

*Tommy Godsell*

**LIVING THROUGH THE CRISIS:  
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE CURRENT CRISIS  
IN WHICH SOUTH AFRICAN CHRISTIANS ARE LIVING,  
IN THE LIGHT OF THE LIFE AND THOUGHT  
OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER**

*“Lost time is time in which we have not lived as full people, experienced, learned, created, enjoyed and suffered. Lost time is unfilled, empty time. The last years have definitely not been lost time”.*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER<sup>1)</sup>

**1. Is there really a crisis?**

Are we in South Africa really living in a crisis?

There are many in our land, our Prime Minister amongst them, who think not.

After all, they say, we live today in inflationary times – not only money, but also word inflation. Everything is a crisis. Yesterday’s crisis, to adapt an adage, wraps today’s fish and chips. And, when we point to Soweto, they remind us that many people have very short memories. Yes – the Soweto riots rocked the country. But 16 years ago we experienced Sharpeville. The country was placed in a state of emergency ... hundreds, if not thousands of whites left our fair shores, convinced the end was indeed nigh ... foreign funds disappeared overnight ... the world raised loud and angry voices ... exiled leaders made appointments with the press “I’ll see you in Pretoria” they said “in a couple of years’ time”.

Yet, eight times two years later none of the Jeremiah prophesies have come true. The country has grown ... each year tens of thousands of white people come to South Africa. The policy progresses. There is “rus en vrede” ... more than many

1. From “Ten Years After”, *Widerstand und Ergebung*.

lands enjoy. Where then is the crisis?

The arguments are soothing and persuasive — yet I fear they conjure a dangerous delusion.

The world of 1961 is not the world of 1977. Soweto is not Sharpeville. Black resistance at the time of Sharpeville was spearheaded by small groups of dedicated adults ... now large numbers of school children have taken to the streets, repeatedly ... and indeed the recent actions show that what happened in June was no 'flash in the pan'.

More ominous still are the reports (exaggerated, perhaps, but quite baseless?) of large numbers of black schoolchildren crossing our borders to become guerillas. When a substantial segment of the youth of a country displays signs of such fundamental alienation the future must indeed be threatening.

Then too, in '61 the dawn of African independence was just beginning. Now South Africa is bordered, with but one exception, by Black ruled countries — countries either neutral or positively inclined toward groups seeking change in South Africa by the force of arms. And the world beyond Africa is a new world also. Pan Africanism is now an established force. The contacts between Africa and the East are now a significant reality, not a future threat.

Further, to compound the situation, South Africa is experiencing its worst economic depression since the war. And Western world economy is taking far longer to recover than was at first anticipated. If unemployment is a threat to democracy in the West, how much more is it a threat to the 'status quo' in South Africa? Estimates of black unemployment in South Africa range between one and two million. "Jobs or freedom" — for a long time this was the choice, and many choose jobs above freedom. When such a choice no longer exists?

Yet, our more optimistic sons will rebut, there is a flaw in our argument. The opposition in South Africa is not between the forces of change and the forces of stagnation. We fight not to preserve a status quo, but indeed to protect our opportunity to change .. the real opposition is between peaceful, evolutionary change, and violent, revolutionary change.

The very words sound comforting. And they hold a certain truth, or course. And there has been change. Signs have come off benches. White and black have played together, and sat together to watch other play. Theatres and hotels have been stripped of 'whites only' prohibitions. The Coloureds and Indians have a '*new deal*'. All groups have been promised free and compulsory education. The Transkei is independent. That is change ... indeed in the 'white world' it is a veritable whirlwind of change. Indeed a 'peaceful revolution'.

Yet we live no longer in a 'white world', and alas that white world no longer dictates the timetable of events. No single land has recognised the Transkei ... and the world, quite rightly, looks to Soweto, not Umtata, to know the heartbeat of black politics.

We know our world has changed and is changing in other, more ominous ways. We sense it in the new air of confidence and hostility we who are white feel reflected in the 'they' who are black. The warnings are found not just in arguments, but in attitudes ... in the enormous growth of white fear ... in the rush to guns ... in the continuously re-run discussions about leaving ... in our sons on the border.

Yes, there is a crisis. And whatever South Africa's history in the next few years, all its citizens, white and black, face fundamental challenges and choices.

Inevitably those choices will be hard. They will be costly choices. And the choices facing the South African churches – especially those churches with both white and black memberships – will be very hard choices.

