

Editor's Introduction to the Reader's Edition
of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers
from Prison*

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When first published in 1951 Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* was a slender volume of two hundred pages with an uncertain future. Its editor, Eberhard Bethge, a German Lutheran pastor and close friend of Bonhoeffer's, had yet to become well known as his biographer and interpreter. Now, as volume 8 of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, *Letters and Papers from Prison* is considerably larger, thoroughly revised, freshly translated, and includes a great deal of previously unpublished material.

Letters and Papers from Prison has become a twentieth-century Christian classic that has attracted the interest of a wide circle of readers in many countries. It is also an essential text for anyone interested in understanding Bonhoeffer and the relevance of his legacy today. More specifically, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

documents the final two years of Bonhoeffer's extraordinary life. It is a poignant story of friendship and love, faith and hope, as the tide of history turned against Germany and Bonhoeffer's own life drew to a dramatic, lonely, and tragic close.

The Story in Its Context

With the fall of Stalingrad in February 1943, Germany's fate was virtually sealed. Soon the Russian and Allied forces would make their final push toward Berlin. At the same time the German resistance was growing in determination, and those in the conspiracy who were plotting Hitler's assassination were considering their options. Bonhoeffer had spent the previous two years working in the German military intelligence, which, ironically, was also the heart of the conspiracy in which he too was involved. But it was his other anti-Nazi activities, among them helping Confessing Church pastors evade military service, that aroused the interest and suspicions of the Gestapo. On April 5, 1943, he was arrested at his parents' home in Berlin. Also arrested with him were his sister Christine and brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, all charged with the "subversion of the armed forces."

Dietrich was taken to Tegel military prison, and soon found himself in its alien, hostile environment, so different from the relative comforts of home. But worse by far was that he was now separated from his family, his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer to whom he had only recently been engaged, and from his friend Eberhard Bethge who was shortly to be married to his niece Renate Schleicher. But they all anticipated that they would soon be reunited. After all, the Bonhoeffers were well connected, and the Nazi prosecutors seemed to have only circumstantial evidence on which to base their case.

For the first few months, Dietrich was only allowed to correspond infrequently with his parents, and all the mail was censored. As we

read the letters, we soon become aware that Berlin, though still far from the battle lines, was being subjected to increasing Allied bombing, making Dietrich anxious about the welfare of his loved ones. He put on a brave face, trying to hide his loneliness and circumstances from them. He was also concerned about his friend Eberhard who had been drafted into the military and would soon be sent to the Italian front where the Allied forces had landed and were advancing toward Rome. And as the bombs rained down on Berlin night after night, he was more immediately mindful of the needs of his terrified fellow prisoners and warders.

Yet outside life went on despite food rationing, the bombings, and growing inconveniences of all kinds. Bonhoeffer's nieces and nephews went to school, his father, though retired, continued to work as a neuro-physician, and his elder brother Karl-Friedrich continued his work as a physicist. Bomb-damaged homes were repaired, gardens planted, and weddings and birthdays celebrated. But hovering over everything in the family circle was the ominous cloud of the imprisonment and interrogations of Dietrich and Hans von Dohnanyi.

As the days dragged by, and the court proceedings and his trial began, Bonhoeffer developed strategies for survival. His prison cell became a hermitage in which the passing seasons of nature and the Christian year provided a semblance of structure to the loneliness and tedium of prison life, as did reading the Bible and the visits of his aging parents with parcels of food and books. Memories of better times and places sustained him, as did his remarkably extensive reading, and soon he was jotting down notes of his reflections on time and memory, music, friendship and marriage, biblical texts and hymns.

On July 20, 1944, the plot on Hitler's life failed. This was a critical turning point not only for the resistance but also for Bonhoeffer.

Even though the Gestapo did not yet know that he was involved, they were determined to root out all the conspirators on the orders of Hitler. Bonhoeffer's hopes of release faded. He now captured his feelings in poetry and drafted the outline for a book on the future of Christianity in a postwar secular age. Bethge, who had for so long been his conversation partner, resumed that role as these letters flowed between them. These are sometimes referred to as the "theological letters." The last surviving letter Bethge received was dated August 23, 1944. Several others came after that but were destroyed for security reasons. Bethge wrote his last letter to his friend on September 30, but it was not delivered.

Ten days earlier, on September 20, Gestapo commissioner Franz Sonderegger discovered files related to the conspiracy in Zossen, an outpost of the Military Intelligence. The discovery sealed the fates of Bonhoeffer, his brother Klaus, and his brothers-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi and Rüdiger Schleicher. On October 8 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was transferred to the Gestapo prison on Prinz-Albrecht-Straße. Later that same month Bethge himself was arrested as a possible accomplice, and taken from Italy back to Berlin under guard.

On February 7, 1945, Bonhoeffer was taken first to Buchenwald and then, passing through the village of Schönberg in Bavaria, to Flossenbürg concentration camp where he arrived on April 8. That evening he was tried by a hastily convened and rigged court and condemned to death. Early the next morning he was executed along with several other conspirators. The same day his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi was executed in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, near Berlin. On April 22, his brother Klaus and his brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher, the father of Renate Bethge, were shot by the Gestapo near the Lehrterstraße prison in Berlin. A few days later Berlin was liberated and the war came to an end.

