

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Brief Bio

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born on February 4, 1906, in Breslau, Germany, the sixth of eight children. His twin sister Sabine was number seven. The Bonhoeffers were a Prussian upper middle-class family. In 1912 his father was appointed as Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology at the University of Berlin, so the family moved to Berlin. As a young teenage boy Bonhoeffer surprised his family by announcing that he planned to be a theologian. The Bonhoeffers were members of the church, and the mother made sure the children were given religious instruction. But the family did not regularly attend church.

Bonhoeffer commenced theological studies at the University of Tübingen in 1923. He completed his doctorate in 1927 at the age of 21 at the University of Berlin. His dissertation was entitled *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Following the completion of his dissertation he entered his regional church's course of training for the ministry. In February 1928 he traveled to Barcelona, Spain, to serve for a year as a vicar for a small German-speaking congregation. In 1929 he returned to Berlin and accepted a position as a "voluntary assistant lecturer" in systematic theology. During this time, he also focused on writing his postdoctoral thesis *Act and Being*, completed in July 1930, qualifying him to be a university teacher.

In September 1930 he left for New York to study at Union Theological Seminary. While at Union, he often attended Abyssinian Baptist Church, an African American congregation in Harlem, and even taught Sunday School there. Upon his return to Berlin in 1931, he taught as a lecturer in the theological faculty, filled a student chaplain position, taught a confirmation class at a working-class parish, and became involved in the ecumenical movement and was chosen as Youth Secretary for the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches.

On February 1, 1933, two days after Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer was on the radio warning of the danger of making an idol out of a political leader. In April 1933 he published an article entitled "The Church and the Jewish Question," in which he highlighted three possible responses of the church to an unjust state: one, publicly question the legitimacy of unjust state actions; two, aid the victims of state action; and three, seize the wheel itself—that is, engage in direct political action to resist unjust state actions. Bonhoeffer worked with Martin Niemöller to form the Pastors' Emergency League, a forerunner of the Confessing Church, which resisted the inroads of the Nazis and Nazi ideology into the life and work of the church. In October 1933 Bonhoeffer left for London to serve two German-speaking congregations. Thus, he was not present in May 1934 for the adoption of the Barmen Declaration, which became the foundation of the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer supported the Barmen Declaration's resistance to the inroads of the

Nazis into the life and structure of the church, but was especially critical of its silence on the treatment of the Jews. In August 1934 he attended an ecumenical conference on the island of Fanø in Denmark. There, in a speech entitled "The Church and the Peoples of the World, he issued a radical call to peace and this challenge to the participants: "There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is the great venture."

In 1935 Bonhoeffer faced a decision of whether: (1) to continue as pastor of the congregations in London; or (2) to travel to India to study non-violent resistance under Gandhi; or (3) to accept an invitation to direct one of the Confessing Church's illegal seminaries. He accepted the invitation to lead the seminary, initially located in Zingst and then moved to Finkenwalde. At Finkenwalde he first met Eberhard Bethge, his dear friend, student, confessing partner, fellow conspirator, and biographer. Finkenwalde was closed by the Gestapo in September of 1937. Bonhoeffer continued training seminarians in a couple of "collective pastorates" in Pomerania. On *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass), November 9, 1938, Nazi henchmen vandalized hundreds of synagogues across Germany. Bonhoeffer was appalled by the silence of the Confessing Church in the aftermath of this horrific event.

In 1939 Reinhold Niebuhr and other American friends, wanting to rescue Bonhoeffer from the Nazis, arranged for him to come to the United States to teach and to work with German refugees. Soon after arriving in the United States, he realized that, as he wrote to Niebuhr, *"I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people."*

Upon his return to Germany, he resumed work with the collective pastorates until they were closed by the Gestapo in March 1940. In October 1940 he became a courier for the resistance group secretly operating out of the Office of Military Intelligence under the leadership of Hans Oster and Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi. As a courier he was to engage in secret talks with foreign church leaders who would communicate with Allied leaders concerning the plans and aims of the resistance movement. In this role he traveled to Switzerland three times, to Sweden, to Norway, and to Italy. During his time as a courier, he was banned from public speaking, had a residency restriction imposed on him, and was banned from publishing.

In January 1943 he became engaged to Maria Wedemeyer. They would never marry. Bonhoeffer and his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi were arrested and imprisoned on April 5, 1943. After the failure of the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt on Hitler, Bonhoeffer's fate was effectively sealed. He, brother-in-law Hans, and several other conspirators were executed by the Nazis on April 9 at the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp. The life and writings of

Bonhoeffer continue to have a significant impact on people of faith and the life of the church. The charge of treason against Bonhoeffer was removed in 1996.