And so a question facing all of us who have been baptised by South Africa's beneficent sun is indeed ... how will we live through the crisis?

## **2. Who is Dietrich Bonhoeffer and what has he to do with South Africa?**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a young German pastor and theologian, born into one of Germany's leading academic families, who involved himself in first the church-based and then the political

opposition to Hitler, and as a result spent the last two years of his life in jail, being executed days before the Americans liberated the concentration camp where he was being held.

What has such a man to do with South Africa? On the face of it very little. He never visited the country, and barely mentioned it in his writings<sup>2</sup>). Furthermore, it would be wrong, foolish and even dangerous to suggest that South Africa in 1977 is “the same” as Germany in 1939. Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer’s closest friend and foremost interpreter, in a report on a visit to South Africa in 1973<sup>3</sup>) noted certain superficial similarities – in fact, the ‘realities’ which all countries exhibiting authoritarian laws and practices, have in common – but also fundamental differences in the situations in the two times and two countries.

Why then bother ourselves with this man?

I believe Bonhoeffer has much to say to both the church and to individual Christians in South Africa 1977 because Bonhoeffer, as a ‘modern’<sup>4</sup>) Christian, lived through a crisis of easily the same fundamental proportions as the crisis which now faces us. He lived through the crisis both in spite of, and indeed because of, his final execution. And the insights he won in doing so – insights into how indeed a Christian may live through the crisis – are of the greatest value to us today. They are indeed the Gospel revealed anew in our times.

### 3. Three stages in the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Eberhard Bethge, in his definitive biography of Bonhoeffer<sup>5</sup>),

2. Bonhoeffer used a South African character in an unfinished novel he began writing whilst in prison.

3. *Bonhoeffer, Exile and Martyr*, Eberhard Bethge, 1976.

4. ‘Modern’ is used here in the sense of a citizen of a world come of age.

5. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Theologe Christen und Zeitgenosse*, Eberhard Bethge, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1966.

has identified three stages in his life. He has characterised these stages as Bonhoeffer the theologian, the christian and the contemporary (though the word 'contemporary' is a weak rendering of the German term 'Zeitgenosse' ... perhaps more 'man of his times', or even 'actor-in-history').

Bonhoeffer was born in 1906, one of twins, forming the 6th and 7th children in the Bonhoeffer family. It was an illustrious family. Bonhoeffer's father was Germany's leading psychiatrist, the head of the leading Psychiatric Institution in Berlin. Dietrich's eldest brother, Karl-Frederich, was a leading physicist; the second eldest brother, Walter, died in the first World War; the third eldest, Klaus, was a prominent jurist. Dietrich's two elder sisters both married lawyers who held important positions in government. His twin sister, Sabine, married a law professor of non-Aryan background; and his younger sister, Susanne, married a theologian.

#### *Bonhoeffer the theologian*

Bonhoeffer studied theology at the university of Tübingen and Berlin. He was a brilliant student. At the age of 23 he became a junior lecturer in the theology faculty at Berlin. By this time he had already published two books, *The Community of the Saints* and *Act and Being*.

Though he studied under Germany's leading liberal theologians, Bonhoeffer was more deeply influenced by the 'revelation-based' theology of Karl Barth. Barth formed one of Bonhoeffer's most important intellectual contacts throughout his life.

In the year 1930/31 Bonhoeffer studied at the Union Theological Seminary, where he made contact with leading American theologians such as Reinold Niebuhr. One of the results of this experience was to strengthen Bonhoeffer's rejection of 'liberal' theology. During these years the foundations of Bonhoeffer's 'christological' interpretation of Christianity were laid, and well-laid ... for throughout his life, and in the enormous development of his thoughts about Christianity, the central question remained for Bonhoeffer, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"

### *Bonhoeffer the Christian*

Bethge locates a movement in Bonhoeffer's life from theologian to Christian as commencing more or less on Bonhoeffer's return from his year in the United States.

Bonhoeffer had of course been preparing to enter the ministry. Yet he faced a basic choice with regard to his future career; was he to teach or to preach? The dilemma as to which of these two careers to choose occupied Bonhoeffer for a number of years (during which time he did both!). However, in the early thirties it became clearer and clearer that Bonhoeffer wanted to 'live' his Christianity, rather than analyse, order, understand and teach it.

Also in the early thirties there began a commitment for Bonhoeffer which was to be one of the major shaping forces in his life. He was suddenly propelled into the ecumenical movement. Here his rise was meteoric.