Soon after the war ended, Bethge circulated some of the “theological letters” to a few of Bonhoeffer’s former students, and spoke about them to others within the circle of German theologians and pastors who had been influenced by Bonhoeffer. But with his friend no longer around to speak for himself, Bethge felt the need to share his final theological explorations with a wider readership. In the meantime he had already retrieved many of the other letters that had been safely hidden during the war, and which provided the more personal context in which the “theological letters” were written. These letters were first published in German under the title *Widerstand und Ergebung* (*Resistance and Submission*), which captures the heart of the story. Resisting the despair that so often threatened to break his spirit, Bonhoeffer had learned to trust and submit to the will of God.

The book immediately attracted attention in Germany, where Bonhoeffer’s “new theology” sparked off an intense debate. Then, in 1953, it was published in English, where the debate was equally lively but differently focused. If German theologians were interested in Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on the “nonreligious interpretation” of biblical concepts, the English pastors and their congregations were intrigued by Bonhoeffer’s proposals for the life of the church and spirituality in a “world come of age.” But there was still a great deal of material that lay dormant in Bethge’s files waiting publication if and when the time was right. This time came when in 1971 Bethge published a new and expanded version of *Letters and Papers from Prison* in which he included more letters of general interest. Then, in 1997, the new, critical German edition, of which Bonhoeffer Works volume 8 is the translation, was published. Bethge had completed his lifelong task with remarkable energy, dedication, and insight.

A Book in Four Parts

This new edition is divided into four parts as described below. In what turned out to be an editorial masterstroke, Bethge included as a Prologue an essay Bonhoeffer wrote before his arrest in December 1942. This was a Christmas letter to his co-conspirators in the resistance. Titled “After Ten Years,” it provides a bridge between Bonhoeffer’s final months of freedom and his imprisonment. In it he reflected on the years since Hitler came to power and the resistance into which he had been so ineluctably drawn.

1. The Interrogation Period: April–July 1943

For the first four months Bonhoeffer could only correspond with his parents; in his letters he downplayed his plight while supporting and encouraging them. He also sent a wedding sermon to Eberhard and Renate Bethge that arrived too late for that occasion. The sermon provides an insight into his conservative view of marriage and gender relations at the time. This is also evident in the correspondence that he also had with his fiancée in the months that followed; those letters have been published as *Love Letters from Cell 92: The Correspondence Between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer, 1943–45*.

On July 30, Bonhoeffer was informed that the preliminary investigation into his case had been concluded, but he remained in custody. He had to learn how to accept that maybe things would not work out as he and his family and friends had hoped.

2. Awaiting the Trial: August 1943–April 1944

In the second phase of his imprisonment Bonhoeffer had additional letter-writing privileges, including permission to correspond with Maria. As all correspondence was censored, more sensitive messages to and from the family were encoded in the text. It was only on

November 18, 1943, that Bonhoeffer wrote to Bethge for the first time from prison. The letter was smuggled out with the help of a friendly guard who continued to act as a conduit for letters to Bethge over the ensuing months. Fortuitously, Bethge was in Berlin visiting his wife Renate when the first letter arrived. But in January 1944 he was sent to the Italian front just after the Allied troops had landed at Anzio, south of Rome.

Bethge's ten months in Italy coincided with the German army's retreat from the Allies, increasingly under partisan fire. He was assigned to a small Military Intelligence unit where he worked as a clerk for the commanding officer. Bonhoeffer's initial letters to Bethge reflected doubt about their future together, and spoke more openly about the actual conditions of prison life than did his letters to the family. As much as Bonhoeffer was interested in the ordinary things of life and experimenting with "creative writing," he told his parents that his "real work" in prison was his theological explorations. These now began to find expression in his letters to Bethge.

3. Holding Out for the Coup Attempt: April–July 1944

Reading between the lines during this third phase, it is evident that there was both great anxiety and expectation as the day for the assassination attempt against Hitler approached. But this was also the period during which Bonhoeffer's theological reflections gathered fresh vigor, as seen in his letter of April 30, 1944. Other "theological letters" followed in relatively quick succession. Together with his "Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge" and the "Outline for a Book" (in part 4), they embodied Bonhoeffer's "new" theology from prison.

When Bethge returned to Berlin for the baptism of his son in May, he took with him all the letters he had received until then and buried them in the garden of his parents-in-law's home, adjacent to

that of the Bonhoeffer parents' house. Bethge also managed to visit Bonhoeffer. This led to a flurry of more letters, reflecting on the visit and what they had discussed. On returning to his unit in Italy, Bethge found several of Bonhoeffer's letters that continued the conversation about Christianity in a "world come of age." Soon after, in the letter of June 7, the first of Bonhoeffer's poems, "The Past," arrived. This unexpected venture into poetry took Bethge by surprise. Three more poems followed during that summer, expressing both Bonhoeffer's existential situation and some of the insights of his "new" theology.

