly to the world? In that case Christ is no longer an object of religion, but...really the Lord of the world. But what does that mean? (279-281)

# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

Hasn't the individualistic question about personal salvation almost completely left us all? ... Isn't this in fact biblical? Does the question about saving one's soul appear in the Old Testament at all? Aren't righteousness and the Kingdom of God on earth the focus of everything? ... It is not with the beyond that we are concerned, but with the world as created and preserved, subjected to laws, reconciled, and restored. What is above this world is, in the gospel, intended to exist for this world... (285f)

# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

Religious people speak of God when human resources fail, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure, always, that is, exploiting human weakness or human boundaries and limitations. ... I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the center, not in weakness but in strength, and therefore not in death and guilt but in human life and goodness. ... God is “beyond” in the midst of our life. The church is not at the boundaries where human powers give out, but in the middle of life, in the middle of the town. That is how it is in the Old Testament, and in this sense we still read the New Testament far too little in the light of the Old. (282f)



# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

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There are some lines that say, “that we remember what we would forget, that this poor earth is not our home.” That is indeed essential, but it must come last of all. I believe that we ought to love and trust God in our lives, and in all the good things that he sends us, that when the time comes...we may go to God with love, trust, and joy. (168)

# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

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I must be able to know for certain that I am in God’s hands, not in men’s.  
Then everything becomes easy. (174)

# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

Christian hope of resurrection sends us back to life on earth in a wholly new way which is even more sharply defined than it is in the Old Testament. The Christian...has no line of escape from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but like Christ himself... Christians must drink the earthly cup to the dregs, and only in doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with them... Christ takes hold of a person at the center of his or her life. You see how my thoughts are constantly revolving around the same theme. (336f)

# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

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That is conversion [to faith in Christ]: not in the first place thinking of one’s own needs, problems, sins and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ... (361)

# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

God would have us know that we must live as persons who manage our lives without him. ... Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us...by virtue of his weakness and suffering. [Matt. 8:17: (v. 16: Jesus heals the sick and demon possessed.) “This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, ‘He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.’”] (360)

# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

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One goes to God when one is sore bestead,  
Prays to God for succor, for God’s peace, for bread,  
For mercy for one sick, sinning, or dead;  
All people do so, Christian and unbelieving.

One goes to God when one is sore bestead,  
Find God poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,  
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead;  
Christians stand by God in God’s hour of grieving.

# Bonhoeffer, “Letters and Papers from Prison”

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God goes to every person when sore bestead,  
Feeds body and spirit with God’s bread;  
For Christians, pagans alike God hangs dead,  
And both alike forgiving. (348f)

**July 21, 1945**

## **After the news of the failure of Stauffenberg's bomb**

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I'm still discovering that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. ...I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In doing so we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane. ... How can success make us arrogant, or failure lead us astray, when we share in God's sufferings through a life of this kind? ... May God in his mercy lead us through these times; but above all may lead us to himself. (369f)



**May, 1944**

## **Thoughts on Day of the Baptism of a Friend's Child**

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**Your grandfather on your father's side lived in a country parsonage. A simple, healthy life, with wide intellectual interests, joy in the homeliest things, a natural and unaffected interest in ordinary people and their work, a capacity for self-help in practical things, and modestly grounded in spiritual contentment – those are the earthly values which were at home in the country parsonage... In all the circumstances of life you will find them a firm basis for living together with other people, and for achieving real success and inward happiness.**

**May, 1944**

# **Thoughts on Day of the Baptism of a Friend's Child**

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**The urban middle-class culture embodied in the home of your mother's parents led to pride in public service, intellectual achievement and leadership, and a deep-rooted sense of duty towards a great heritage and cultural tradition.**

**May, 1944**

## **Thoughts on Day of the Baptism of a Friend's Child**

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**In the revolutionary times ahead the greatest gift will be to know the security of a good home. It will be the bulwark against all dangers from within and without. The time when children broke away in arrogance from their parents will be past. Children will be drawn to their parents' protection, and they will seek refuge, counsel, peace, and enlightenment. ... The piety of your home will...teach you to say your prayers, to fear and love God above all, and to do the will of Jesus Christ....**

**May, 1944**

# **Thoughts on Day of the Baptism of a Friend's Child**

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**It is a question whether we are moving towards an age of the selection of the fittest, i.e. an aristocratic society, or to uniformity in all material and spiritual aspects of human life. Although there has been a very far-reaching equalization, the sensitivity of all ranks of society for the human values of justice, achievement and courage could create a new selection of people who will be allowed the right to provide strong leadership. It will not be difficult for us to renounce our privileges, recognizing the justice of history. We may have to face events and changes that take no account of our wishes and our rights. But if so, we shall not give way to embittered and barren pride, but consciously submit to divine judgment, and so prove ourselves worthy to survive by identifying ourselves generously with the life of the community and the sufferings of our fellow men. ...**

**May, 1944**

# **Thoughts on Day of the Baptism of a Friend's Child**

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**It is not for us to prophesy the day (although it will come) when men will once more be called so to utter the word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it. ...it will be the language of a new righteousness and truth, proclaiming God's peace with men and the coming of his kingdom. ... Till then the Christian cause will be a silent and hidden affair, but there will be those who pray and do right and wait for God's own time.  
(294-300)**

# Excerpt from “After Ten Years” [after Hitler]

A reflection given to some members of the “Abwehr,” Christmas, 1943

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In other times it may have been the business of Christianity to champion the equality of all men; its business today will be to defend passionately human dignity and reserve. The misinterpretation that we are acting for our own interests, and the cheap insinuation that our attitude is anti-social, we shall simply have to put up with; they are the invariable protests of the rabble against decency and order. Anyone who is pliant and uncertain in this matter does not realize what is at stake, and indeed in his case the reproaches may well be justified. We are witnessing the levelling down of all ranks of society, and at the same time the birth of a new sense of nobility, which is binding together a circle of people from all former social classes.

# Excerpt from “After Ten Years” [after Hitler]

A reflection given to some members of the “Abwehr,” Christmas, 1943

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Nobility arises from and exists by sacrifice, courage, and a clear sense of duty to oneself and society... it shows an equally natural regard for others, whether they are of higher or lower degree. We need all along the line to recover the lost sense of quality and social order based on quality. Quality is the greatest enemy of any kind of mass-leveling. Socially it means...a break with the cult of the “star,” an open eye both upwards and downwards, and pleasure in private life as well as courage to enter public life. Culturally it means a return from the newspaper and the radio to the book, from feverish activity to unhurried leisure, from dispersion to concentration..., from snobbery to modesty, from extravagance to moderation. Quantities are competitive, qualities are complementary. (12f)

# Excerpt from “After Ten Years” [after Hitler]

A reflection given to some members of the “Abwehr,” Christmas, 1943

We have...learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled. The important thing is that neither bitterness nor envy should have gnawed at the heart during this time, that we should have come to look with new eyes at...sorrow and joy, strength and weakness, that our perception of generosity, humanity, justice and mercy should have become clearer, freer, less corruptible. We have to learn that personal suffering is a more effective key, a more rewarding principle for exploring the world in thought and action than personal good fortune. This perspective from below must not become the possession of those who are eternally dissatisfied; rather we must do justice to life in all its dimensions from a higher satisfaction, whose foundation is beyond any talk of “from below” or “from above.” This is the way in which we may affirm it. (17)