He soon became one of three international youth secretaries of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the churches (a predecessor to the World Council of Churches). It was in the ecumenical movement that Bonhoeffer made some of his most enduring and important friendships – the most significant of which was with George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester.

Also at this time Bonhoeffer became significantly involved in the church struggle in Germany. In essence this was a struggle between those either wanting or willing to see the church in Germany made into an organ of a National Socialist State, and those who wished to keep the church free and faithful to the Gospel.

In 1933/35 (in fact just a little over one year) Bonhoeffer went to London to be Pastor to two emigrant German churches. In a way this was an escape. The pressure had become too great. He needed distance.

In 1935 Bonhoeffer returned to what is probably the most important 'Christian', and certainly church-related, experience of his life. He returned to found a seminary for training ministers for the young Confessing Church. This church had broken away

from the State Church in order to be faithful only to Christ. The seminary was located at Finkelwald, and became a seminary like no other in German Protestantism. Here Bonhoeffer created a 'brothers' house' – not merely a college, but a community of Christians living together.

There was something of a 'modern monasticism' involved. The daily routine included meditation and common prayer and Bible reading. Yet it was hardly an instance of aesthetic withdrawal.

The moments of reflection were married to other moments of acting, relaxing, and just 'being' together. Central to the whole 'experiment' – for this is what it was, and was seen as – was an attempt to recapture real Christian fellowship. Whether the Finkelwalders were praying, studying, listening to Bonhoeffer's American jazz records, or frantically producing election pamphlets for the church elections, they were sharing themselves and their lives in a way rarely to be seen in modern Christianity.

Perhaps the most important test of this 'experiment' is the survival of the bonds between the brothers, which long outlived the closing of the seminary by the Gestapo in 1937. For years Bonhoeffer maintained contact with the Finkelwalders through the circulation of a newsletter. Even in his final prison days his thoughts were often turned to news of the death of 'a brother'.

The period at Finkelwald was also the 'mid-wife' to the writing of two of Bonhoeffer's most important books – *The cost of discipleship*, a discussion of the Sermon on the Mount and its implications for Christians, and for the church – *Life together*, the report of the Finkelwald experiment.

After Finkelwald was closed Bonhoeffer spent some time as a travelling Pastor. His military call-up threatened. As once before, the pressure became too great, and he left hurriedly for America.

#### *Bonhoeffer the contemporary*

The second visit to America was intended to be of a much longer duration than the first. It was seen (certainly by others, if not by Bonhoeffer himself) as a flight from a Germany, where continued struggle had become hopeless, if not impossible. Yet

weeks after arriving in America, and after extensive arrangements had been made for Bonhoeffer to lecture in the States, Bonhoeffer decided to return to Germany.

The decision to return "to the centre of the storm" was inexplicable to many of Bonhoeffer's friends. Bonhoeffer himself never regretted the decision, as clearly difficult as it had been to take. The return is perhaps the single most significant action of Bonhoeffer's life. For Bonhoeffer was returning to not only a country in crisis, but also saw a mission for himself in the crisis. His brother, Klaus, and brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi and Rüdiger Schleier, had for several years been involved in a group of politicians and military leaders opposed to Hitler. They had already been involved in the first unsuccessful Putsch, or coup, in 1938. Now Bonhoeffer knew he was returning not to Finkelwald, or a church struggle, but to a politically dangerous and morally ambiguous involvement in Germany's history.

For the next four years (until April 1943) Bonhoeffer played an important, though limited, role in the German resistance (see Peter Hoffman, who has written perhaps the definitive history of this movement). Bonhoeffer's contribution lay in his contacts with people in other countries. He made several trips abroad essentially to prepare the way for negotiations between the Allied Powers and a new German government. That his trips were unsuccessful was not in any way due to a lack of effort or daring on his part ... nor on the part of his old friends from the ecumenical movement, such as George Bell. They were unsuccessful because the Allies repeatedly refused to make the distinction between Hitler and Germany ... a refusal which certainly increased the odds against the success of the resistance movement.

In November 1940 Bonhoeffer (unknown to most of his church friends) entered the service of the German Military Intelligence — in order to facilitate the activities in which he was en-



gaged. By this time certain groups within the military were the only remaining viable opposition groups left. In April 1943 both he and Hans von Dohnanyi were arrested – initially for fairly minor breaches of military rules. At that stage the Gestapo had no idea of how deeply these two men were involved in a plot to remove Hitler. This was only discovered more than a year later after the July 1944 unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life.