4. After the Failure: July 1944–February 1945

Immediately after he heard the news of the failure of the July 20th plot, Bonhoeffer wrote his poem "Stations on the Road to Freedom." Despite his perilous situation he found new energy to get on with his theological work with enthusiasm. He was stimulated by an intensive program of reading books from the prison library and brought to him by his family. But he also drew deeply on his accumulated knowledge.

His major preoccupation was how to speak of God without the need for a religious worldview that was no longer credible, given the immense changes that had taken place in human endeavor over the past few centuries. Bonhoeffer was particularly challenged by the insights of modern physics, which made it impossible to fit God into the gaps of human knowledge. With this in mind he drafted his "Outline for a Book," an extended essay in which he took stock of the present situation of Christianity in "a world come of age," reflected on the meaning of Christian faith in this new historical context (the "nonreligious interpretation of Christianity"), and then offered some conclusions for the future of the church.

By "world come of age" Bonhoeffer meant that for vast numbers of Europeans influenced by the Enlightenment, there was no longer

the need for the “God-hypothesis” to explain reality and meet human need. This process, which would continue unabated and spread more widely, could not be addressed by an apologetic based on “ultimate questions” (such as despair, sin, and guilt) to which God alone was the answer. Such thinking reduced God to a *deus ex machina*, a “God from the machine,” who stepped in when everything else failed. Such thinking pushed God to the periphery of human affairs, to become the God of individual piety, bourgeois privilege, and a ghetto church, that is, the God of “religion.” Such an apologetic assumed a “religious *a priori*,” that is, a religious longing and a sense of weakness that could be appealed to in preaching the gospel. Bonhoeffer wanted to speak, rather, of God at the center of life and address men and women as responsible human beings.

The question of God had to do with “who Jesus Christ actually is for us, today,” the question that had increasingly provided the focus of Bonhoeffer’s theology. If we start with conceptions of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, we will never arrive at a true knowledge of God. However, if we participate by faith in Jesus Christ as the one who “is there for others,” we are liberated from self and experience the transcendent in the mundane. That is truly the God of the Bible, and this is the meaning of Christ becoming fully human and dying on the cross. Only from this perspective is it possible to interpret key biblical concepts and the creed, and to engage in liturgical renewal in a nonreligious way. The God of the Bible is not the god of “religion,” but the “suffering God,” and this was the starting point for Bonhoeffer’s “worldly interpretation.”

The consequences are far-reaching. If Jesus exists only for others, then the church must not seek its own self-preservation but be “open to the world” and in solidarity with others, especially the oppressed and suffering. The problem of the “world come of age” was not just that educated elites had drifted away from Christian faith or

claimed their autonomy, but that “Jesus” had disappeared from view because the church was no longer “at the center of the village” in any meaningful way. “Heavily burdened by difficult, traditional ideas,” the church was making “no impact on the broader masses” (4/187: **PAGE**). As a first step Bonhoeffer proposed that “it must give away all its property to those in need” and that its ministers should not receive a state stipend.

The Bonhoeffer who emerged in the final pages of the prison letters embraced within himself both a genuine Christian commitment as well as a humanist interest in and knowledge of life in the world in all its complex richness, and in which the church would become a zone of freedom. In this way Christian life would become more truly human. This did not mean the superficial worldliness of the enlightened but learning to live fully in the world by throwing “oneself completely into the arms of God,” for this, he says, “is how one becomes a human being, a Christian.”

Just as Bonhoeffer’s “this-worldliness” is not banal or superficial, so the “church for others” does not surrender its identity or the profound mystery of its faith in Christ. For this reason the church, in being “open to the world,” has to recover the “arcane discipline” (*disciplina arcana*) of the ancient church, whereby the mysteries of the faith are protected from profanation. In the world the church should be known by its service and its work for justice and peace; but within itself it is sustained by the disciplines of worship, prayer, and the sacraments which, with the creed, remain hidden at the heart of the life of the church, not thrust upon the world in some triumphalist manner.

Bonhoeffer’s “new theology” was not the only development that took Bethge by surprise. He was also taken aback by the rather sudden experiment at writing poetry during the final few months of Bonhoeffer’s life, which occurred at the same time as he was

developing his ideas on being Christian and on the church in a world come of age. But whereas his theological explorations were focused on the future of Christianity, his poetry centered more existentially on his own experience in prison, his struggle with faith and doubt, his hopes and fears, and his sense of impending death. Yet a close reading of his poetry reveals that it complements his theological reflections. The poems are their counterpoint penned at the same time but more deeply personal and existential. Not only do they express his loves and fears, his hopes and crises, as well as his profound awareness of events beyond his cell and the suffering of others, but also his leaps of theological imagination. In doing so they speak directly to our own hopes and fears, our longing to know who we truly are and how to face death.

At the beginning of this Introduction we noted that *Letters and Papers from Prison* has become a Christian classic. We suggest that this is so because it tells the story of a remarkable man and family who lived through an extraordinary moment of history. And it does so in their own words in which the mundane, the intimate, and the profoundly theological are woven together in a way that continues to speak to us in our time.