In a way the very richest thoughts of Bonhoeffer stem from his two years in prison. The letters and papers which survive this period testify to the critical role Bonhoeffer played as an intellectual leader, encourager and reflector in his new 'company of brothers'. This emerges, of course, only indirectly, for never could Bonhoeffer write of his real hopes, plans or fears.

In April 1945 – days before the liberation of the area in which he was being held – Bonhoeffer was executed. Von Dohnanyi and Schleier, his brothers-in-law, as well as Klaus, his brother, were also executed in that month.

The reaction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in West Germany has been particularly influenced by the actions of his final years, that is, his involvement in the political conspiracy. Within West Germany the churches have tended to prefer to remember the 'purer' heroes, that is, the people who died because of their 'religious' opposition to Hitler. Now, a few years after the holocaust, the church has 'returned to normal', and the thought of political opposition – of assassination plots, seems improper if not downright 'unchristian'.

In the West, the reaction has been more positive, yet also more superficial. Bonhoeffer was against Hitler and died because of this. These seem to be the only facts that count. The world – now – is also against Hitler ... so Bonhoeffer is quickly raised to the status of martyr ... where he can inspire, rather than disturb or question us.

In the East, in East Germany and Poland, Bethge reports a much more profound and thorough interest in Bonhoeffer. Perhaps this is because the church there is still faced with persecution, and with identifying with the persecuted. There the church remains without the privileges and powers and status it enjoys in

the West. Perhaps there is a profound truth in this differing reaction.

#### 4. Bonhoeffer – some challenges for the church

At least three major challenges can be seen for the church in South Africa arising from Bonhoeffer's life and thought. Before describing these, we need to briefly consider what we mean by the church. There is a tension here between the "visible" and "invisible" church – the visible church being the organised church, and the invisible being the body of true believers, to which body not all members of the 'organised churches' belong. A distinguishing characteristic of Bonhoeffer's theology was that he tended to identify these two conceptions of the church. Here, we use 'church' in referring to the organisation and institutions of the churches as we know them in South Africa.

##### *Authentic faith*

Bonhoeffer's first challenge to our churches can perhaps be stated in the form of the question: "how authentic is the faith of our churches?"

For Bonhoeffer this question caused an examination of his faith – the actions and words – of his church in the concrete questions it faced in his world.

Bonhoeffer did and said a great deal about 'authentic faith'. We can focus on two aspects of his challenge here.

The first approach has to do with the concept of grace – a concept central to Lutheran Christianity. Bonhoeffer's *The cost of discipleship* is a plea for "costly" as opposed to "cheap" grace. In the following quotation we hear what Bonhoeffer means by this distinction:

"Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian 'conception' of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins. The church which holds the correct doctrine of grace has, it is supposed, *ipso facto* a part in that grace. In such a church the world finds a cheap covering for

its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin. ... Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner...

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*. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: 'ye were bought at a price', and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God". (Bonhoeffer, *The cost of discipleship* p. 35, 37 – original emphasis).

It is Bonhoeffer's thesis that with the 'establishment' of the church cheap grace has come to replace costly grace. For Bonhoeffer cheap grace is the preaching of the forgiveness of sins without the call to discipleship.

Which sort of grace is the basis of the churches in South Africa's preaching? Do we redeem only the sinners who are racists, or also the sin of racism itself? Is the confession of our sins in the liturgy of the church anything more than a 'poetic' reality? Most of all: where is the call to discipleship in the church in South Africa?

The second aspect is really a concrete instance of the first. As early as 1933 Bonhoeffer began to address himself and the church on the subject of the Jewish question. "*The church is in great trouble with the Jewish question*", Bonhoeffer noted, "*which has caused the most sensible people to lose their heads and forget their Bible*" (Gesammelte Schriften, volume I, page 37). Soon the debate about the 'Jewish question' was to form the central point of the contest between the confessing and the German church. Being a state church, the church was subject to "church elections". Bonhoeffer was intensely active in the campaign for the elections of July 1933. Although he did not write the following pamphlet, from which extracts are quoted below, it well reflects what Bonhoeffer meant by his challenge to the church to be a church of authentic faith:

*"The German Christians say: The voice of the people is the voice of God*  
(Declaration by Müller)

**THE BIBLE SAYS:** Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice – they cried out again ‘not this man, but Barabbas!’ Now Barabbas was a robber. (John 18, 37, 40)

**The German Christians say:** The appearance of Jesus Christ in world history is in its ultimate significance a phenomenon of a Nordic character. (Jäger)

**THE BIBLE SAYS:** The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matthew 1.1)

**The German Christians say:** A godless fellow-countryman is nearer to us than one of another race, even if he sings the same hymn or prays the same prayer. (Hossenfelder in Hamburg).

**THE BIBLE SAYS:** Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister and mother. (Mark 3.35)

**The German Christians say:** Only the existence of the nation makes possible the existence of an ordered and therefore potentially effective church. (Jäger, *Evangelical Germany*).

**THE BIBLE SAYS:** You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16.18).

(From: *No rusty swords*, pages 205, 206)

Perhaps Bonhoeffer’s most notable statement about the ‘costly grace’ of the church remains “*Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants?*”

How authentic is the faith of the South African churches? How intermingled is it with a “national religion” and a “national ideology” – in some cases quite explicit, the idea of the election of the Afrikaner nation, of their privileged place in the sight of God, of the victories God granted this nation over other national groupings. In other cases this is less explicit, but no less strong. How many White Christians make their faith in the brotherhood of men in Christ co-exist with the conviction of White superiority over men (and believers too!) of a different colour. Remember the shock, now many years ago, when Robert Kennedy had the temerity to suggest that God might have a Black skin.

“*The message to the people of South Africa*” was an attempt to put the ‘practical faith’ of the South African churches to the test of the Bible. As such it was both commendable, and vitally important. What was its impact? And what has happened since then?

### *Authentic fellowship*

The second Bonhoeffer challenge I see for the churches in South Africa is the question which asks “How authentic is the fellowship of the Church in South Africa?”

When Bonhoeffer returned from London in 1935 to head the seminary at Finkelwald he was under no illusion about the state of the church in Germany, and the challenges it was to face in the coming years. He designed a training environment that would best equip the young pastors who passed through Finkelwald to meet these challenges. In doing this he was also testing ideas about “the Christian community” in a more general sense.

In the “Brothers’ house” at Finkelwald the young pastors learnt together, discussed together, prayed together, relaxed together... indeed *lived* together. They also served their community together. Bonhoeffer encouraged the idea of team ministry, not only of “ministers-in-training”, but also after the Finkelwald period. As many of the ministers coming to Finkelwald had lost their “licences” from the State, and thus the privileges of a State appointment, this idea was not only possible but indeed made a lot of sense. The community established in the six months the ordinants spent at Finkelwald clearly survived after this, and served as an undergirding to the ministers, as they faced their individual challenges back “in society”. Bonhoeffer’s final words in “life together” are:

“The communal life of the Christian under the word reaches fulfilment in the sacrament.”

These words could be equally well reversed to describe what Bonhoeffer achieved at Finkelwald, so that:

“The sacrament reaches fulfilment under the word in the communal life of Christians”.

The intensity of sharing was a quality and a habit Bonhoeffer himself took with him from Finkelwald. His friends and his co-conspirators and even, in lesser degree, his fellow prisoners were to benefit from this.

Now the question is, what is fellowship in the church in South Africa? Is it no more than the “Kiss of Peace” during the service?

Or is it the Women's Auxiliary? Or is it shaking the minister's hand as you leave the church? And what of the Minister or Priest? The Catholics, and perhaps to lesser extent, the Anglicans, have long practised a form of "team ministry". But what of the "free churches"? Are leaders' meetings, and circuit meetings, or even the monthly Christian Institute meeting enough? Who supports, who criticises, who learns with, laughs with, cries with the Minister in South Africa, on the long and thorn-filled road he must tread?

To return to the laity, or rather those laity who in some way are engaged in witness, and so service (and in truth which Christians should not be so engaged?) — where is this man or women's "supportive community". Where do they go with the questions they cannot answer alone... the fears and the hopes.

Surely Bonhoeffer, in exploring a new kind of Christian community, one which he himself believed was unlimited in its relevance for modern Christianity, points to what is a vital necessity for the church in South Africa if the Christians in the church are to have the strength to speak the words of truth and do the acts of compassion and justice to which God is calling us in the months and years which lie ahead.

#### *Authentic witness*

"Who is Jesus for us today?" This was the question which haunted Bonhoeffer throughout his adult life. The most stunning answers he gave to that question were given in his time in prison.

The prison days must have been days of the most enormous tension. Bonhoeffer had participated in actions which put at risk not only his life, but also his reputation (at least in the eyes of the vast majority of his colleagues). He was uncertain if he would ever emerge from prison. He was uncertain if the plot would succeed (except in the final period from July 1944 to April 1945 when all hope of its success must have vanished).

His work, in secret, under stress with his fellow conspirators, had clearly left a deep impression on him. These men had done what Christ had asked to them ... they had risked their lives, not

recklessly, not in a gesture, but in a careful and calculated way. Many were Atheists or Agnostics. How was one to “witness” to men such as these?

This is the background against which Bonhoeffer’s idea of the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts, and a religionless Christianity, must be seen – though nothing in this background should distract us from looking at the intrinsic value of these thoughts.

Here we can do no more than sketch in the barest outline the development of this thought.

Bonhoeffer spent the early months in prison reading in German and European history ... basically from the middle ages. This reading prompted his vision of a world “come of age”, a world emerging from the mythico-magical realms of the middle ages. The world of the Renaissance, of the birth of science, of the conquering of the world for logic and reason. The world of the birth of a democracy more radical than anything history had yet seen. What, asked Bonhoeffer, were the consequences of the birth of this new world for religion?

In mythical thought God was the source of all power. He was the creator of the world, and of man. He made the rains rain and the sun shine. He produced flood and famine. He visited sickness upon man because of man’s sins. Yet now there was a new word – sickness was caused by germs, and these germs could be controlled (by man). Flood and famine were caused by weather cycles, and though they could not be completely controlled, they could be planned for and their most devastating consequences avoided. Gradually area by area of the mythical world was swept away by a new vision of a mechanical causation, and with it a man-centred control. God’s creation and control of the world was rendered more and more indirect.

What has been the reaction of the Church to this “coming of age” process? In Bonhoeffer’s view the response has been overwhelmingly negative and defensive. Like an actress on the stage jealous of a new arrival the church sought first to compete, and then sulkily sought a private corner where she would be without competition. So God became the “God of the gaps” – the God

who has the answers to the questions science has not (yet) answered. And religion became that body of beliefs about the 'last questions', that is the questions of death and suffering. It became the 'personal' 'individual' part of the whole person. Religion had to do with the 'soul' wherever and whatever that might be.

That such a reaction was inadequate seemed self-evident to Bonhoeffer. Not only was it inadequate, but it was wrong ... it was heretical. God, Bonhoeffer was convinced, rejoiced at the "*Mundigwerdung*" of the world ... at its 'coming of age'. He rejoiced in the increase in man's knowledge, at the diminishment of suffering, and at the improvement of man's life. He rejoiced in the increase in the individual's responsibility, at his emerging from serfdom. Now, not only could man pray for good rulers ... he could vote out the bad and vote in the good.

However, the reaction was also heretical because it concealed a hard but fundamental truth. As Bonhoeffer has it:

"The God who is with us, is the God who has left us! (Mark 15, 34) ... Before and with God, we live without God ... God is impotent and weak in the world and only so is he with us and able to help us".

These perhaps shocking, perhaps paradoxical passages say only what Christ said: "Where I am going you cannot come." They express the profound and paradoxical truth of truths. God created the world, but man made and makes it. God is powerless in our world. We have made him so. And he has allowed us to do so. That is the mystery of the fall. How ever could the church have thought otherwise. However, could the church have pretended that "God willed" this or the other evil thing? Perhaps such a belief was tenable in mythical world. In a world come of age it is impossible ... and it is dangerous. It is dangerous because it disguises the truth of the human authorship of evil. If God is responsible for evil (bad government, sickness, victory or defeat in war) what can or should man do about this? But if man is the author of evil, who else but man can do something about it?

A deeper, and perhaps a double, paradox lies here. We must not overlook the first half of Bonhoeffer's key formulation: "Before and with God...". "But the Father will send a comfort-



er”, said Jesus. He will give you strength. In accepting our responsibility for the world we discover our fellowship with God. In opposing evil we discover the strength of the forces of good. This is a concrete rather than a poetic truth. In Matthew’s Gospel, a Gospel given much more to concrete parable than poetic metaphor, Christ speaks, in chapter 25, of the end of time, and of the day of judgement. On this day, says Christ:

The King will say to those on his right hand, “You have my Father’s blessing; come, enter and possess the kingdom that has been ready for you since the world was made. For when I was hungry, you gave me food, when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger you took me into your home, when naked you clothed me; when I was ill you came to my help, when in prison you visited me”. Then the righteous will reply, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and fed you ... And the King will answer, “I tell you this: anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me”. (Matthew 25.34-41).

How we love to give this passage a ‘symbolic’ significance. Yet surely Bonhoeffer teaches us that its significance is literal, or it has no significance at all. God is saying: “Do you seek me — then find the oppressed, and the poor ... for that is where I will be”. This, surely, is what Bonhoeffer meant when he spoke of the task of the Christian as that of “suffering with God”.

The second, equally essential part of this paradoxical saying is that it is in “our world” that God is powerless, and that it remains the most vital thing a man must do — never to forget that this world of ours is not our home. Man lives in the kingdom of man. In Christ he discovers the kingdom of God. By following Christ he discovers the kingdom of God. By following Christ in costly discipleship man can witness and work for this Kingdom. He can begin his journey toward it.

This was the background then for Bonhoeffer’s key formulation about the church. It is this formulation which is of critical importance when we ask ourselves how authentic is the witness of the church in South Africa. To answer this question we must first affirm with Bonhoeffer:

“The church is only the church when it is for others”.

The above set out “challenges” do not do justice to the depth of Bonhoeffer’s thought. Perhaps they make a small contribution

to the dialogue which could take place between the life and thought of this man, and the life and thought of our churches. If my comments about the churches in South Africa seem lopsided and unduly harsh, is it not, in our predicament, better to err on the side of harshness? Generosity, after all, has had a long reign.

##### 5. Bonhoeffer – some challenges for individual Christians

What have the life and thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to say to individual Christians in the face of the enormous decisions, and the difficult roads which lie ahead of us in South Africa?

Firstly, we should expect no guidance from Bonhoeffer in terms of being told “what” to do. Bonhoeffer himself had to choose between difficult decisions, and the choice was one he alone could make. The situation in which Bonhoeffer found himself was at least as complex as ours. Bonhoeffer’s choice in this situation cannot be seen as the ‘only’ option for the Christian in that situation – just as now in South Africa no one ‘option’ can be held up as the ‘only way’.

As different as Bonhoeffer’s situation was it may be instructive to examine some of the options he faced.

##### *Flight*

It is somehow comforting to know that a man of Bonhoeffer’s deep and searching faith did not proceed through life with the single-minded surety of purpose of a classical saint. Bonhoeffer did in fact flee from his situation twice: once to London in 1933, and once to America in 1939. Moreover, Bonhoeffer recognised flight as one of the several legitimate alternatives, saying this of it:

“God does not call everyone to martyrdom. Not flight, but deceit is sin, though we must say that there can be situations in which flight is the same as deceit, as also, in reverse, there are those situations in which flight itself is a part of martyrdom... The Christian refugee has the right to ask for himself to be spared from the final suffering, to ask to be able to serve God in peace and tranquility”.

However, Bonhoeffer saw that there were certain consequences attached to flight:

“In choosing flight, however, the refugee gives up his right to carry on the struggle ... his longing for the victory of truth over falseness remain unfulfilled, and must so remain”. (Bonhoeffer, quoted in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, E. Bethge, page 741).

Perhaps here there are some words of relevance for the South African who chooses to leave, and yet seeks also to remain ‘involved’; who becomes, in his new home, the resident ‘expert’ on the South African ‘situation’, and who becomes so often so destructively critical of all who have chosen to remain behind. Perhaps Bonhoeffer is saying we can have safety or the struggle. Not both.

#### *Staying and doing what is required*

At one stage of his life Bonhoeffer was an adamant pacifist. He changed his views, however. How much this was influenced by his own involvement with the military, or by seeing many of his friends and colleagues drafted into military service, knowing protest would mean senseless suffering, is impossible to tell. Bonhoeffer had no words of criticism for those friends who found themselves in this position.

#### *Staying and opposing ‘on principle’*

There were those who opposed Hitler in the name of the church (whereas Bonhoeffer might be said to have opposed Hitler in the name of the world) – many of these men paid for this opposition with their lives.

Bonhoeffer clearly had the deepest respect for such men and women.

#### *Staying and working responsibly for change*

The above attempts to describe what Bonhoeffer in the end decided to do himself. I should hasten to note that describing

his choice as working ‘responsibly’ for change is not for one moment meant to suggest that the choice of someone else to work in a different way is ‘irresponsible’. Rather it is an attempt to distinguish two kinds of ethics. Bonhoeffer said once: “In short, it is much easier to consider a matter ‘in principle’ than it is to do so in concrete responsibility (*Widerstand und Ergebung*, page 16). He was trying to point here to the reverse truth of the commonly accepted adage that the ends do not justify the means. The reverse truth is simply that the selection of ethically pure means does not necessarily guarantee the ‘rightness’ of the end of our action. To express this in another way, it is not enough to be sure to have clean hands.

This thought of Bonhoeffer should challenge us. So often the situation calls us into revolt. We want to protest, to dissociate ourselves from the action, the person, the authority. We want the world to know where we stand. Bonhoeffer seems to suggest that this is not always enough. We have to ask ourselves: what is the result of my protest? Does it really change anything? Is it the most effective way to act?

There are times when we can only protest — even when we know our protest to be impotent. There is no escaping such moments — nor should we try to do so. Bonhoeffer calls us, however, to ask if protest is enough.

Bonhoeffer is calling us here to strike a balance between the two ethics Max Weber has described as the “ethic of inner conviction” and the “ethic of responsibility”. It is a timely call. Christians for far too long have been concerned only about having clean hands.

“The ultimate responsible question is not, how I might emerge from this affair heroically, but rather how the coming generation shall (best) live on”. (*Widerstand und Ergebung*, page 16).

But if Bonhoeffer cannot “tell us what to do” in our situation, has he perhaps some advice as to how we might live through the crisis? Indeed he has.

### *The importance of laughing*

“It’s said in America that the Negro survived because he didn’t forget how to laugh, whereas the Indian’s doom resulted from his stolid pride”. (*Widerstand und Ergebung*, page 251).

### *The danger of contempt and hatred*

“He who holds a man in contempt will never be able to make something out of him. Nothing in others which gives us cause for contempt is in ourselves quite strange. ... We must learn to see people not so much in terms of what they do, or fail to do, but rather in terms of what they suffer. The only positive relationship to people – precisely with those who are weak – is love, that is the desire to seek community with them”. (*Widerstand und Ergebung*, page 19).

### *Imminent justice*

“It is one of the most amazing things, yet quite incontrovertible, that the evil show themselves – often in an astoundingly short time – to be stupid and purposeless”. (*Widerstand und Ergebung*, page 19).

### *God at work in history*

“I believe that God can bring good out of even the most evil situations – and that he does. For this he needs people who allow themselves to serve the good in all things. I believe that in every situation of need God gives us as much strength to resist as we need. However, he does not give this strength ‘in advance’ so that we may simply rely on him, and need no effort from ourselves”. (*Widerstand und Ergebung*, page 20).

### *The enduring worth of optimism*

“Optimism as a will for the future will make no one despair, even when it is proved wrong one hundred times; it is the health of life which safeguards against sickness”. (*Widerstand und Ergebung*, page 26).

### *In the end ... a happy death*

“We can no longer hate or fear death – we have discovered in his ways

something good, and are reconciled to him ... We do not make death heroic, life is too great and valued for that. Indeed we love life, yet I believe death can no longer take us by surprise". (*Widerstand und Ergebung*, page 26).

### *Can we still be used?*

"We are mute witnesses to evil deeds, our hands have been washed with so much water, we have learnt the art of ambiguous reason, we have become, through experience, distrustful of people, and must often remain guilty of denying them the truth of our thoughts, through so many unbearable conflicts we have become brittle, perhaps cynical – can we still be used? Neither geniuses, nor cynics, nor the contemptuous, nor the brilliant tacticians, but rather straight forward, simple, people is who we need to be. Will our inner resistance against those forces which press around us be strong enough, and our sincerity with ourselves remain faithful enough, so that we might find the way to simplicity and truth?"

## 6. Living through the crisis

Bonhoeffer wrote the above words in December 1942. His words and actions in the remaining two years of his life showed that he could indeed be used. He lived through the crisis, and met death with the quiet confidence of a man who knows he is going to God. He was a man who loved God, loved life, loved this partial, often evil world of ours, and the people who inhabit it. This practised, risked, dared love taught him in the end how to love death. Surely he can teach us something about how we might 'live through the crisis'.

Johannesburg, 1977.

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